

The Perils of Pollyannas (Excerpted)

“Conservation biologists are probably more aware than anyone of **the extinction crisis and the decline of natural diversity in all its forms**. We read the facts and figures in countless articles, we hear one sad story after another at conferences, we see the **destruction of our study areas and the gradual deterioration of the landscapes we call home**. As I write this in the foothills of the Oregon Coast Range I can see a fresh clearcut on the slope across the valley, I hear bulldozers groaning in the distance as they prepare yet another home site, and I smell faint but pungent diesel fumes in the air...

Now there is a penalty worse than an ecological education and a peril worse than ecological ignorance. It is **the concerted attempt by seemingly well educated people-- people who should know better--to convince the public that the environmental movement has succeeded** or else was never needed in the first place, that the forests are coming back, that we've cleaned up our rivers and lakes, and that the environment in general is healthier, cleaner, and greener than it was on the first Earth Day in 1970. **These Pollyannas of the environment are wrong. They are also dangerous because a public out of touch with the natural world cannot see the fallaciousness of their claims...**

Consider this quote: "In both the United States and Europe, environmental trends are, for the most part, positive; and environmental regulations have proved to be strikingly effective." So writes Gregg Easterbrook, a contributing editor for Atlantic Monthly and Newsweek, in the 10 April 1995 issue of The New Yorker. Easterbrook published a similar article in the 9 April 1995 issue of Washington Post Magazine; both articles are distilled from his new book, A Moment on the Earth: The Coming Age of Environmental Optimism (1995, Viking Press)...

It is when Easterbrook strays beyond the physical and immediate human environment into the domain of natural habitat that he walks onto thin ice and ultimately falls through. **Although he admits that "habitat preservation .. is likely to be the primary ecological issue of the coming century," Easterbrook seems to have very little understanding of the habitat needs of nonhuman species or of the structural, physiognomic factors that determine habitat suitability for plants and animals.** Ecologists will be amused to learn that habitat is becoming an important issue, when for us it has been the primary issue for a long time. Furthermore, **to Easterbrook habitat is simple vegetation cover.** He cites the **misleading statistics that forest cover is increasing over much of the U.S., failing to acknowledge that even tree farms are included in these reforestation statistics and that secondary forests, in many cases, have barely begun to regain the structural complexity and species richness of natural forests. The short rotation lengths of commercial forests and plantations will never allow them to recover the habitat structures of old growth.** Easterbrook also claims that much agricultural land is "reverting to woodland and prairie," which will surprise prairie restorationists, who know **how laborious restoration can be** and recognize that even after 60 years the restored prairie at the University of

Wisconsin-Madison Arboretum is still missing many species of the pre-European tallgrass prairie. In a **pitiful display of biological ignorance**, Easterbrook suggests that insects do not distinguish between native plants and crops--"Does an insect care that the plants on which it feeds now grow in concentric circles, supported by farmers' irrigation fields, rather than in random patches?"--ignoring the wealth of evidence that many phytophagous insects specialize on particular genera and species of plants and are utterly incapable of switching, except, of course, over evolutionary time scales. When Easterbrook refers to endangered species, the successes he cites (for example, the Bald Eagle and Peregrine Falcon) represent cases where **partial recovery followed control of DDT and other toxic substances**. He fails to acknowledge that **habitat destruction is by far the greatest threat to endangered species, a problem that has not been adequately addressed by the agencies administering the Endangered Species Act**.

Although Easterbrook cites statistics about the growing number of protected areas in the U.S., he neglects to mention the evidence that **by and large these reserves are too small, too few, and too isolated to maintain their characteristic species and natural processes over time**.

If Easterbrook is correct in his claims, then there is no need for conservation biology, at least not in North America and Europe. But available evidence at species and ecosystem levels suggests that **if we care about any aspect of nature beyond the immediate human environment, then Easterbrook is terribly wrong. Trends are downward, not up**. Unfortunately, Easterbrook is not the only one making outrageous claims about ecological recovery. For example, three U.S. Forest Service scientist-managers, Hal Salwasser, Douglas MacCleery, and Thomas Snellgrove, wrote in a 1992 report: "There is overwhelming evidence that, while some problems remain and others have emerged in the last few years, on balance, multiple use and conservation have worked. The conditions of United States forests, wildlife, rangelands, agricultural lands, and related resources have improved dramatically during the last century. These trends continue." **If only it were true...**

Primary forests that took hundreds of years to develop are still being logged; streams are still being diverted, dammed, and channelized; public rangelands are still being overgrazed; roads are still being built; and remnant natural areas are still losing native species. The Turkey Vultures that soar over my ridge are fewer each year..." [Emph. added.]

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