

NEC Round-Up: Diversity Hurrah

by Tim McKay

Now that we are well into spring, let's take a moment to assess the various groups that work in the garden of the Earth. It is a diverse group!

Rene Dubos, in his recent book Wooing the Earth, restates his recurrent theme that humankind can and must foster and cultivate the planet. Some critics could argue that there could be some conflict between his view and that of an environmentalist working for preservation of some obscure species or its habitat.

But any perceived conflict has to stem from failure to see that the opposite ends of the conservation spectrum are but differing faces on the same coin. The diversity of the "movement" is its strength! Or at least it should be.

The protection of natural diversity is the meat of Building an Ark: Tools for the Preservation of Natural Diversity Through Land Protection, by Phillip M. Hoose, and published by Island Press of Covelo, California (\$12).

Phillip Hoose is Director of Preserve Selection and Design for the Nature Conservancy, and is quite able to chronicle the many ways to protect the many forms of life in the United States.

Two Reasons

The preservation of natural diversity is most important for both pragmatic and ethical reasons. On the ethical side, Hoose points out that, "Humans as rational beings are responsible for safeguarding forms of life which we did not create but suddenly have the power to destroy. By knowingly causing the extinction of these species and their habitats, we sacrifice a part of our humanity."

On the pragmatic side, the great value to humanity of obscure life forms has been demonstrated repeatedly. So many medicines are derived from plants and animals.

Did you know that the blood of the horseshoe crab can help diagnose spinal meningitis in children, or that blowfly larvae secrete a substance which promotes the healing of deep wounds? The desert pupfish—a very endangered species—may hold the key to the cure of certain kidney diseases, and the "ugly" armadillo may help eradicate leprosy.

Don't forget that 90% of the world's food supply comes from about 20 plants, and that important new developments of necessary varieties of these plants wholly depend on the existence of a wild gene pool to draw on.

We all should be banking on the preservation of natural diversity but the simplification of complex natural systems continues at too fast a pace. It is estimated that in the eight year period between 1967 and 1975 some 14 percent of the private land in the U.S. was converted from one use to another. That is 210 million acres.

Ark-Building

Building an Ark details a number of tools and techniques used to protect natural diversity. Most have been used to protect areas in private ownership, but the book does have a brief chapter dealing with public lands.

For those of us in northwestern California the chapter on public lands should be a volume since the diversity they support is high, the threats to natural diversity are legion, and the area of concern is about five million acres. As Hoose points out about public land, "It is seldom managed to protect elements of natural diversity." There is more than enough work to be done in the private sector as well, and Hoose has detailed well the tools available. Such tools are being used locally by the Nature Conservancy, Coastal Conservancy and the Humboldt North Coast Land Trust.

As trust President Al Holt outlined in a recent message to members, that body attempts to use private action as a dampening influence against both over-development and over-regulation.

Besides the point that Building an Ark is a volume that should be read by all concerned with the protection of natural diversity, another point to be made is that the diversity of those working in the broad spectrum of conservation must also be respected.

Focus

Whether we are members of the Earth First or of the Save the Redwoods League, or both, we should spend our time focusing on our conservation goals rather than on judging the goals or style of another conservation group. This is not a plea to abandon critical thought, but rather a plea to think about the strength of the natural diversity of the conservation movement.

Remember, we conservationists are alleged to be wholistic thinkers and, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Considering the challenges to conservation and natural diversity which face us, it would seem prudent to go beyond the tolerance for those who have different goals or style to actually offering mutual aid. Now is the time to pull together — not apart.