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Palliser's Country A New Way Of Protecting Our Grassland

Rob Gardner

Standing on the south boundary of Cypress Hills Interprovincial Park, you can gaze across the broad sweep of grassland stretching to the Sweetgrass Hills about 140 km southwest. Turn to the southeast, and the grass stretches into Saskatchewan just as far, but with no hills to backstop the view.

The prairie adventurer with a (very!) full canteen could travel on native grassland from Climax, SK, to Writing-On-Stone Provincial Park, a distance of 250 km, while crossing only six roads.

Prairie residents take vast expanses for granted, but perhaps our mountain friends could think of it this way: Palliser's Country's eight largest roadless areas are each the size of Kakwa Wildlands Park (250 sq.mi.). Overall, the area is larger than Banff National Park, but has perhaps 2% of Banff's population.

This grassland is no golf course! The rolling prairie suddenly plunges over sandstone cliffs into the Milk River Canyon where dryland species such as yucca, cactus and rock wren are found. At the other extreme, the fescue grassland gives way to a narrow band of lodgepole pine, white spruce and orchids in the Cypress Hills. Along the way, wetlands and sand hills add their variety.

The local bird checklist, with its 307 species, documents the wide range of habitats. Of these, about a dozen are considered "species at risk". Their presence here, when they are no longer found in most of their former territory, reflects the generally good condition of the grassland. Nevertheless, the serious decline in population of migratory birds is cause for concern.

The first response of many conservationists is to cry out for more parks. In fact, the Special Places Program attracted many nominations in the region. With only the smallest of exceptions, these suggestions were rejected by local residents.

Speaking in general terms, the ranchers were less concerned with the conservation aspects of the proposals than with the potential recreational use of their land and the loss of control over land management.

In fact, it seems that wilderness proponents have quite a bit in common with ranchers. Many people in both groups believe that the use of motorized vehicles degrades the environment, and the extraction of coal, oil and gas provide only short-term benefits while reducing the long-term sustainability of the region.

Palliser's Country Grassland Heritage Region builds on this common ground by encouraging both natural and cultural heritage. But what exactly is a heritage region? The Heritage Canada Foundation states that a heritage region "links education, conservation and entrepreneurship using cultural and natural resources. New opportunities for local employment are an anticipated benefit."

Initial responses have been positive. Ranchers have indicated that while they favour wildlife conservation, that type of management has expenses attached. Several new agricultural programs are aimed at providing compensation for these actions. It is hoped that national conservation organizations will also provide financial incentives for conservation.





At the same time, the ranching traditions will be celebrated. Visitors will have increased opportunities to experience the ranching lifestyle in existing protected areas, or in managed situations. Several forms of interpretation are being looked into that would reinforce the history of the region.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Palliser's Country will be improved communication between the various stakeholders, and the growing realization that we have more in common than we thought. When all parties are pulling in the same direction, everyone will benefit.

The role of the Cypress Hills is being reassessed in light of the new perspective brought by the heritage region concept. Long described as an island of forest in the sea of grass, the park may be more accurately described as a core protected area in a broader, privately managed landscape. This and other existing parks, although they are not large, seem to have sufficient grassland to accommodate the current demand for this type of recreation.

Alberta Wilderness Association could play an important role in the heritage region. AWA was founded on similar principles, and still has many ranchers as members. Formal support would demonstrate that the environmental community is open to new ideas regarding the conservation of our landscape.

Those people wanting more information can contact the author by telephone at (403) 527-2052, or review the web site at eidnet.org/local/grassland.

