



“When it comes to ecology and enterprise, the adversarial model surely will keep letting us down.”

We Can Have Our L

VIEWPOINT

by Michael L. Rosenzweig

Photo by Jay Rochlin

There is still time. There is good reason to believe that civilization need not destroy most of the Earth's nonhuman species. The trick is to learn how to share our spaces with other species.

One thing is for sure: The constant battling and bickering between environmentalists and business interests won't work. The adversarial model makes sense for some things in our society. But when it comes to ecology and enterprise, the adversarial model surely will keep letting us down. Why?

First, because we find ourselves on both sides of the argument. On the one hand, we would all like to live in a healthy, stimulating environment. But on the other hand, we all need to make a living, too! We all must live in real bodies — a corporeal existence that makes real demands on nature. We need to use the Earth's resources. We need to grow our food, mine our minerals, harvest our wood, and occupy nature's vastness. Conclusion? We cannot be unbiased champions of either side. Any competent judge would disqualify us for conflict of interest.

In addition, science now rejects the adversarial model. Recent research shows that we cannot do much ecological

good simply by confining our efforts to the world's parks and wildernesses. We already knew that about air and water pollution. But scientific advances, made mostly here at the University of Arizona in the 1990s, teach us that the same thing is true when it comes to conserving wild species. If we write off the land that we use for ourselves, if we treat it as despoiled and worthless and impure, the Earth will lose almost all its species. In fact, it appears that for each 10 percent of the land we write off, life eventually will lose about 10 percent of its diversity. And “eventually” threatens to come all too soon.

But we need not write off that land. We can have our land and share it, too. I call this “reconciliation ecology.” Reconciliation ecology means remodeling our habitats so that they continue to serve us but also support wild species. I believe reconciliation ecology is the best environmental news you have heard in a very long time.

Sound like a fantasy? It isn't. People often design habitats for themselves or for their enterprises and then find out that wild things also use these habitats successfully. Sometimes the sharing is accidental, sometimes quite purposeful. But sharing works. And it is very cheap.

Consider Eglin Air Force Base in Florida's panhandle. Just before the Iraq War, the U.S. demonstrated MOAB, the 21,000-pound Mother-Of-All-Bombs, by dropping one on a range in Eglin AFB. The blast was enormous! To protect the news media from its violence, they had to witness it from 20 miles away. Eglin Air Force Base is no nature reserve.

But Eglin is a crucial site for reconciliation ecology. Here's how:

In the early 1990s, the Department of Defense and the Nature Conservancy teamed up to learn how Eglin AFB could safeguard its many rare species of plants and animals. You see, Eglin was built on a massive tract of longleaf pine forest. By 1990, only 5,000 acres of old-growth longleaf pine remained in the whole USA — only 5,000 acres out of an original 90 million acres. And there is none anywhere else. Longleaf pine forest is one of the great loser habitats of the Earth, and dozens of species depend on it.

Today, Eglin has more than 200,000 acres of longleaf pine. Eglin's managers burn the pine forest regularly — tens of thousands of acres a year. Burning does not harm the pines, but it does kill the pines' chief enemies, scrub oaks whose dense foliage starves pine seedlings of the sunlight they need.

And Eglin's managers help other species, too, notably red-cockaded woodpeckers. This southeastern species was a charter member of the U.S. rare-and-endangered species list in 1973. To survive, it needs nest holes in live longleaf pines. Despite its listing, it had declined steadily, along with the pines. Armed with large, industrial, gas-powered augers,

Many examples of reconciliation ecology come from the world's poorer economies. You don't have to be rich to love nature. Researchers studying Third-World economies have developed a new kind of conservation ecology. They call it "countryside biogeography." These scientists are learning how traditional agricultural practices may offer people more: more species, more happiness, and more sustainable profits. No doubt the most famous case is shade-grown coffee.

All coffee plantations are human-designed, human-dominated landscapes. For centuries, they all depended on tropical trees to provide shade for coffee growing. Then, geneticists came up with a type of coffee that could grow well in sunshine. Such coffee can be grown with big agribusiness tools and techniques. It is techno-coffee. The rub? The trees must be cut down so all the animals that depend on them lose their habitat. In addition, growing techno-coffee results in overproduction, falling prices, and a nasty soil loss that demands expensive, continual application of mineral nutrients.

Yet, though it generates less profit, the practice of growing techno-coffee continues. Why? The price of coffee is about the same for both sorts, but shade-grown coffee has higher labor costs. So coffee growers are stuck with this Frankenstein monster. But reconciliation activists who consume coffee can help to free them by telling this story and buying shade-grown coffee whenever they can.

If you care about the world's species and nature's diversity, here are a few other things you can do.

Learn as much about reconciliation success stories

as you can. Spread the word that we can keep the sky from falling simply by doing sensible things with our

Land and Share It, Too

Eglin drill teams climb the pines and supply the nest holes. They've reversed the woodpecker decline.

Meanwhile, Eglin continues to serve as a site for military tests. And thousands of people live on it. Even more thousands of people camp in its forest, fish its waters, and hunt its game. And its pines are timbered commercially — at a profit!

Eglin's is a big story. Many others are much less grand, but no less important:

- Individuals who put bluebird nest boxes in their gardens have joined with thousands of others to shore up the future of this delicate and beautiful thrush.

- Prairie Dunes Country Club's golf course in Hutchinson, Kan., hosts some 35,000 rounds of golf a year, but it also deliberately encourages an abundance of diverse wild species in its roughs. Prairie Dunes is showing that golf courses can do even better than no harm to nature — they can actually help her.

- Mayor Richard Daley's Chicago is bringing wild creatures to the inner city. Chicago took 19 abandoned gas stations and made them into pocket parks — little areas for birds, flowers, and trees.

"We cannot do much ecological good simply by confining our efforts to the world's parks and wildernesses."

world. If you are a business leader or are in a decision-making situation for a company, take the time to learn how maximizing profits and supporting natural diversity not only can be, but must be, compatible and complementary goals.

No matter what your job, consider that we know all too little about the needs of most of the species in trouble. Yet we must have this sort of information to design our reconciled

habitats. So be an advocate for such research — it is going to take some tax dollars and that can happen only with citizen support.

You also can support organizations that buy into the goals of reconciliation. Those include the Nature Conservancy, Defenders of Wildlife, the National Wildlife Federation, Bat Conservation International, and the North American Bluebird Society.

Another, more active (and fun) activity

is to join neighbors in an effort to change what grows in your own backyards. But, perhaps most difficult, ignore the divisive zealots on both sides; their wish for vituperative conflict will die down only if it finds no ears and no echo.

If enough of us care and act, there is still time.