



Protect Land to Prevent Need for Restoration

Published: Monday, July 12, 2010, 9:15 AM

By Danielle Nierenberg & Amanda Stone

In the recent Oregonian article, “The once and future marsh,” Katy Muldoon wrote about the re-engineering of the salt marsh from land degraded by agricultural use. It is very exciting for an ecological habitat to be restored to its original and valuable natural state.

It is also crucial, however, that when using land for agriculture, farmers work to both protect the environment and wildlife. By avoiding the overuse and mis-use of pesticides, fertilizers, and other harsh chemical inputs and overgrazing, it's more feasible to avoid such financially intensive restoration projects.

In some parts of the world, such as sub-Saharan Africa, there are organizations working with farmers to help communities realize that protecting wildlife is in their own interest.

Raoul du Toit, Director of the Rhino Conservation Trust in Zimbabwe, for example, promotes “landscape-level planning” that takes into account the needs of wildlife, the environment, and farming communities. Rather than relying on development agencies and governments to decide where cattle fences should go or where farmers should plant their crops, local communities and stakeholders need to be part of the process. Development aid, says du Toit, should follow what local stakeholders need and perceive, not the other way around.

The Institute for Sustainable Development in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia has performed studies with farmers to test the viability of natural compost versus chemical inputs. The natural compost avoided the financial costs and environmental degradation caused by the chemical inputs and avoided other negative side effects such as stunted crop growth and death of honeybees.

While it's wonderful that we have learned how to successfully rehabilitate land to its natural state, it's better to stop problems before they start. If we treat the land better to begin with we wouldn't have to go to such extreme measures to heal it.