Making Ripples

Why Grass Isn't Always Greener

by Amanda Bancroft

Perception can be a tricky thing when it comes to science. A flock of birds flying overhead may appear to negate the finding of their endangered status, or it could be the last flock of passenger pigeons in your neighborhood – a glimpse before their 1914 extinction. Lush, green lawns with water sprinklers may make it seem like water is abundant, when in the desert southwest, it may mean that Colorado waters are being shipped into the area to make up for the depletion of local water resources. And the desert itself appears lifeless, a wasteland in terms of human benefit, but filled with immense biodiversity to the ecologist who has spent decades studying desert life.

Conservation is such a tough sell in parts of California currently stricken with drought that there are now fines of $500 being implemented as a tool to persuade water wasters to comply with conservation restrictions. According to ABC news and other major media, "Suburban residents are not fully aware of the seriousness of the three-year drought — the worst in California since the mid-1970s," said Felicia Marcus, chairwoman of the State Water Resources Control Board.

These fines apply to those who use water wastefully, such as for watering lawns and drought-intolerant landscaping that can't thrive in a desert climate. But if grass is green, shouldn't it help the desert ecology? Anyone can see that migratory birds like landing on golf courses. They also like landing on airports that displaced their habitat, but airports are hardly healthier for them. For endemic species (species found nowhere else) like two species of Sonoran sparrows, they need that lifeless-looking thing called a desert. The challenge is that unaware citizens can't easily perceive the life of a sparrow, let alone a threatened tortoise or the largest terrestrial salamander in the world (the tiger salamander). We don't grow cacti in Alaska for the same reasons we shouldn't grow lawns in the desert…but somehow, our perception tells us that grass is greener.

Despite the objective evidence of hydrologists, ecologists, other scientists and regulation agencies, subjective human perception can take over. Our gut perceptions and personal experiences give us vital information – for example, knowing when a car is coming so we don't step out in front of it. But when it comes to science, it's best to learn from scientists and weigh their combined knowledge through research as heavier than our casual observation that grass is indeed the color green. The best thing about these observations, if we're open-minded, is that they lead us to *questions*, not answers. And science is all about the questions. Rather than saying, "I saw a bird in my yard today. The yard is good for the bird." Science would ask, "What effect is my yard having on the native species, and why did I see that bird today?"

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