

Stream Restoration Neoliberalism and the Future of Environmental Science

: A Complex Interplay of Environmentalism and Capitalism

Stream restoration, once a realm of ecological engineering, has become increasingly entangled with the forces of neoliberalism. This transformation has not only shaped the physical landscapes of rivers and streams but has also profoundly influenced our understanding of nature and the role of science in environmental decision-making.



Fields and Streams: Stream Restoration, Neoliberalism, and the Future of Environmental Science (Geographies of Justice and Social Transformation Ser. Book 12)

by Rebecca Lave

★★★★★ 5 out of 5

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The Rise of Neoliberal Environmentalism

Neoliberalism, an economic and political ideology emphasizing privatization, deregulation, and market competition, emerged in the 1970s. Its influence on environmental policy has been profound. By commodifying nature and prioritizing economic growth over environmental protection, neoliberalism has fundamentally altered the way we think about and manage our natural resources.

Stream Restoration in the Neoliberal Era

The impact of neoliberalism on stream restoration is evident in several key areas:

- **Commodification of Riverine Ecosystems:** Rivers and streams are increasingly seen as economic assets, providing ecosystem services such as flood control, water filtration, and recreational opportunities. This commodification has led to a focus on monetizing these benefits and using them to justify restoration projects.
- **Privatization and Outsourcing:** The neoliberal push for privatization has extended to stream restoration. Private companies and contractors

are increasingly responsible for carrying out restoration work, potentially compromising ecological objectives in favor of profit motives.

- **Deregulation and Self-Regulation:** Neoliberalism has emphasized deregulation and self-regulation, reducing government oversight of restoration projects. This can lead to inconsistent standards and practices, with some projects prioritizing economic benefits over ecological integrity.

The Consequences for Ecological Science

The neoliberalization of stream restoration has significant implications for ecological science:

- **Shifting Baselines and Altered Goals:** Neoliberalism has introduced new goals and metrics for stream restoration projects, often emphasizing economic benefits rather than ecological restoration. This shift can undermine the scientific principles that once guided restoration efforts.
- **Subordination of Science to Economics:** The commodification of riverine ecosystems and the emphasis on economic growth have elevated economic considerations above ecological ones in decision-making. This subordination of science to economics can lead to suboptimal restoration outcomes.
- **Erosion of Public Trust:** The increasing privatization and deregulation of stream restoration has eroded public trust in the restoration process. Without transparent and accountable decision-

making, communities may question the legitimacy and effectiveness of restoration efforts.

Envisioning a Future of Ethical and Scientific Environmental Science

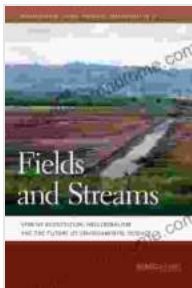
To address the challenges posed by stream restoration neoliberalism, it is essential to:

- **Recenter Ecological Integrity:** Restoration projects must prioritize ecological restoration as their primary goal, ensuring that scientific principles guide decision-making.
- **Foster Collaboration and Transparency:** Scientists, policymakers, and communities should work together to develop transparent and accountable restoration processes that consider both ecological and social values.
- **Promote Public Engagement and Education:** Engaging the public in stream restoration efforts is crucial for building awareness, fostering stewardship, and ensuring the legitimacy of restoration projects.
- **Strengthen Regulatory Oversight:** While deregulation can promote flexibility, robust environmental regulations are essential to ensure the ecological integrity of restoration projects.

: Redefining the Relationship between Environmentalism and Capitalism

Stream restoration neoliberalism has brought about fundamental shifts in our understanding of nature and the role of science in environmental

decision-making. By commodifying riverine ecosystems, prioritizing economic growth, and undermining scientific principles, neoliberalism has created a need for a re-evaluation of our environmental ethics. As we move forward, it is imperative to envision a future of environmental science that is ethical, scientifically rigorous, and responsive to the needs of both nature and society.

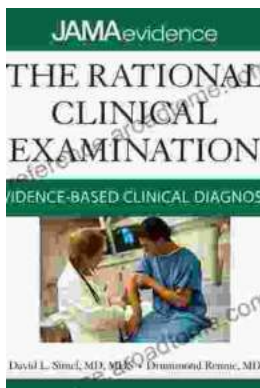


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