

Nature and Culture in Historic Landscapes

Sometimes, when we “manage” nature (or culture) in what I shall generically term cultural landscapes, we do such things as cut second- or third-growth woods in what were once open fields of fire for Civil War artillerists. We may run into trouble doing this: a clean swath along section or fence line breaks the integrity of the woods by exposing its vulnerable inner sectors to domino-effect wind falls.

Or, we might debate the fate of a large, anachronistic, and exotic tree—like the one that once shaded visitors and framed their photos of the mission at Tumacacori. That tree has gone to its reward. And we are pure. And on hot days visitors do not stand in the shade of that tree to contemplate the lovely façade of the old mission. They rush across the simmering compound to the cavernous shade within.

Back to the Civil War. In the search for purity and literal accuracy (as documented by contemporary photos and maps), we may be overzealous. Nearly forty years ago my old friend Frank Barnes (then Regional Historian in the then Northeast Region) often expressed his discomfiture at the clutter of 19th Century monuments and memorials at Gettysburg’s Hallowed Ground. He floated a trial-balloon idea to have them removed. The mere hint ignited instant wrath amongst Civil War aficionados. More important, had the notion flourished it would have desecrated the cultural impulse that commemorated that decisive battle. This deep-felt impulse—resonating with Lincoln’s “mystic chords of memory—turned a battleground into a field of conciliation as the old veterans from both sides shared their memories and, arm-in-arm, placed the markers that delineated their struggle-at-arms decades before. Moreover, their memories were accurate. And the memorials they commissioned and lovingly placed have proven invaluable interpretive statements. Gettysburg, without its memorials and monuments placed by the soldiers who fought there, would be the cultural equivalent of a vacant house.

All of us with some duration in this business can cite instances like those above. Some later accretion, natural or cultural, that challenges our sense of accuracy or suitability. Or some initiative of our own in the quest for the last datum—several in recent years—that recalls the apocalyptic Vietnam War report: We had to destroy the village to save it. Or, as counterpoint, the shaping to conventional park standards of a place like Fort Bowie, which says it all as an abandoned ruin in an isolated pocket of lonely mountains. Here our role

should be to perpetuate nature's reclamation—our work and presence so subtle and effacing that visitors must discover lingering human echoes on their own. A wild and primitive and provocatively mute place that takes us to the edge of dread. Along this whole spectrum our problem is doing too much.

Let me close this phase of the essay with what may be a sort of philosophical criterion to help us judge these matters. In preserved cultural landscapes (and evermore in living ones) we are dealing with memorial landscapes. Accuracy is indeed a virtue in these landscapes. But it is not the only virtue. And applied too literally it can transmute to violation. After-the-event things do come into the fields of history by natural or cultural means. Some of these complement, become part of the continuum of the times and events commemorated. Some of them, like additions to an old house, may be a bit slaunchwise, but have incorporated themselves into the scene, become beloved elements of it. In these instances, literal accuracy may be the wrong thing entirely. We never achieve literal accuracy anyway. No matter how pedantic we may become, how pure in our no-nonsense factual microscopy, we are never really literally true in our representations at these places. If it were so we would have rotting horses and screaming wounded and piles of amputated arms and legs aswarm with flies at Gettysburg.

Nothing above, as I intend it, supports a sloppy, careless approach. Rather, let us be gentle and subtle in these memorial landscapes. Give the benefit of the doubt, whenever possible, to those later accretions—natural and cultural—that add to the harmonies and atmospherics of memory. That is what commemoration is all about. And by all means, when we must get rid of the incongruous or intrusive or obscuring element, let us do so with care. Especially is this critical in the removal of natural elements, to avoid ugly and costly wounds to the evolved landscape.



In a larger sense, all parks and equivalent reserves are cultural landscapes. Societies make decisions that these places have public value, are worth saving from consumptive types of utilitarian use. These are value-system determinations, abstract artifacts. They are products of culture. As, in their dedicated role, are the material reserves themselves—whether natural or built environments. We easily speak of both natural and cultural reserves as heritage sites—a generic way of stating cultural value. Now we have World Heritage Sites and International Biosphere Reserves, some sites having both designations.

Evermore, super-saturated modern world culture (over populated, urbanized, industrialized, and homogenized by dependence on the same resource, energy, financial, and communication systems) becomes one grand system, and the biosphere its one contiguous support system. In such a world system we may look for radical changes. We have many spot examples: statues and buildings sluff in polluted places; forests die from acid rain.

Now comes another blind-side blow. Recent studies by Duke botanist Dr. Boyd Strain forecast the possibility that "aggressive weeds" fed by excess carbon-dioxide could inherit the Earth. Strain's research (as described in the 12/12/95 *Christian Science Monitor*) gives warning that CO₂ enrichment could "have a profound effect on plant life even if there were no substantial climate change." And if there were, the impacts of global warming could "not be understood without taking account of CO₂'s fertilizing influence." This combination could so change the mix of plant species on unmanaged lands that "the whole system of birds, bees, rodents, fungi, and microbes" could radically change as well. Thus conceivably opening the way for "a feeding frenzy" and takeover by undesirable plants.

This scenario may recall President Carter's "killer rabbit" encounter, but don't dismiss it on that account. Strain and his co-investigator Dr. George Hendrey of Brookhaven National Laboratory make the point that intensively managed agricultural acreage might adapt to such a changing regime. In contrast, lands we want to preserve "in their natural state" might be more vulnerable and need more active management.

Workers in the park and equivalent reserve business may be facing changes that could make most of today's management dilemmas and manipulations fade to insignificance. The mandarin curse comes to mind, "May you live in interesting times."

To end this ramble on a less depressing note (the holidays still ahead as I write) it should be noted that interesting times are times of challenge, times that stretch us to do our best. Which brings to mind a marvelous "Block that Metaphor" quote in a recent New Yorker, ending with the line: "It's a two-sided sword, one hand washes the other." Be of good cheer!

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