

## *Blog: Decay Preserves*

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<http://blog.decaypreserves.org/?p=9>



### Decay Preserves--Because Decay Preserves

By Arthur "Skid" Buckham

My political adviser (that would be my son, Devon) tells me I should introduce myself, to give a face to the Decay Preserves movement. That sounds like I'm should put myself up as the face of decay. C'mon, I'm better-preserved than that. Look at my head shot up there. But youth has no regard for age. Okay, fine: I am Skid Buckham, a software developer on a self-funded sabbatical.

Decay preserves, just to get the definition out of the way, are like wildlife preserves, except that they preserve decay. Most people react to decay—especially personal decay, as I just demonstrated—with fear and loathing. My protests about being "well-preserved" go straight to our need as a society for decay preserves. Because we fear decay, we need decay preserves. We need to understand that decay really does preserve. Let me tell you why, and why decay preserves deserve a place in the sun.

For countless generations, including mine, Mt. St. Helens was a beauty of a mountain whose snowy skirt spread to a lake, where we canoed, hiked, fished, and stared into our campfires' ruddy flickering. In the moonlight, reflected in Spirit Lake, the calm of her rough symmetry seemed eternal.

On May 18, 1980, eternity ended in a cataclysm. At 8:32 a.m., most of Mt. St. Helens exploded into a speeding chaos of superheated debris that destroyed 230 square miles of forest. Half the mountain became a vast cloud of ash and pumice, crackling with lightning. The ash spread on the winds to blanket thousands of square miles across four states. In the blast area, the onslaught killed 57 people and uncountable animals, plants, and microscopic lifeforms. A child in the back of a pickup suffered the same death that came to Pompeiians in ancient times.

While the eruption's mudflows, tens of feet thick, was still hot, as surviving humans and animals were coming to terms with what their world had become, the creation of a new forest began. The process found its course with a river's inevitability, by infinitesimal steps in the minutely rolling cycle of growth, rot, and growth, of microbes and seeds living and dying in their seasons each year, each seedling wavering upward amid the reach of endless gray.

Last summer, I drove up the road to the Johnston Ridge visitor center, a green blanket had spread in swelling streaks and sweeps. Spinneys of young trees and underbrush sprouted on the hillsides, and on the shoals and islands of volcanic debris braiding the Toutle River. The creaks of unseen frogs sounded in the air. The recovery of this ravaged landscape was the very image of decay's power to preserve the cycle of life by enabling the creation of new life.

Another side to the story of the recovering forest is the human community's recognition of the value of decay and its timetable. To protect this immense and yet simultaneously minute and patient set of processes from the destruction of commercial exploitation, President Reagan created the Mt. St. Helens National Volcanic Monument: 110,000 acres around the mountain, a preserve of the destroyed and recovering forest. Within the boundaries, only a few trails, the road I drove up, and three visitor centers have been built. None more will be allowed, and limits to recreation will allow the area's evolution to continue nearly without disturbance. Thus a

great spread of seared, felled trees still covers the hillsides between the mountain and Norway Pass to the north. One end of Spirit Lake is still clogged with a massive raft of timber washed off the hills and back into the water by the lake's own miniature tsunami. Harry Truman's Spirit Lake Lodge and the lake's campgrounds will never be rebuilt. With the processes of decay and regeneration left in place, this is the largest official decay preserve in the history of the world.

As I drove up the Toutle River to Johnston Ridge, I challenged the worth of leaving devastation alone. I am a software developer, in a fiercely entrepreneurial occupation in a country whose entrepreneurialism has been enshrined in ideology. I think in terms of getting the most value out of anything. Development and exploitation. Not improving this cleared-out landscape goes against my very blood.

All that changed at the Johnston Ridge observatory. The mountain was hidden by clouds. In the vacuum that the mountain's absence left, the silent, hidden agents and processes of destruction and creation roared in upon me from all directions. I staggered.

As I drove away, questions surged: Is the blast zone the only decay worth preserving? Could other zones of decay within our daily environments, if preserved like St. Helens' environs, have a similar impact for urban dwellers? If they could, are they also worth setting aside? Even if minuscule by comparison and lacking the volcano's great, severe beauty?

Consider vacant lots and their footpaths. In the city, nearly every vacant lot has a footpath worn across it.



Those paths, the traces and means of our going from here to there, are the remains of a world in which we went on foot or measured our horsepower (donkey power, ox power) in single digits. As those meandering paths are regularly obliterated in favor of new buildings and sidewalks, that world constantly decays, but never vanishes entirely, like the practically endless tail of nuclear half-lives. On the other side of the coin, wherever a piece of the built modern world is abandoned, it decays in turn. If it is razed and leaves a vacant lot, the wandering habits of dogs and people recreate their paths. Both worlds, the paved and the pathworn, decay into each other. Two domains of decay, one that we recognize as such, and one that we don't. Would we benefit from preserving vacant lots from redevelopment?

Or consider abandoned buildings: Having lost their purpose, they fall to rust and rot, dessication and moldering. Life finds in them niches of survival: wind-seeded weeds and mushrooms split inches-thick concrete. At the same

time, waste piles up, and the thrown stone, and copper scavengers wrenching open a hasp, accelerate ruin. How is any of this in any way worth protecting?

In fact, we already treasure ruins—but only some ruins: those of architectural or historical treasures that we celebrate for the remnants of their beauty and the pathos born of their history. They're like the charismatic species we find it easy to care about preserving, such as polar bears, elephants, and tigers, when the dwindling populations of frogs and snail darters may be more significant.

The Forum, Stonehenge, Angkor Wat, and their peers are the superstars of decay, the objects of pilgrimage for millions, with posters, books, online media, and uncountable social-media posts devoted to them. You might argue that the ruins that are tourist attractions are decay preserves, but they are not: With endless efforts, we fight to preserve these divas at some imaginary point in their disintegration. We love the fallen blocks of the Forum, but we prevent them from falling any more than they had when we discovered them. We love the fluid roots of the banyan trees swallowing the temples of Angkor Wat, but no more than they already have.



Notice something funny about the two pictures above?

They're both of a single structure. It has actually been tidied up, and...preserved! As are its sister decay divas the Roman Forum and Stonehenge. Here a platform and fencing save it from tourist-wrought decay. In order that it may decay on its own? No: The room's own decay has also been interrupted. In the picture on the right, the massive roots in the picture on the left have been cut away, presumably to keep them from crushing the building in their grip. You can see the remnants of the massive older roots under the network of young, new roots. So we have preservation not of decay itself, but only of the appearance of decay—a tamed decay, rather than the languid mercilessness of true decay.

We don't stop to think—we don't want to think—we don't think it needs thinking—what we have destroyed by preserving the glamorous ruin and not its processes of disintegration, by preserving the re-purposed or renovated warehouse and not its own particular tumbling, slumping roll downhill: By not preserving decay itself and its power to teach.

What decay has to teach us? Am I kidding? Everyone knows what decay teaches us: To resist in every possible way its destruction of everything we cherish in our lives and ourselves. Our bodies and minds, upon reaching their optimum as functioning systems somewhere in our early twenties, tip irrevocably into decline and ever-diminishing capability as age progressively compromises us. Death is the end point, when decay triumphs and we lose all. In the world's decay, we may see the unfleshed face of death. We can't defeat death, but we can combat every appearance of decay. We obliterate potential decay preserves at every opportunity, either by razing and replacing them or by renovating them into genteel new uses.

Everything we believe about decay is true. But it's all wrong.

We think of decay as a one-dimensional doom, but decay is actually the crucible of regeneration. As decay crumbles the old, it raises the new. Those abandoned buildings show themselves as nurseries of life for those weeds, mushrooms, and the fugitive careers of the homeless. No one thinks of decay as life-giving, but the creation of life is at the heart of much decay by its strictest definition: the consumption of plant, animal, mineral, or building material by life itself. Thus life, the heartening, encouraging instinct, the creator of optimism, warmth, and beauty, is literally an eater of death. J.K. Rowling in the Harry Potter books mistook her Death Eaters because her audience doesn't properly understand the relation of life to death that decay mediates.

This is not to suggest that we let ourselves go to hell in a handbasket, embrace our demise, do nothing to improve our lives—although if that's what you want to do, be my guest: Bags of chips on the couch, watching trash TV, go for it: Be your own decay preserve!

Instead, I am suggesting is that as we strive to create our country's, our community's, or our own greatness; nurture the next generation; or simply live our lives, we not deny the decay that is part of everything we do and are.

If, rather than destroying decaying buildings and lots, we protected them as decay preserves—leaving them to their continual evolution—we would move to the side of life that is greater than death, by making decaying buildings and lots a resource, celebrating the world's decay processes, the side of life's coin that we reject.

There are plenty of examples documented on the web:

- In Berlin, an abandoned tuberculosis hospital from World War I.



- Abandoned factories in the north central and northeastern US.



Photo courtesy the [IndustrialDecay.blogspot](#)

- A decommissioned prison farm in Idaho.



Photo by the author

- The town of Chernobyl, a decay preserve courtesy of its quarantine.



These decay preserves are the real thing, rather than artificially maintained, tasteful appearances of decay. You may find them beautiful or horrifying. You may see that fleshless face, the dark spectre that haunts our dreams and unoccupied daylight thoughts. You may see beauty in the ivy's arabesques of chance along the balconies of the tuberculosis hospital or in the shadows and mote-lit beams of the abandoned factories. Pathos in the prison farm and the Chernobyl nursery.

Can we change our relationship with decay? Can we change the value system that we follow as instinctively as if we were born with it? Areas of decay, preserved by the state, could help us do so. The simple fact of their being set aside for contemplation, like gardens, could prompt visitors to reconsider how they view the decaying building or vacant lot, and therefore how they view decay: Decay preserves would act like a microscope for visitors to understand decay itself.

Taking a different look at decay has shown me value in more of the world than I ever dreamed of caring about. Finding value in abandoned buildings suggests, by extension, finding value in people I have always done my best to ignore: the homeless, the disabled, even, I have to admit, the working poor. I also have to admit that my greater valuing of people is so far theoretical. But the potential decay preserves that I have found have pointed the way. And the pointer seems to make the path irresistible. It seems a strong potential that decay preserves might unlock. Something new to spend state money on isn't the smart horse to bet on, these days. But as intangible as the return on investment seems at present, decay preserves will deliver it.

Finally, there is that mysterious presence revealed by absence that rushed in upon me on Johnston Ridge. The contemplative spaces of decay preserves will help us quiet our daily, business-dominated noise and find something different in the moving stillness.

These, then, are some of the reasons we should, through the state, create decay preserves. I recognize that this proposal flies against human nature—no, not against human nature, but against our most basic assumptions about life and the world.

Trying to change who we are as humans, conventional wisdom tells us, is foolish, futile, and vain. That doesn't bother me anymore. Rather than thrive superficially and temporarily within a falling vision of a falling world, we

can expand our vision of what's possible, even to what we don't want to be possible—not to what is inimical to life, but rather, to the side of life that is greater than our presumptive divides. Decay shows us realms that we presently shy from. We can fly higher than Icarus—as high as the sun, whose light, which created life, is the product of the sun's decay. Come fly with me: Join the Decay Preserves movement! Preserve decay as decay preserves our world!