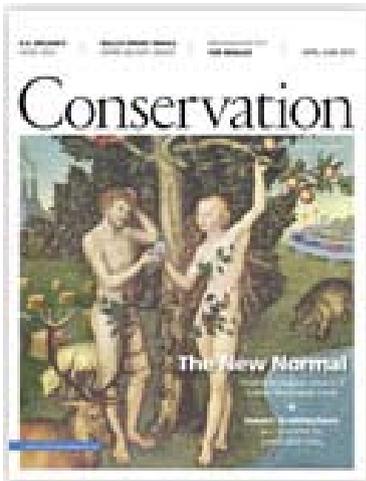


LETTER TO EDITOR

Accepting ‘The New Normal’? Not so fast...

In “The New Normal” (*Conservation*, Spring 2010), Emma Maris argues that some ecosystems, degraded by exotic invasive species, should be celebrated as the new normal for conservation. We recognize that some “novel ecosystems,” such as hedgerows in England, have social and cultural value, but



the author’s arguments might lead to allowing exotic invasive communities to thrive and spread in unmanaged systems, resulting in a loss of increasingly uncommon native plant communities. At the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center in Austin, Texas, we agree that restoration to a pre-Columbian state can sometimes be unfeasible; however, we argue that without proper management invasive species become more dangerous over time, causing major loss in global biodiversity and species extinction. Our response follows:

Argument 1: Novel ecosystems are an alternative stable state and should be accepted as the new norm.

Stability alone is not a desirable trait. A corn field in Iowa is quite stable yet would not be considered a success in ecological restoration. Many natural ecosystems are dynamic, changing over time with natural disturbances. An exotic forest may be stable, but if it has replaced a dynamic native savanna, it shouldn’t be considered the new norm.

Stating that novel ecosystems are running on their own processes without human control is a nonscientific claim. If “natural” means “existing without human involvement,” then—as Bill McKibben (1) has pointed out—nature ended a long time ago.

Humans have directly or unintentionally created these novel ecosystems. By removing natural disturbances such as fire, widespread ungulates, predators, etc., humans have allowed exotic plants to thrive and take over native vegetation.

Whether the system in question is native or novel, neither can be considered “existing without human influence.” Both ecosystems are a result of human influence.

Argument 2: Novel ecosystems increase biodiversity.

The article cites increased biodiversity in one system at the sake of decreased biodiversity in another. Plant diversity did increase in Mascaro’s “novel forest,” but no native birds are seen. This reflects Tallamy’s (2) claim that avian diversity decreases greatly in landscapes composed of nonnative species. While there may be an increase in local species richness, homogenizing global biota results in a decrease of global species richness. To maintain Earth’s biodiversity, we should focus on maintaining and restoring diverse native plant

communities, not allowing novel ecosystems to overrun them.

Argument 3: Novel ecosystems should be protected.

The processes may be worthy of study, but when they are encroaching on ecosystems that are the last of their type, such as the native ‘ohi’a forest, it is easy to see why conservationists think these novel ecosystems are bad news. It will become more costly—in dollars and species—if we do not control them now.

Lady Bird Johnson once said that she wanted “Texas to look like Texas and Georgia to look like Georgia.” The rampant spread of nonnative invasive species is leading to the homogenization of the world’s biota. Should we sit back and allow these cleverly named novel ecosystems to expand until we find ourselves in the “Homogocene”?

1. McKibben, B. 2006. *The End of Nature*. Random House, New York.
2. Tallamy, D.W. 2007. *Bringing Nature Home: How You Can Sustain Wildlife with Native Plants*. Timber Press, London.

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