

Why restoration is failing (in the American West)

All over the rural West - and now even in some of our cities – restoration has become a major industry. In dollars spent and jobs generated, restoration has surpassed resource extraction in importance in many rural, western communities. And many of the jobs are well paying. Biologists, geologists and engineering firms make top money completing assessments, designing projects and drafting plans. Heavy equipment contractors pull down lucrative contracts. Even the government jobs in restoration tend to be well paying. I know of one Resource Conservation District which pays its project coordinators as much as \$25.00 per hour and its administrator considerably more.

Beginning earlier but accelerating dramatically during the Clinton Administration, restoration has become the preferred method for addressing virtually every natural resource problem. From salmon to salamanders, forests to fire and wolves to watersheds, restoration is promoted today as an effective way to reverse the decline of ecosystems while providing mitigation for continuing job losses in the extraction industries.

In some cases restoration is working. The successes are well publicized. Reintroduced wolves thrive in Yellowstone National Park and the feature media reports abound. But most restoration efforts are never independently evaluated and few are even monitored to see if they were implemented as designed. Instead success is measured by dollars spent – the more money that is spent, the more benefit that is assumed to have accrued to the target species, watershed or forest.

In truth, however, much and perhaps most of the billions of taxpayer funds that have been spent have not accomplished what they claimed they would. After 15 years of promoting restoration, working (in community collaboratives) on restoration programs and projects, and after personally evaluating scores of watershed, fisheries and forest restoration projects, I have concluded that, for the most part, restoration has been a failure and a boondoggle.

So why isn't restoration working? Why is it, for example, that while for a decade or more at least \$60 millions dollars per year has been pumped into salmon restoration, we are not seeing restored salmon runs?

An example will serve to illustrate the problem. During the 1980s federal funding for US Soil Conservation programs benefiting farmers were cut drastically. In Northern California's Scott River Watershed, these funds were being used to rip-rap the banks of Scott River in order to prevent loss of agricultural land during floods. Looking around for a new source, SCS and the local Resource Conservation District (RCD) noticed that funding had become available for fisheries restoration through the Klamath Act, legislation, including a 20-year appropriation, passed by Congress to restore Klamath River Basin salmon and other fisheries. With the help of SCS staff, the RCD successfully applied for the salmon funds. Rip-rapping of the Scott River continued.

I learned about the projects when I became aware that bank swallows – a species listed as threatened under provisions of the California Endangered Species Act – was nesting along the Scott River. Subsequent investigations turned up the fact that bank swallow habitat was being rip-rapped in violation of state law. Further investigation revealed that the rip-rap projects were at best of little benefit to fisheries and might, in fact, be detrimental. In spite of these facts coming to light, rip-rap bank stabilization with state and federal fisheries restoration funds

continues in the Scott River Valley, albeit in a changed form and away from Bank swallow habitat. The projects continue because they benefit the ranchers who dominate the politics of this county and because those in charge of restoration funding decisions keep supplying the funding.

There are four primary reasons why restoration in the rural West is not working:

- Restoration projects are most often planned and selected by collaborative groups. When all stakeholders have a say, projects chosen for funding and implementation are those on which consensus is possible. Projects which would be effective as restoration would also require major changes in the activities which caused the problem in the first place. Projects of this kind do not achieve consensus; they are vetoed by a stakeholder groups – typically a timber industry firm, Cattlemens Association, local Farm Bureau, or a local official linked to these interests. As a result, collaborative restoration programs accomplish the easy projects, giving the illusion that something is being done to restore the resource, ecosystem or species, while delaying or preventing the changes which would actually advance restoration.
- Restoration funds are controlled by agencies which have their own agendas and skeletons which they want to keep hidden in the closet. Whether it is NOAA Fisheries or California Department of Fish & Game, EPA or the Department of Ecology, restoration funding agencies too often make decisions for political rather than ecological reasons. The biggest problem is that the agencies think they can buy the cooperation of local landowners. Knowing this, landowners effectively extort money from the agencies while providing a modicum of cooperation. Furthermore, the agencies are often at pains to cover up their failure to enforce the laws and regulations that are their sworn duty to uphold and which are implicated in the decline of the species, watershed or resource. Restoration projects are seen as a substitute for law enforcement and serve to cover up long-standing non-enforcement of laws and regulations which could, if enforced, effectively reverse the species or ecosystem decline.
- No one is serving as the public's watchdog. While the words "monitoring" and "project evaluation" are used liberally in restoration plans, there is little effective monitoring; project and program evaluation is completed by the agency implementing the project or by the funding agency. In both cases, the motivation is to find that the project was effective and the programs successful. To find otherwise would be to jeopardize your own program/agency and the jobs of your coworkers. Furthermore, grassroots conservationists – in the West the typical watchdogs – are either participating in the collaboratives that created the project (and thus compromised) or have lost interest long ago when the restoration programs were authorized and when the appropriation was secured.
- Effective restoration involves not just doing things but not doing things. As Aldo Leopold observed, the first task of an effective restoration program is to stop doing the things that caused the resource, land, ecosystem or species to decline in the first place. In the rural west, restoration has, for the most part, not involved changing destructive practices. On the contrary, for the most part restoration has functioned and continues to

function as a means to avoid those changes in practices and management of resources without which restoration can not take place.

- Restoration is viewed by legislators as another form of pork. In other words, government restoration programs are created by politicians as a means to bring money back to the district. As pork, restoration does not need to be effective. In fact, ineffective restoration serves the need of the politician for pork because it must be renewed year after year and decade after decade. As long as the money continues to flow, who cares if the projects are effective?

The reasons summarized above explain why, in spite of billions spent over decades, restoration in the West has been overwhelmingly ineffective. Some will protest that success takes time and that restoration is a relatively new concept. But in some areas restoration has been going on for almost two decades. On the Klamath and Trinity Rivers, for example, twenty years of programs and projects authorized and funded via federal and state legislation has not restored commercially valuable salmon and steelhead fisheries. Instead, by most indicators, these fisheries have continued to decline or at best remained stable but depressed.

Two more examples will serve to make these points more robust:

The concept of “restoring fire to its natural role” in western forests is now popular. Millions are already being spent and soon billions may be devoted to “thinning” and other forest work which proponents claim is necessary to restore our forests to a state in which they are ready for fire. Yet at the same time, fire suppression and logging – the two activities which have created the need for forest restoration – continue to be practiced essentially as they have been for decades. For example, this July the Forest Service actively suppressed another fire deep in the heart of the Marble Mountain Wilderness during a time when conditions were perfectly suited to letting the fire burn. In spite of the fact that a fire plan exists for this wilderness area allowing officials to let fires burn when conditions are right, Forest Service managers continue year-after-year to suppress fires that pose no threat to communities or individual homes.

To restore salmon we must return water to dewatered rivers, taking it from agriculture which, in virtually every western river basin, removes 80% or more of summer base flows from our rivers. In Northern California’s Scott River, for example, the millions of dollars spent over the years on “salmon restoration” can not succeed so long as the river is dewatered by excessive stream diversions and groundwater pumping, and so long as the Department of Fish & Game fails to enforce applicable Fish & Game Codes. These key tasks will never be accomplished by consensus of stakeholders in a collaborative.

I wonder how long American taxpayers will remain willing to finance ineffective restoration programs. So far there have been no spectacular revelations, no large congressional investigations, no broad exposes. Over the course of the next decade, however, I predict that this will change. First grassroots activists and subsequently other government watchdogs will begin exposing forest, watershed, fisheries and ecosystem restoration for what they are and for the most part have been - massive frauds that have benefited landowner over species, and which have served as cover for the failure of resource users to obey and agencies to enforce the bedrock state and federal laws. In many cases, effective enforcement of long-standing state and federal laws and regulations would have prevented the decline of species and ecosystems and obviated

the need for restoration. Across the expanse of the rural West, restoration programs and practices are in need of radical reform. To be effective, restoration must become not a means to avoid making hard decisions but rather the means to making them, not a substitute for enforcing bedrock environmental laws but a means to focus them, not a tool for delivering pork to constituents but a true partnership. It is time for grassroots activists to resign from the collaborative and resume the role of watchdog. The restoration establishment is corrupt; a reform movement will emerge.