

Prairie Conservation – Together We Can!
- Saskatchewan Prairie Conservation Action Plan (SK PCAP) -
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Biodiversity can be most simply defined as different kinds of living things working and interacting within an ecosystem. The level of biodiversity within an ecosystem relates to its health: if the number of species, whether plant or animal, decrease, so will the health of the ecosystem. At times, biodiversity can be lowered by the removal of a species due to human activity such as settlement, development, agriculture and industry. The Swift Fox, a cat-sized canid, was once extirpated (could no longer be found) in Canada mainly due to unintentional poisoning and trapping that was targeted towards wolves, prairie dogs and coyotes. The last Swift Fox to be seen in Saskatchewan was in 1928 but the Swift Fox was not officially designated as extirpated from Canada until 1978. Today, a small population of approximately 647 foxes can be found successfully breeding in the wilds of Alberta and Saskatchewan (based on a 2006 census). How can this be? The species was re-introduced to the prairies from 1983 to 1997, thanks to the collaboration of a number of partners.

Just as an ecosystem requires different kinds of living things working and interacting together to be healthy, the reintroduction of a species requires different individuals and organizations working and interacting together to be successful. Similar to the Swift Fox, the Black-Footed Ferret was once an integral part of the native prairie landscape but was extirpated from the Canadian grasslands in the early 1900's due to wide scale poisoning to eradicate prairie dogs, their only source of prey, and habitat loss. Thought to be globally extinct until 1981, a small population was discovered in Wyoming. Today, a conservation breeding program at the Toronto Zoo that began in 1992 with seven wild ferrets has enabled the re-introduction of the Black-Footed-Ferret into their natural habitat throughout parts of the United States and Mexico...and now in Canada.

On October 2, 2009, the Black-Footed Ferret finally returned to the Canadian prairies with the release of 35 ferrets in and around Grasslands National Park near Val Marie, SK. Over five years, beginning in 2004, several organizations and individuals collaborated to make this dream a reality including Parks Canada, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, Calgary and Toronto Zoo, US Fish and Wildlife Service, World Wildlife Fund (US) and Brad Dixon, a rancher from Val Marie, SK. What is encouraging when looking at those involved with the reintroduction is that it does not only include biologists, government and conservation organizations as one would expect but a different kind of "Species at Risk": ranchers. Ranchers are one of the main reasons that the biodiversity of native prairie still remains. With their extensive knowledge of the land and its intricate linkages, it is important that ranchers are involved in conservation activities/initiatives such as species reintroduction.

Brad, a local rancher, was an active member on the recovery group from the beginning and eagerly welcomed some of the 35 ferrets onto his land during the release. His motivation for being involved with the recovery group was to educate and change attitudes towards ranching and Species at Risk, wanting people to know that ranching is not detrimental to Species at Risk and that these species can co-exist with cattle grazing. During the past five years, he has worked with some organizations that as a rancher he may have been wary about working with in the past, but feels that attitudes are changing. Instead of being told what to do, as in the past, ranchers are now being asked for their opinion and are encouraged to participate in the organization and implementation of Species at Risk conservation activities. The relationships and partnerships being formed

between ranchers and conservation organizations will continue to improve as ranchers become more comfortable working with and trusting these organizations.

For conservation partnerships to be successful, they must include individuals and organizations with diverse backgrounds who in the past may have not worked together but have now come to realize the importance and benefit of each others knowledge and can work together towards a common goal: the improvement of native prairie ecosystems.

For more information on PCAP, please visit our website at www.pcap-sk.org or contact the PCAP Office at (306) 352-0472 or pcap@sasktel.net.

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