

# Introduction

BY RICHARD NILSEN

*This issue is devoted to environmental restoration. Consider it an invitation to get your hands dirty. Old houses can be restored, but so can streams, marshes, and forests. Here are people working with nature, explaining how they do it and why. As an activity that invites your participation, environmental restoration is a way of focusing on the particular instead of the planet. We are suckers for the grandiose. Phrases like "save the earth" and "heal the planet" have become part of the problem, as Wendell Berry argues on page 68.*

*Working at environmental restoration helps get priorities straight. If you have to step around a homeless person on the way to the mailbox with a check supporting Third World peoples, you are overlooking a basic contradiction. If there are no trees on your block, or pollution is killing the trees there now, then focusing on rainforest depletion in the Amazon basin is a misplaced concern. And if lack of habitat has eliminated the frogs or songbirds from your neighborhood, then dolphins or grizzlies should not be the first species you try to help. There is urgent work for us all, and it begins in our own backyards.*

*Some argue that local environmental good works are diversionary, that the most urgent need is for broad changes in national policy. It's true that the situation cries out for strong leadership. Consider one glaring example: we began the last decade with a millenarian deconstructionist for Secretary of the Interior, and have ended it with that office occupied by a spent political hack. How do we change that? By first educating enough people about what a healthy environment needs — beginning with their own communities.*

*This country is about freedom and justice, but it began over particular local grievances. Will the process of building a popular groundswell of informed demand for changes in our environmental laws be any different? Doing environmental restoration work gives you intimate understanding of what a healthy environment should look like, and new eyes that will begin to see the rest of the world a little differently. ■*

# Life Work

BY JIM DODGE

A basic rule of human habitation has always been "Don't shit in camp." When the number of human inhabitants reached five billion, "camp" became the planet, the common ground of the global village and everyone's backyard. This recognition that our species' pollution and pillage in disparate locales now threatens, by cumulative insults, to foul the collective nest has been relatively sudden (the last thirty years of human occupation) and perhaps too late. But if necessity is the mother of invention, species-survival may prove downright inspirational.

The notion of "right livelihood" — work that is individually satisfying and for the common good — is beginning to exert its simple wisdom on a wider scale. If we spend about a third of our lives sleeping and a third at work, a comfortable bed and a fulfilling job are obvious provisions for getting a jump on happiness. A recent Columbia University study of people over 95 years old asked the elders what they'd change if they could re-live their lives. Among the three most frequent answers was "Create something that would last beyond death." (The



The author consults with old-timer Jimmy Kennedy about removing a log jam on Palmer Creek in the Gualala River watershed in Northern California. Some log jams act as barriers to spawning salmon. This one took a crew of eight one week to remove with hand tools.

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Cazadero Forest Workers' crew stabilizing the toe of a cutbank to prevent further erosion. Materials used came from a nearby log jam.

Victoria Stockley

other two were "Take more risks" and "Stop and smell the roses.") Restoration work not only offers right livelihood at a time when we seem sick-to-puking with meaningless labor for the poverty of dollars, it also, according to our elders, insures us against regret. Work is work, but it's a pleasure to sing for one's supper when the song itself provides sustenance.

Restoration, like any art, seeks a greater understanding of existence, which tends to deepen our appreciation, gratitude, and humility, salubrious states of mind that are less fringe benefits than compelling requisites for further work. Moreover, the art of restoration is finely balanced between mind and body, thought and sweat. The work is heads-up and hands-on: figuring out by guess, gut, experience, and calculation how many trees to plant on the hillside, what species, when, and to what immediate and long-term consequence, then picking up your hoe and doing it. Even better, it's outside work, so you don't have to make a special trip to smell the roses or feel the rain on your face. Compared to restoration, the other

arts seem dangerously self-involved and boringly one-dimensional.

It's my feeling, one that swings between conviction and wild hope, that we're at a point in species' consciousness where we're about to grasp both the importance and rightness of helping the planet heal the injuries we've mindlessly inflicted. It's tempting to think of restoration as a new genre of the healing arts, but in fact we have hardly begun to wash the wounds, much less address the psycho-social pathologies and self-destructive contempt that fuel the affliction. In caring for the earth, we may heal ourselves, but at present the art of restoration is more janitorial than medicinal. We've made a mess of creation, and now we need to clean it up. ■

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*Jim Dodge helped write the "Where You At?" environmental quiz in the Bioregions issue of CoEvolution Quarterly in the winter of 1981 (#32) — one of the most-reprinted items we've ever published. He lives in Arcata, California, where he is an author, a former restoration worker, and a running-dog bioregionalist. —Richard Nilsen*

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