

**Good News Or Else:
The Need for a Radical Expansion of Landscape Preservation Goals**

This year's important public presentation in Montreal will place the traditional goals of the AHLP in a global environmental context. When the view of the contorted peaks of the Lijiang or the Three Gorges of the Yangtze is invisible because of the brown cloud of Asian air pollution; when the cloistered gardens of Europe melt and shrivel in acidic rain; when the soft, rural landscapes that form the jeweled setting of the worlds' great cities are transformed into asphalt sprawl; and when the covered bridges and byways of rural North America are industrialized to produce monocultures of identical plants or confined animals, the entire idea of what an historic landscape is and how it might be preserved has to be profoundly reinvented.

Holly Dressel was trained in France as a medieval art historian with an emphasis on the history of architecture and architectural spaces. Her first public lectures here in Montreal, in her late 20s, were on the history of gardens. But by the time she was in her late 30s, she had shifted her focus from the history of plants and human constructions to the biology of natural survival. She argues that the buildings and the landscapes that tell long stories of human history also reveal how that history intersects with the natural world.

Although people concerned with any form of conservation and preservation, whether it be cultural or biological, would seem to be natural allies in terms of their basic values and thought processes, only over the past decade or so have these two groups started to work together in practical and pragmatic ways. As many members of the AHLP here may realize, but which is less well-known to the general public, environmentalists of every stripe are coming to the somewhat belated realization that human culture is not only responsible for planetary degradation—it is also the best way to conserve and protect any landscape. And they have found formidable allies in the traditional, that is to say, historical, practices of people all around the world, living in the many ecosystems that have been enhanced and preserved through culture.

Dressel points out that the landscapes that rural people have created, that combine high biological and cultural production, such as the artificial lake districts of northern India or the agricultural terraces of Italy, don't need to be re-invented, merely recognized, appreciated for their complex achievements, and conserved. So, whether the landscape is approached from the direction of environmental sustainability or cultural preservation, the results are often the same—the cultural beauty and the ecological health of the area both benefit.

Dressel argues that the human-altered landscape is the primary bridge between the entire span of human culture across the globe and the shared natural systems upon which all life depends. The artists' media are the natural systems of soil, air, water and plant life, in greater or lesser combination with manmade structures, whether statuary or rice terraces. Her discussion will present a bold new design for landscape preservationists in the 21st century, in which she suggests that the preservation of historical landscape now has to be understood for what it really is: a partnership between the cultural and aesthetic activities of humans, and the ever more pressing need for preserving the landscaper's media—the systems of the natural world.

In the aptly-named "Good News Or Else," Dressel will draw the good news from current legislation protecting vast agricultural areas across Europe and from little-known historical landscapes in India and South America that combine culture and aesthetics with a profoundly ecological understanding of water and land use. She will build this discussion towards a picture of what will happen if North American preservationists don't get together with environmentalists to protect much larger swaths of our own landscapes. Dressel argues that to survive in an increasingly polluted and resource-scarce world, we need to develop a shared culture that honours and truly understands history. If we don't, we will lose more than just our past; we will lose the very ability to survive in our respective ecosystems. Holly Dressel's presentation on the occasion of AHLP's thirtieth anniversary argues for public support for a serious expansion of the current definition of historical landscape and for the need to radicalize a preservation mandate. It will also help lay out a roadmap to begin to achieve both goals.