

Digressions

Science does not always advance in an orderly fashion. Looking back over the past few decades I recall the near excitement attending the discovery of the orderliness in which old-field succession progressed from bare plowed earth to climax forest and the animal communities associated with each stage; and the marvelous revelations in the first half of this century—things like Cowles work on the Lake Michigan dunes through Adams, Gleason, Cooper, Harshberger, Oosting, Grinnell, Dansereau, Leopold, Curtis, Daubenmire, and well, all the others. Such works have been instrumental in the thinking and doing in the field of park management.....albeit park management has sometimes been dragged kicking and screaming into some of the 'new' technologies and philosophies. Well, I digress.

In the 'modern' era of plant and animal sciences—beginning, say, in the 1950s—I also recall the 'to-do' over 'molecular biology.' There was a time when it was professionally unsafe to be a 'natural historian' (that old stuff!). Whole departments in colleges and universities turned into labs where every creature in sight was ground, centrifuged and chromatographed, treated statistically and reported upon. Natural historians fled to departments of geography, or retired, or, well, disappeared. Then came the age of 'the computer.' Every datum in sight was jammed into these mindless machines and the output was labelled 'truth.' Never mind the fact that all the data in sight were inadequate to define that truth. Molecular biology and computer technology, and their uses, have matured far beyond that point—and the results have become exceedingly important to us—but the loss of much work in the field of natural history has been suffered as a result. Whether scientific faddism—and the resultant sources of funding—largely has been responsible for this or not now seems moot. Except for one point: funding still dries up for important works because 'you've been doing that for years...we already know about it' or 'it's turn-of-the-century stuff' or well, you know what I mean. The bottom line seems to be that many studies aren't 'sexy' enough for some of the decisionmakers. Long-term studies especially come to mind. 'You've been on that study for years—what can you possibly learn in another year?' Etc. The answer: lots! If park management really means to manage in such a way and by such means as will leave the natural scene intact for future generations, then that management can't do its job on the basis of quick-and-dirty one-time studies; even short-term cycles are missed, and the long-term cycles aren't even comprehended; to say nothing of the spin-offs. When one is involved for many years studying wolves at Isle Royale or terns at Dry Tortugas or sequoias in the Sierras, there's a whole lot more than just wolves and terns and sequoias that comes to light: everything from associated species, habitats, and habits to long-term climatic cycle effects also come to light—culminating in more information, knowledge and wisdom than ever could have been gathered by short-term quick-and-dirties. But, again, I digress.

Sometime back, the 'park naturalist' somehow virtually disappeared—the Russ Graters, the Natt Dodges, the Art Stupkas, et al. Instead, 'communicators' began 'communicating.' **How** something was communicated became much more important than **what** was communicated. I was appalled one summer at a park, whose name I won't mention, to find the season's interpretive program replete with hugging trees and conversing with wildflowers, apparently under some guise of 'loving and understanding nature.' It didn't wash for long—thank God—but still some parks seem deficient in solid, accurate, meaningful information, knowledge and wisdom emanating from their interpretive programs. Could it be that superficiality