

What Is Responsible Management of Private Rangeland?

Holmes Rolston, III*

I want to put you in your place. Socrates said that the unexamined life is not worth living, and I add that life in an unexamined world is not worthy living either. Your place is that of the land manager, and I invite you to examine that kind of life as worthy living. This requires examining what kind of place we live in, the worth of the world. One way to begin is to ask what it means to manage nature.

1. Managing nature

We need to manage our soils, to keep irrigation systems in repair, and so on. So we manage for this or that, to get a forage crop, or timber. But do you think of yourself as managing nature? If I suggested that we manage piecemeal, you might reply that it is better to do comprehensive ecosystem management. But by the time we reach that level, the orientation of management begins to shift. One is not just managing this or that forty acres, or four thousand acres of private land. One is managing in the context of landscape wide ecosystems. The changing perspective comes, for instance, when we ask just how much would we like to accelerate this management of nature.

Do we want more rain here and less there? Would we like Texas to be less

humid on the east and less arid on the west? Do we wish to modify the climate, and have our weather programmed by the meteorologists? Or by national policy? Would we like to have more summer and less winter, or the other way round? More spring and less fall? Less wind? More clouds? More or fewer mountains? Plains? Canyons? We want more lakes, apparently, for we often build them. But do we want more rivers? Do we want different species of fauna and flora, or more here and fewer there? More birds? Fewer snakes? Bugs? We want fewer hurricanes, presumably, but do we want fewer forest or prairie fires? Snowstorms? Would we like to have nature less spontaneous and more orderly, or more spontaneous and less orderly? More diverse? Less complex? Should we leave these decisions to those who will increasingly manage nature?

You are managing an acreage, perhaps a pretty good spread. But push this management idea all the way around the globe. Some say that the principal novelty of the new millennium is that Earth will become a managed planet. William Clark writes, in a Scientific American issue devoted to Managing Planet Earth, "We live in an era characterized by syndromes of global change. ... As we move from merely

* As University Distinguished Professor of philosophy at Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado, the author has written resource books, chapters, and articles acclaimed in both professional journals and the national press pertaining to environmental ethics, theology, and means responsibility to the earth ecosystem. Dr. Rolston has been recognized worldwide, serves on numerous editorial boards, consulted to over two dozen conservation and policy groups, including the U.S. Congress and a Presidential Commission, and is an avid backpacker, field naturalist and biologist.

causing these syndromes to managing them consciously, two central questions must be asked? What kind of planet do we want? What kind of planet can we get?" (Clark, 1989) The root of "manage" is the Latin "manus," hand. Humans will handle the place. Nature is to be harnessed to human needs.

When we push the management question to these levels, we are not so sure we want to manage it into something else; it is already a rather congenial home planet. We cannot take nature ready to hand, but we can remake it for the supporting of agriculture, industry, culture. After that, perhaps, on the larger landscape, regional, and planetary scales, it is better to build our cultures in intelligent harmony with the way the world is already built, rather than take control and rebuild nature by ourselves and for ourselves. We worry a little about those who would play God—not that we should not intervene in nature's course for our own good. But there is indeed a danger of false gods, or perhaps of too little trust in "Mother Earth."

We want a sustainable society with its health and integrity, superposed on a natural world with its health and integrity. We have to manage nature at the first level of scale. But this is in the context of scales on which we are not so sure that managing nature is the apt paradigm. Why not, for instance, think of ourselves as residents who are learning the logic of our home community, or as overseers who are trying to optimize both the cultural and the natural values on the planet? Is our only relationship to nature one of managing it for the better? Perhaps what

is as much to be managed is our managerial mentality, something that has been one of the causes of the environmental crisis in the first place.

On planetary scales, and even on continental and regional scales, it is not so clear that we really do want to manage the environment; rather we want to manage human uses of the environment so that they are congenial to letting the planet, the ecosystem, the landscape go on managing itself. We do say of an Iowa fanner who plows and plants his fields that he is managing his land, but when the sun shines and the rains fail, and the seed grows in the ear, the farmer is fitting his operations in with what is going on over his head and outside his managing hands. We do not just conserve natural value by managing it; we manage ourselves to let natural values continue to flow.

2. Resource and residence

The problem lies deep in basic assumptions about what counts as worthy living in the world, about what the world is worth. Managers, if they are nothing more, do not really dwell in an environment; they only have resources, something like the way in which bosses, as such, do not have friends, only subordinates. Even the most enlightened exploiters, qua exploiters, do not live as persons in a community; they are not citizens of a world, only consumers of materials. They reduce their environment to resource and sink. The environment must be this much, but it can be much more. For consummate managers, proportionately as the management ethic increases, the

environment is reduced to little more than exploited resource. Mere managers are not yet stewards of something entrusted to their care.

Do you want to manage nature? Or do you seek an increased quality of life in habitat, more experience of neighborhood? Each person lives in a particular time and place, and we have to be responsible as we inhabit a local environment. We have to bring the sense of residence into focus at native range, to find a local environment to be lived through. Nature in that sense is not a resource to be managed, but a home where we reside.

A rural New Yorker once reflected over his environment, in late November, with a strong sense of satisfactory residence:

The wind sweeps out of the west, with the faint breath of blizzard far away; but the skies are clear, without even the shredded, high-flying clouds of storm. And so November leans toward December, and late autumn creeps past, silent as the stars. The hush of winter approaches, and short days lie upon the land.

Now is the time that the countryman has the country to himself, The visitors are gone, vacations over. Even the migrant birds are gone. The squirrels go quietly about their business. And a man has time to survey his world and understand his own place in it, if he is ever to understand.

Now it becomes clear that it isn't the little pleasures of the country that make life worth living there. It is rather the big assurances. The little pleasures are for the casual visitor; but one must live with the wind and the weather and know the land and the seasons to find the certainties. The flash of a goldfinch or the song of an oriole can delight the senses; but the knowledge that no matter how sharp or long the winter, they will be back again for another spring provides an inner surety. To see a hillside white with dogwood bloom is to know a particular ecstasy of beauty; but to walk the gray winter woods and find the buds which will resurrect that beauty in another May is to partake of continuity. To feel the frost underfoot and know that there is both fire and ice in the earth, even as in the patterned stars overhead, is to sense the big assurances.

Man needs to know these things, and they are best learned when the silence lies upon the land. No one can shout them. They need to be whispered, that they may reach the questing soul (Editorial, New York Times, November 28, 1948, p. 8B)

The responsibility of a land owner, if we may phrase it so, is to be a resident in a local environment who senses the recurrent universals particularly displayed in that place—the seasons, the regenerative, vital powers of life, the life

support, the natural and cultural history achieved in that time and place. One ought to enjoy these big assurances exemplified in local areas. A person in his or her biography is a detection device for catching something of the richness and integrity of what is taking place on the landscape. That is the real science, or, better, the wisdom, of landscape management.

Your responsibility is to find what we might call, to adapt a biologist's term, a situated adapted fitness in your niche, on the landscape where you reside. We want a form of life that is good-of-its-kind and good-in-its-kind-of-place, all in a good kind of place. These add up to the question of well-placed goodness. Responsible land management is, we might say, a value optimizing question. Humans want to be inhabitants who appreciate (in double senses of finding value in and adding value to) their habitats. Humans are value-able, able to evaluate the world, able to discover (as well as invent) value there.

3. Commodity and community

"We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect." That is how Aldo Leopold begins his Sand County Almanac (Leopold, 1969, p. viii). At the end, he concluded with a general principle, "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (pp. 224-225).

You might suppose that, as a responsible

land manager, I would ask such questions as, "What crops are you raising? What is your return on your investment? How long before you retire your debt? Is your operation sustainable? What is the spillover of pesticides in the streams? How much does compliance with environmental regulations cost?" Certainly these can be relevant questions for responsible land management.

But suppose we try this changed orientation from commodity to community. Here are more questions, a sort of test of how responsible you are, how responsive you are, on your landscape.

Name a half dozen wildflowers currently in bloom on the lands you manage. What will be the first flowers in the spring? What will be the last in autumn?

Recall an experience appreciating nature aesthetically—a sunset, a cumulus cloud, the flair of an elm, a flight of geese overhead—within the last week.

Do you have a sense of seasons passing (beyond calendar dates), a sense of the day passing (beyond o'clock)? Do you ever check time by looking at sun or sky, or think seasons by looking at a flower or bird that has arrived, or disappeared? What was your last experience of geological time on the lands you manage?

Are there places that you have

managed in the past, or which you now manage, to which you could not return, after a long absence, without bringing goose pimples or a lump to your throat?

Name a half dozen birds now resident in, or migrating through, the environment you manage. Where is the nearest active bird's nest? What birds now present will leave, come winter or summer?

What large mammal did you last see on your landscape in the wild? Small mammal?

What encounter with an animal, bird, or plant recently took you by surprise, so much so that you turned aside from what you were doing to observe it?

What fauna and flora inhabited the landscape on which your home is located before humans lived there? Where is the nearest that each of these can now be found? Can you name your native ecosystem?

What species are especially characteristic of your ecosystem—not found or more difficult to find when you travel further north, south, east, or west? What is your state animal, flower, bird? Are any present on lands you manage?

What local natural area that you formerly enjoyed has been so much degraded by development

that you are disappointed when you return there? Might it have been better managed, if you had been the manager in charge?

If all human-made noises were to cease, what cries, calls, or natural sounds could you expect to hear after dark on lands you manage?

What part of, or processes on, lands you manage can still be considered wild?

What part of your local natural environment—birds, flowers, insects, trails, fishing spots, tackle, flies and baits to use, hunting areas, drainage patterns and names of streams, types of flowers and vegetables that grow best in your climate—do you know particularly well, so much so that others seek you out for information?

What did you last eat that came directly from the soil, without being marketed? Did you prepare it?

What pictures, patterns, arrangements of flowers, wildlife, or landscapes ornament your home?

Name three issues in the conservation and preservation of nature that are affected, for better or for worse, by decisions you make as a land manager.

What is the next activity you plan that will increase your

familiarity with your natural environment? What has been your most memorable such activity this year?

When did you last act, or refuse to act, in encounter with nature, on lands you manage, out of moral conviction?

When was your last encounter with birth or death in the natural world? When did you last pause with a sense of mystery before nature? With a sense of assurance, or a shudder? Recall a recent experience of the sublime, or religious experience outdoors. Where, if you could, would you most like to be buried?

An environmental ethic needs roots in locality. Aldo Leopold, as we heard, formulated a land ethic, one that he recommends to all land managers. But he gains this principle because he has lived a life deeply embedded in his love for the Wisconsin sand counties. It is no accident, but rather essential to his ethic, that, seeking that sense of community with which he begins and ends, he wrote an Almanac and that the pages from beginning to end remember a January thaw, the spring flowering of Draba, the April mating dance of the woodcock. Leopold's biographical residence is the personal backing to his ethic.

Responsible land managers ought to live out a spacetime, placetime ethic, interpreting their landscapes and choosing their loves within those landscapes. We endorse the world with

our signatures. In this sense we want an emotive ethic, but not, as that term usually conveys, an ethic that is nothing but emotion. Emotive environmental ethics lives in caring response to the surrounding natural places and times in which one resides. That might even prove to be life in the best possible world, or at least the best possible life in this kind of world.

4. Winning and losing

Managers ought to be winners, we think. But doing the right thing by the land ethic can seem to make us losers economically. Here we need to ask whether people on the landscapes on which they reside ought to be winners. Ought nature ever to lose in favor of people? Ought people ever to lose in favor of nature? Socrates made the claim that an unexamined life is not worth living; he also made a famous claim that "no evil can come to a good man" (Apology. 41d). Socrates argues that the only true harm befalls one's character—he calls this the "soul." If doing wrong ruins the soul, doing the right is such a great benefit that even if considerable other harms come in result, the just person never loses. For no accumulation of resulting harms from doing right can outweigh negatively the excellence (arete) we gain, which more than compensates for other losses, such as one might have in the business he or she manages.

Let us apply this to land managers. There are often win-win situations. A bumper sticker reads: Recycling: Everyone wins. Is that the model for the whole human-nature relationship? If we

are in harmony with nature, everyone wins, both the managers of nature and the nature they manage. But this is evidently not always so. We have decided in favor of wolves, restoring them to Yellowstone this fall; and the ranchers will lose some sheep. But might ranchers who want these wolves gain in virtue more than they lose in sheep; and, meanwhile the wolves win too?

Is this a shell game? Or is it a truth about responsible land management? In a particular decision context, a person can lose when he or she is constrained in management options because of water quality, or soil erosion, or endangered species. The loser will be worse off by his lights, but his lights are wrong, and if he or she gets things in the right light, there is no loss. It doesn't do any good to win if you're wrong; the win isn't a win. We are corrected from a misperception. We win because we get our values right.

Think about how this works in other areas. Once my great-grandfathers, slave owners in Alabama and Virginia with several hundred slaves, lost a war and were forced to abolish slavery, losing a considerable economic investment. Although slave-owners lost in the short term, they and their society really gained. When the right thing was done, the result was win-win in the long term. Similarly with the liberation of women in my own lifetime. Some men lost job opportunities; others have to do housework. Males lost their dominance, they lost power. But relationships are now more just and humane; interpersonal relationships male to female, white to

black, are more genuine. The talents and skills of women and blacks, formerly often wasted, now are fully utilized in the work force; family incomes are higher, marriages are richer. In environmental ethics, there is a parallel. The person reforms, re-forms his or her values, and becomes a winner because he or she is now living in a richer and more harmonious relationship with nature. Some will protest that we insist that humans can win but then redefine winning. We win by moving the goal posts. And that's cheating, like showing a net positive balance in your checkbook by revising the multiplication tables. You will win, by losing at the old management game and playing a new game. Some persons did lose, in the sense that losing had when our argument started. They lost timber, or opportunities for development, or income from crops, or sheep to wolves. But now you redefine winning, and they do not lose.

Yes, moving the goal posts might be cheating if the game were football. But in environmental ethics, there is a disanalogy. You move the goal posts because you discover that they are in the wrong place. And that is really to win, because getting to the wrong goal is not winning. With the new goal posts in the right place, people find more values in the natural world than before. Land managers stop exploiting nature and become a member of a human and a biotic community, residing on a richer, more meaningful Earth.

The person who is doing the wrong thing will, quite likely, not think this is wrong. Or even if, in more honest moments, one

knows it is wrong, one expects to win. If such a person is wrong, the goal posts, misperceived, will have to be moved. That is facing up to the truth: what was before thought to be winning is losing.

Consider those who gain a living on timber lands in the Pacific Northwest. There will be some losers, in the sense that some persons will have to change jobs. They will, meanwhile, come to reside in a community that is stable in its relationship to the forests; that makes them winners. They once lived in a community with a worldview that saw the great forests only as a resource to be mined, exploited. But that is not an appropriate world view; it sees nature as commodity for human gratification, and nothing else. The idea of winning is to consume, the more the better, and those who satisfy consumers get the profit. Moving the goal posts, these "losers" at the exploitation game will come to live in a community with a new worldview, a sustainable relationship with the forested landscape; and that is a new idea of winning. What they really lose is what it is a good thing to lose: an exploitative attitude toward forests. What they gain is a good thing to gain: a land ethic. I suspect that what is true with forests in the Northwest is true with range in Texas.

In the relations between humans and nature, we cannot always have a win-win outcome, if we mean that values never have to be traded off, gaining some things by losing others. But we can always look for harmony, optimizing values, and conserving nature, more or less. We can find paths of landscape management to enjoy, even though (and

indeed because) they are constrained out of respect for nature. Some things in nature will be sacrificed, but some things that we might otherwise have wished to do will be left undone, in order to keep the land healthy. In the latter case, there will be compensations that are enriching: living on a more diverse landscape, with its integrity and biodiversity preserved. We will have some (but not all) of nature. We will have enough (but not maximum) landscape development. Such culture is really a better culture because it is harmonious with nature.

In one sense, culture is triumphant on Earth; pristine nature ought to be sacrificed to it; we live in a post evolutionary phase of Earth's history. We have rebuilt the wild landscape and made it rural and urban; we have to manage those rebuilt landscapes. But we also live in a postmodern phase of culture; the exploitative attitude has gone past extremes. Nature is overconquered, and further sacrifice of it will not benefit humans. The society we have built on our landscape cannot profit by moving to some imagined post-ecological stage. Often, though not always, decisions can be win-win. There are nonrival, complementary goods. Properly to care for the natural world can combine with a strategy for sustainability. The idea here is that nature provides the life support system for culture, for agriculture, and therefore what is good for nature is often good for culture and agriculture. Fauna, flora, and people all need clean air and water, good soil. It is hard to have a healthy culture, or agriculture, on a sick environment. Nature and culture have entwined destinies.

5. The end of nature

Ask yourself this question, Do you think that nature has ended on lands that you manage? I ask this because when your landscape management actions are joined with those of millions of others, when we add up all the human cultural and agricultural developments that have accelerated during this century, there looms before us what some call, rather dramatically, "the end of nature." In the twenty-first century, there will only be nature that has been tampered with, not spontaneous nature. Indeed, laments Bill McKibben, already "we live in a postnatural world," in "a world that is of our own making." "There's no such thing as nature any more." Earlier, wild nature could remain alongside culture; the natural givens stayed in place. There could not be wilderness everywhere, but there could be wilderness somewhere, lots of it, all over the world. Wild creatures could coexist on their own in **the reserves, the woodlots, the fencerows, the nooks, the crannies of civilization.** But with acid rain, with pollutants everywhere, with carcinogens in the food chains, with pesticides and herbicides in the rivers and ground water, in the oceans, such coexistence is impossible. With global warming accelerating climate change a hundred times over, "changing nature means changing everything" and this "seems infinitely sad." Everything, everywhere "bears the permanent stamp of man." "We live at the end of nature, the moment when the essential character of the world ... is suddenly changing." There is no more nature "for its own sake." (McKibben, 1989, pp. 60, 85, 89, 78-79, 210, 174-175)

Now has or might nature come to an end? Has your work as a landscape manager helped bring nature to an end? Is that what you wish as responsible land management? The answers are both matters of fact and of philosophical analysis. There will be an absolute sense in which nature has ended, since there is no square foot even of a place like Yellowstone Park in which humans have not disturbed the predation pressures, no square foot on which rain falls without detectable pollutants. But it does not follow that nature is absolutely ended, because it is not absolutely present. Answers come in degrees. Events in Yellowstone can remain 99.44 percent natural on many a square foot, indeed on hundreds of square miles, in the sense that we can designate there "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain" (Wilderness Act of 1964, sec, 2(c).)

On the lands we actively manage for agriculture or industry, past certain thresholds, where land is fenced for pasture or mowed as lawns, wild nature has ended. This ending may be always, in its own way, a sad thing; but it is sometimes an inevitable thing, and the culture and agriculture that replaces nature can have compensating values. It would be a sadder thing still, if culture had never appeared to grace the Earth, or if cultures had remained so modest that they had never substantially modified the landscape. We do not always lament our presence, even though we want some untrammelled lands. Where the human presence permanently alters the land, wilderness is impossible, but some portions of the Adirondacks of New

York can be rural and still relatively natural.

Still, the more drastic the intervention, the more nature has ended. This will never be absolute; there will be rain and sunshine, and birds will fly in and insects will hatch out and go about their business. Some natural processes will remain. But with intensive enough management, the system will be unrecognizably natural. All spontaneously self-organizing systems, wild nature with its integrity, will be effectively over. Is that what you wish on the lands you manage? The end of nature is not absolutely here, it is not absolutely possible, but it is relatively to be feared. Some end of nature is a good thing; but too much of any good thing is a bad thing. Beyond, beneath, and around our culture and our agriculture, we do not want the end of nature. We value nature as an end in itself.

6. Earth ethics

Dealing with an acre or two of real estate, perhaps even with hundreds or thousands of acres, we can think that the earth belongs to us, as private property holders. Dealing with a landscape, we can think that the earth belongs to us, as citizens of the country geographically located there. But even on landscape scales we pass from a sense of what belongs to us to a sense of belonging in a place. By the time we reach the global scale, Earth is not something we own. Earth does not belong to us; rather we belong to it. We belong on it. The question is not of property, but of community. The responsibilities of land owners, local scale, is not something we

can completely specify until we have risen to the planetary level, and valued this larger system of life that we inhabit.

The astronaut Michael Collins recalled being earthstruck: "I remember so vividly ... what I saw when I looked back at my fragile home—a glistening, inviting beacon, delicate blue and white, a tiny outpost suspended in the black infinity. Earth is to be treasured and nurtured, something precious that must endure" (Collins, 1980, p. 6) The UN Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, closed the Earth Summit: "The Spirit of Rio must create a new mode of civic conduct. It is not enough for man to love his neighbor; he must also learn to love his world." (Boutros-Ghali, 1992) On these scales, Earth is a precious thing in itself because it is home for us all; Earth is to be loved, as we do a neighbor, for an intrinsic integrity. The center of focus is not people, but the biosphere.

Earth is, some will insist, a big rockpile like the moon, only one on which the rocks are watered and illuminated in such way that they support life. So it is really the life we value and not the Earth, except as instrumental to life. Responsible land management gets good things out of the earth for the benefit of persons. We have duties to people, perhaps to living things. We must not confuse duties to the home with duties to the inhabitants. We do not praise the earth so much as what is on Earth. We are not so much responsible to the earth, or even to Earth, as to who is on Earth. But this is not a systemic view of what is going on. Perhaps we own real estate locally, perhaps we are responsible first

to people, but, in the end, we need a global, biospheric sense of obligation.

The evolution of rocks into dirt into fauna and flora is one of the great surprises of natural history, one of the rarest events in the astronomical universe. We humans too arise up from the humus, and we find revealed what earth can do when it is self-organizing under suitable conditions. This is pretty spectacular dirt. On an everyday scale earth seems to be passive, inert, an unsuitable object of moral concern. It is just a resource we manage. But on a global scale? The scale changes nothing, a critic may protest, the changes are only quantitative. Earth is no doubt precious as life support, but it is not precious in itself. There is nobody there in a planet. There is not even the objective vitality of an organism, or the genetic transmission of a species line. Earth is not even an ecosystem, strictly speaking; it is a loose collection of myriads of ecosystems. So we must be talking loosely, perhaps poetically, or romantically of valuing

Earth. More accurately speaking. Earth is a resource to be managed.

Earth is a mere thing, a big thing, a special thing for those who happen to live on it, but still a thing, and not appropriate as an object of intrinsic or systemic valuation. We can, if we insist on being anthropocentrists, say that it is all valueless except as our human resource. But we will not be valuing Earth objectively until we appreciate this marvelous natural history. This really is a superb planet. At this scale of vision, if we ask what is principally to be valued, the value of life arising as a creative process on Earth seems a better description and a more comprehensive category than to speak of a careful management of planetary natural resources. Earth is the source of our being, more than a resource to manage. The root idea in "management," we noticed, is "hand." Landscape managers can handle the earth. But perhaps we should also remember that hands are also for holding in loving care.

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