

Prairie Prose – Telling the Story of Prairie Conservation by Tara Mulhern Davidson

For anyone who is lucky enough to spend time out on the prairie, there is a certain feeling that one gets. This feeling is a hard one to explain to others, as perhaps it is different for everyone. The feeling may be different for a rancher who is carefully gathering pairs on familiar ground amidst fragrant wolf willow. The feeling may be that of excitement for a researcher who spies an elusive species that they have been searching for, long and hard. For small children who climb over prairie hills on a quest to capture early fistfuls of velvety crocuses, the feeling is probably different yet again, a feeling of adventure.

The landscape leaves an impression on just about everyone who is lucky enough to be out on the prairie. Those who are familiar with prairie grasslands, and certainly those who make their living from the land, know well the benefits and beauty of these dwindling resources.

For most people in Saskatchewan, however, they will not get to experience that “prairie feeling” firsthand. This presents a challenge for prairie stakeholders, because in order for the public to buy into the concept that prairie and its species are worth the effort or cost to conserve, they must value it in the first place. It’s perhaps easy for prairie conservationists to understand *why* we need to share the story of prairie, but exactly *how* do we do this?

Developing an effective prairie story was a topic that opened the recent Prairie Conservation and Endangered Species Conference, hosted by SK PCAP in Saskatoon, SK in February. Lorne Fitch, the Provincial Riparian Specialist for Alberta Cows and Fish, explored the challenges and myths surrounding prairie grasslands, and consequently barriers to conservation successes. “We lack a single, cohesive, cogent prairie story,” explained Fitch. “We can do better; we need to do better, at telling the story of prairie,” he went on to say.



Events like Native Prairie Appreciation Week help people from diverse backgrounds experience prairie hands on. Photo courtesy of Tara Mulhern Davidson

Fitch suggested a thoughtful approach is necessary. “We need to craft a better, more compelling news story,” he explained. “Creating a story that appeals to the heart, in a visceral way, and the mind in a cerebral way, will resonate with our audience,” Fitch said. Fitch’s presentation was set to a stunning backdrop of imagery from Dr. Branimir Gjetvaj, a Saskatchewan-based prairie researcher with a passion for photography. Gjetvaj later shared his experiences in a separate session about the use of photography for conservation, and reasoned that the biggest threat to the environment is human apathy. “Conservation efforts predominantly focus on solving biological problems, but solutions reside within people,” he said. “Photography triggers an emotional connection and initiates action,” he described. Gjetvaj suggested those who are most concerned about prairie conservation should strengthen their capacity in visual storytelling so they can better motivate and engage the public.

“Who writes the rules of prairie conservation? We all do,” Fitch affirmed at the conference. Accordingly, one could ask whose responsibility is it then, to tell the story of prairie.

Ranchers and land managers are in a unique and advantageous position to develop the prairie story. Who better to share a story than those who are living and working on the landscape daily? Some ranchers may be amateur photographers who love to capture and share a beautiful prairie scene. Others may be folks who are good at spinning a yarn at a branding or engaging in conversations about grasslands with their extended family. There are even several ranchers who are well known authors, poets or songwriters who bring attention to grasslands through their creativity. Whatever the medium may be, however simple or complex it is, sharing a story about prairie and species at risk conservation is an effective tool to build public awareness and trust.

How will you share your prairie story? 