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CRITICAL DIALOGUE

INTRODUCTION: THE PLATTE—WOODED OR PRAIRIE RIVER?

With the following articles, we are pleased to initiate a new section, called "Critical Dialogue," to be published whenever a manuscript is accepted that we think addresses a particularly important, potentially controversial issue in the Great Plains. The purpose of the section will be to present alternative perspectives on such issues, to inform our readers and to stimulate rational discussion of the data available for science-based policy and management decisions. Thus, we will invite and peer-review a reasoned response to the stimulating manuscript, and we will provide the original author(s) with an opportunity for rebuttal to that response.

In this Dialogue, W. Carter Johnson and Susan E. Boettcher of the University of South Dakota challenge the present, widely held view that the Platte River was an open, basically non-wooded prairie river in pre-settlement times. With quotes from the historical accounts of the river by the early settlers and early General Land Office survey information, they build a case for the Platte as a river with plentiful trees and riverine forest. If they are correct in their interpretation, the challenge they present has major implications for Platte River management and habitat restoration efforts for federally listed and other migratory birds. This issue is important, biologically, economically and politically. Thus, the evidence supporting the alternative perspective seems to merit scrutiny at the same time. Paul J. Currier and Craig A. Davis of the Platte River Whooping Crane Maintenance Trust, Inc., accepted this challenge. They review the evidence, including some of the same historical accounts as well as contemporary information on bird distributions, that they argue supports the currently accepted view of the Platte River in the middle 1800s as a predominantly open, prairie river with a few trees, many open sandbars in the active channels, and prairie grassland and wetland borders. They also suggest that, given contemporary conditions, the aim of management should be maintenance and restoration of habitat diversity along the Platte, including about 10% open sandbar habitat along with the woodland in the region of the central Platte River that is now most heavily used by Whooping and Sandhills cranes. Drs. Johnson and Boettcher respond briefly to this paper.

We believe that the outcome of this dialogue and continuing discussion is likely to affect both state policy and interstate relationships over Platte

River water. So, we are pleased to provide this platform for a dialogue between two contrasting interpretations of the data available on the condition of the Platte River just prior to European settlement. We invite our readers to suggest other potentially interesting and important issues in the Great Plains that would benefit by further dialogue and discussion in a comparable forum.

Svaťa M. Louda, Editor