

Staying with the trouble: Experiences of restoring through change

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The changing role of history in ecological restoration and reflections on the morality of restoration in the face of change elicit heated debates about the complex human aspects of the practice. These sometimes uncertain or uncomfortable aspects of restoration are understandable given that our activities themselves are ephemeral, that restoration operates within a context of an always-changing world, and that we act on a palimpsest of layered histories. This paper argues that ecological restoration provides a practical opportunity for those involved to confront troubled histories, accept a continuously unfolding present and cultivate nurturing relationships in their environments. Reporting on the findings of participant observation and qualitative social research techniques with restoration practitioners, it shares examples of how motivations, embodied experiences, and responses to restoration practice have been shaped in the face of 1) changing ecosystems and 2) a critical view of the use of history as a template. An epistemology of practice is then introduced as a useful framework for understanding and enhancing restoration experience and knowledge accumulation. By reflecting on the political and ethical components of restoration, we can support enduring efforts to restore through tempestuous social and ecological change. By considering multiple perspectives on local environmental histories, we can expand the outcomes of the practice so that they may be inclusive, healing, dynamic and humbling. Such approaches provide nurturing alternatives to dominant contemporary narratives of crisis, fear and commodification and generate a meaningful sense of place while working to heal dynamic landscapes.