



## Trees Can Be Just Another Sacred Cow

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Due to misguided attempts at preservation, interest groups often side with trees, even when they shouldn't

by TED WILLIAMS | posted 05.13.05

Only God can make a tree, but anyone can ruin a prairie. Consider the celebrated 19th century journalist Julius Sterling Morton. On moving to Nebraska from Michigan in 1854, he found he didn't like the way nature had designed the Great Plains. Accordingly, he summoned forth "a great army of husbandmen...to battle against the timberless prairies."

In 1885, Morton's birthday became a state holiday we all just noted called "Arbor Day." A statue of him, paid for in part by the pennies, nickels and dimes of school children from all over the world, now stands in Nebraska City. Arbor Day is celebrated throughout our land, and when you join the National Arbor Day Foundation you get 10 free tree seedlings that may or may not belong in your area.

There are or were prairies in most of our nation, not just the plains states. Prairies used to dominate the San Francisco Bay region, but as Arbor Day euphoria swept west, locals planted trees – including eucalyptus, America's biggest weed – thereby wiping out native ecosystems. By 1949, the trees had killed off the remnant population of the prairie-dependent Xerces blue butterfly, making the Presidio of San Francisco – an old Spanish garrison – the site of the first documented butterfly extinction in North America.

In 2002, American Forests, the nation's oldest conservation organization, and its "Global ReLeaf" partners, which included such spewers of tree-killing and greenhouse gases as Conoco, Arco Foundation, Baltimore Gas and Electric, Edison Electric Institute, Metropolitan Edison, Texaco, Octane Boost Corp., and Pennsylvania Electric, reached their goal of planting 20 million trees across the United States. There was little thought about what species belonged where and no recognition that lots of places had too many trees already.

Sandra Ross, director of the conservation group Health & Habitat of Mill Valley, Calif., wanted to sign up for Global ReLeaf but couldn't extract a promise from organizers to plant only indigenous trees, and only in areas that used to have trees.

"I have trouble talking to these people who have this wonderful enthusiasm for planting trees," she told me. "Most of them don't have any idea of site-endemic situations. 'We're gonna plant trees!' they'll say, and I'll ask what kind. And they'll say, 'I don't know; they're in little pots.' Mill Valley (in the Bay area) doesn't need a tree-planting program. It needs a tree-removal program."

Just such a program is underway at the 3,334-acre Union Slough National Wildlife Refuge near Titonka, Iowa, where the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is trying to restore a tiny piece of tallgrass prairie, a globally endangered ecosystem supporting 300 plant species per acre and critically important to vanishing grassland birds.

But when managers suggested cutting and burning invasive trees, the public accused them of "playing God" and initiating "a scorched earth policy." School kids blitzed them with e-mails, begging them to desist from aboricide. With the kind of courage that doesn't get recognized enough in federal service, the staff forged ahead, cutting, burning and educating where it could. Although the locals have more or less quieted down, the refuge finds itself strapped for money and manpower.

"I'm frustrated," declares federal biologist Tom Skilling, who reckons that only 10 or 15 percent of the trees have been removed from the project area.

There's a notion, old as the Oregon Trail, that trees prevent erosion in prairie habitat. "Not true," says Rich Patterson, director of the Indian Creek Nature Center in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. "As a general statement, dense growths of trees reduce the ground cover of sedges, grasses and forbs, and there's a lot of sheet erosion in the woods. These ground-huggers do a better job holding soil than trees."

For his radical notions, Patterson used to get pilloried by tree lovers, including state and federal bureaucrats who had devoted their careers to planting trees for "conservation." Now, after 29 years of cutting, burning and educating, he's got everyone pretty much behind him.

Still, the old mindset dies hard. Even today, the Farm Bill's Conservation Reserve Program impedes prairie restoration. It requires landowners wanting to enroll marginal riparian pastures to plant trees and shrubs.

Depending on where and how it takes root, a tree can be lovelier than a poem or uglier than a road-killed coyote. I'll withhold comment on Joyce Kilmer's verse except to say I prefer the words of Ansel Adams, worth perhaps more than one of his photographs, and with which he helped quash a Boy Scout tree-planting project on California's Marin headlands: "I cannot think of a more tasteless undertaking than to plant trees in a naturally treeless area," said Adams, "and to impose an interpretation of natural beauty on a great landscape that is charged with beauty and wonder, and the excellence of eternity."

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