

Native Prairie

STEWARDSHIP

A QUESTION OF VALUE

FACT SHEET

A compelling case

The value that people attach to native prairie has been changing, radically. But, of course, as a farmer, you have always seen more value in native prairie than most.

Think about why native prairie is of value to you, then consider the value of scientific discovery from the prairie. Combined, reasons from these two perspectives suggest that native prairie is property well worth preserving just as it is.

Undisturbed by the plough

Native prairie, or grassland undisturbed by the plough, has always been important to rural life as pasture, as groundcover, as home to predators and other wildlife, and as part of the charm of the prairie countryside.

For obvious reasons, any land not disturbed by the plough—unless set aside as Crown land, or for some

other special reason—had likely been judged unfit for crop production.

[...over]



A long time ago, a farmer, maybe a relative, or a member of a family still farming in the area, considered a piece of land to be too hilly, too gravelly, too saline, or maybe even too wet to work as cropland. Successive generations of farmers made that same judgment, and the land remained native prairie.

Custom fit to pasture and marginal land

Even though unfit for crop production, farmers recognize the value of native prairie as pasture and groundcover. With its spear grass, wheatgrass, june grass, blue grama, and fescue, native prairie has served as productive pasture. A strength of native prairie pasture is its low maintenance and robustness.

It is also excellent groundcover. It is remarkable the way plants appear, as if by design (that there is a design is a suspicion of some scientists), that are capable of thriving on whatever a piece of marginal land has to offer. Despite the wind and the rain, the heat and the snow, it's these plants that keep the soil in place. As we learned from the experiences of the dry 1930s, erosion reigns when soil goes without groundcover.

Wildlife and country landscape

Native prairie is also home to many important predators. Predators help control pest populations, both herbivores like field mice and pocket gophers, and insects like grasshoppers and aphids. Fox and badger and coyote, prairie hawk and killdeer and meadow lark, each in its way, contribute to keeping other creature populations in balance.

But you appreciate wildlife for more reasons than whether an animal eats pests or not. Sharing the countryside with

mule deer, white tailed deer, raccoons, porcupines, magpies, crows, yellow-headed blackbirds, yellow warblers, swallows, even sparrows is part of the appeal of rural life.

Native prairie itself is part of that attraction. Granted, it's not for everyone, at least not yet. Carloads of travellers whiz by on our roads and highways disappointed that the prairie isn't mountain. They have yet to become sensitive to the subtle beauty of the prairie. While you may enjoy following the shadow of a cloud as it sweeps over an expanse of native prairie, many would notice nothing. Your senses are tuned to the prairie. Your eye seeks out the delicate pink of a wild rose, the yellows and browns of the coneflower, the oranges and whites in the flowers of the western snowberry. And the clouds? They are prairie mountains.

In the light of science

As a farmer, you know of many reasons to value native prairie. Now scientists are discovering additional significance for it.

Our attention is directed to two general discoveries. First, we are discovering that native prairie is an irreplaceable source of a rich variety of life forms. In plants alone—without even considering insects, or microbes, or wildlife — native prairie has hundreds of species. This is a condition that scientists call biodiversity. And studying how native prairie as a biodiverse community works may suggest farming techniques to restore and preserve the organic content of your soils!

The significance of the second discovery follows from the first one. Once we discovered the priceless nature of native prairie to research and the future of farming, we went looking for it, and all we could find in the highly developed RMs was bits and pieces, remnants. Or as the wit says, “there it was, gone.”

Ecologically thinking

Much interest in native prairie comes from those scientists who study ecological systems. They tell us that native prairie evolved over thousands of years as a community of plants and animals to thrive exactly where they are. And where your remnant of native prairie is determines what plants live there.

Native prairie in Saskatchewan is roughly classified as moist-mixed prairie, mixed prairie, Aspen Parkland, and Cypress Hills complex. While they have general similarities, they also have individual peculiarities.

Within that each remnant of native prairie is unique, no two patches of



native prairie would ever have exactly the same combination of plant species. But it means more than that: this uniqueness goes right down to the DNA of a plant. A common grass like needle and thread found on some remnant native prairie south of Regina may actually have genetic differences from needle and thread found on mixed native prairie north of Humboldt.

Biogeneticists and wonder drugs

Biogeneticists are scientists who study the DNA of plants. They see native prairie as a huge library of unread books that have been written by nature. Some of their work suggests an entirely new strategy for species development: rather than adapt an alien species to an alien environment, take a species with desirable qualities that already thrives in an area and maximize its potential. This may revolutionize what we grow, and perhaps even how we grow it.

There is also a tremendous interest among pharmaceutical companies to study the links between native plants and folk medicines. Estimates of the market value of prescription and over-the-counter drugs based on plants exceeds \$70 billion annually. The next wonder drug might come from some microbe or plant excretion that lives right now on your patch of native prairie!

Preserving species variety

That the possibility for discovering wonder cures for illness, and long-term solutions to the problems of farming may hide in our native prairie dramatically changes its significance. It explains why, for science and scientists, they would like to see us protect our natural ecosystems and their species variety into perpetuity. To them, when an ecosystem collapses and species disappear, we lose, even if we can never really see what we have lost.

Your reasons must be your own.

Native prairie has value for many reasons. Recent discoveries in science, about ecosystems and biodiversity, suggest new reasons to value native prairie. That it is a threatened ecosystem, just like a tropical rainforest, also increases its value. To these reasons, add the ways you value native prairie: as pasture, as groundcover, as home to predators and other wildlife or as part of the beauty of rural life.

Now, combine these reasons and you have a compelling case to preserve your native prairie, perhaps even to manage grazing or through controlled burns. Ultimately, the reasons you have to preserve your native prairie must come from yourself.



Economic Opportunity: Native Seed Production

A market for native prairie seed is growing. It comes from several places. One market is backyard gardeners in the cities and towns who want native wildflower seeds. Another market is native prairie restoration projects, both rural and urban, which seek specialized mixes of native prairie seed. For example, companies that disturb native prairie in the countryside, to plough in pipelines or to drill wells or to mine coal, may require seed to restore the native prairie. Some farmers and ranchers are also restoring marginal lands and pasture to native prairie. Urban park developers, and people on acreages are restoring areas to native prairie as well. Several Saskatchewan farmers have already become suppliers of native prairie seed.

Ecotourism

The more society becomes urban, the more people seek the countryside for refuge. Around North America, tour companies who specialize in exclusive and out of the way eco-adventures have been springing up. People from all over the world are seeking out contact with ecosystems, even our long unappreciated grasslands. That we have a Grasslands National Park in Saskatchewan gives some evidence of that. Many of these people want to experience what the Great Plains of North America were like to explorers like a Palliser, or a Kelsey, and to aboriginal peoples like the Plains Cree, the Blackfoot, the Assiniboin. Do you have any burrowing owls? Do you have a boulder effigy or any tipi rings? Do you have a Buffalo rub? Any of these could help make your native prairie a destination for national and international visitors.

For more information about native prairie, its plantlife, its wildlife, its role in human prehistory, about techniques to restore its integrity, even to get our beautiful publication on prairie birds, call or write to us:

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