



Midwest-Great Lakes Chapter Society for Ecological Restoration

December 15, 2011

Dr. John Stanley and Dr. Cara Nelson
Certification Committee
Society for Ecological Restoration

Dear Dr. Stanley and Dr. Nelson,

We (The Board of Directors of the Midwest-Great Lakes SER Chapter) would like to take the opportunity to provide SER with feedback and insights related to the development of an ecological restoration certification program. Certification programs are valuable to individuals and organizations as a way of communicating their expertise in a given specialty to others. Many disciplines, such as accountants, education, law, and landscape architecture, use certification programs or standardized professional exams to set professional educational standards. A 2010 survey of the Midwest-Great Lakes SER Chapter members asked the following question: “*Are you interested in an ecological restoration practitioner certification program?*” Of the responders, 66% (37 individuals) of the responders were in favor of an ecological restoration practitioner certification program and 29% (16 individuals) were opposed.

We think an effectively designed certification program can help promote and maintain an agreed upon set of professional standards. Other professional societies (i.e., Society of Wetland Scientists, Ecological Society of America, The Wildlife Society, American Fisheries Society, and American Society of Ecological Engineers) have successfully implemented certification programs to enable their members to receive professional recognition for their important work in both research and practice. We have several suggestions regarding certification types, continuing education, and pricing that we feel should be incorporated as part of SER’s certification program.

First, certification may encompass several aspects: 1) certification of individuals in the practice and research; 2) certification of ecological restoration projects; and 3) accreditation for technical schools and universities for the validation of post-post-secondary education restoration degrees or certificates. Other ecology-related organizations (e.g., Society for Wetland Scientists, Ecological Society of America, The Wildlife Society, American Fisheries Society, and American Ecological Engineering Society) have certification programs that only certify individuals. Thus, SER would truly establish a unique certification program by developing one that encompasses more than just individual certification. We recognize that establishing an individual certification program takes a tremendous amount of work. We recommend that SER take a long-term view towards its certification program and consider the establishment of an individual certification program as the first step in the establishment of a comprehensive certification program. Additionally, we recommend that certification of ecological restoration projects and accreditation for technical schools and universities are considered as part of the SER’s certification program long-term development.

Certification of ecological restoration projects on an international scale represents a significant challenge. We envision that SER could certify restoration projects by evaluating the designs of the projects. Doing so would enable interested individuals and organizations to submit their

project designs to SER for review and would not require onsite visits by SER to certify a restoration project. Despite SER's efforts to define restoration it is still a term used loosely by non-specialists and in some cases has been used to describe projects that are not actually restoration projects (i.e., stream channelization, erosion control, etc.). Development of a certification program for ecological restoration projects would enable SER to communicate to the public and non-ecological restorationists what defines a restoration project. We also feel that the standards and criteria for certifying a restoration project should be based on SER's *Guidelines for Developing and Managing Ecological Restoration Projects* (Clewell et al. 2005) and *Primer on Ecological Restoration* (SER Science & Policy Working Group 2004). Using these foundational documents to develop the standards is a way for SER to promote these core ecological restoration principles to the public and non-ecological restorationists.

Restoration is becoming increasingly popular in academia. A glance at a Google search for "restoration ecology graduate programs" reveals numerous programs across North America, from the University of Georgia to British Columbia Institute of Technology and from University of California-Davis to University of North Carolina. Programs exist as two-year programs, four-year programs, and graduate degree programs and several schools offer "certificate" programs. Personal conversations with colleagues from Midwest post-secondary institutions reveal interest in developing restoration programs, or at very least coupling restoration to existing ecology and/or environmental science programs. While the development of four-year programs devoted to ecological restoration are vital for the future of the field, especially since current four-year ecological restoration programs within North America are limited (Nelson et al. 2008). Additionally, not all institutions will have the resources or the desire to develop a four-year restoration program. Thus, a more viable option would be to develop a two-year certificate that can be coupled to existing four-year degree programs, such as engineering, wildlife management, etc.

Another way that SER can promote the development of future degree programs and "certificate" programs is to collaborate with a recognized post-secondary education accreditation program in the development of an ecological restoration accreditation program. We envision SER, particularly the local chapters, as serving in a technical advisory role and identifying areas of education and training needs specific to various regions. The post-secondary education accreditation institute would implement the program and be the accrediting institution. One such entity is the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (<http://www.ncacasi.org/>) and they have expressed interest in this type of a collaboration. Involvement in such a certification program would signal to others SER's interests in ecological restoration education as well as its practice and science.

Secondly, SER is composed of individuals who consider themselves: 1) practitioners; 2) researchers; and 3) a combination of both. Our 2010 Chapter member survey indicated that: 1) 32% (18 individuals) considered themselves practitioners, 2) 25% (14 individuals) considered themselves researchers; and 3) 41% (23 individuals) considered themselves both practitioners and researchers. Thus, it might be valuable for SER to provide certification for practitioners and a separate one for researchers. Those doing both could simply apply jointly and receive both certificates.

Thirdly, we feel that any individual certification program should be based on both education and relevant experience. For example, Ecological Society of America's certification program has standards whereby a person could become a certified Ecologist if they have: 1) the minimum level of education (Bachelor's degree) and five years of professional experience; or 2) a Master's degree and two years of full-time professional experience. We want to emphasize that we did not provide this example as a recommendation for specific educational and/or experience requirements. Instead, we presented it as an example of the type of a standard that would ensure that those who have extensive amounts of experience, but only have the

minimum level of education would not be disqualified. We also feel that individual certification programs should require periodic renewals. This requirement would be an effective way of promoting the importance of life-long learning and education within the field of ecological restoration.

Fourthly, with respect to pricing we feel that SER members should receive a reduced price than non-members. Member costs for individual certification programs implemented by other ecology-related organizations (Society for Wetland Scientists, Ecological Society of America, The Wildlife Society, American Fisheries Society, and American Society of Ecological Engineers) range from \$75 (ESA) to \$300 (Society for Wetland Scientists). In contrast non-member costs range from \$150 (ESA) to \$500 (Wildlife Society). This aspect may seem obvious, but we mention it anyway simply to ensure that the issue is not overlooked.

We feel it's time to move restoration into the forefront of land management. A certification program for practitioners and researchers that establishes a professional set of standards will help move restoration forward. Likewise, an accredited certificate program for post-secondary institutions will provide the structure for eager students to learn, participate and research pertinent restoration topics, both in general terms and specific to their region. On behalf of the Board of Directors we appreciate the opportunity to share our insights and those of our Chapter members with the Certification Program Committee. Thank you for your time and consideration and let us know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Stephen L. Thomforde
Wisconsin Representative
Midwest-Great Lakes SER Chapter

Dr. Peter C. Smiley Jr. (Rocky)
President
Midwest-Great Lakes SER Chapter

Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies
Environment and Resources Program
322 Birge Hall
430 Lincoln Drive
UW-Madison
Madison, Wisconsin, 53706
Email: thomforde@wisc.edu

USDA-ARS
590 Woody Hayes Drive
Columbus, Ohio 43210
Email: rocky.smiley@gmail.com

Cc: Dr. Whisenant, Dr. Travaglini, Dr. Unwin