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Steven Schubert

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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Prairie Pines: Water for Life

A Visual Short

by Steven Schubert

Submitted for undergraduate completion with:

College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources

Environmental Studies Program

University of Nebraska – Lincoln

Thesis Advisers:

Michael Farrell, NET Special Projects Producer

Nebraska Educational Telecommunications

Sara Cooper, Environmental Studies Assistant Director

University of Nebraska – Lincoln

Foreword and Abstract:

Oft defined by the people that inhabit it, land has taken many shapes and forms. The spiritual relationship between indigenous Native Americans and nature preserved the virgin beauty of the New World. Here, life of all kinds thrived. However, this measured balance was not to be lasted. With the passing of years and advancement of human technology, social order, and insatiable desire North America was found, claimed, and sullied. European (and American) colonialism brought irreversible change to the land of the Americas. Economic emphasis on the maximization of resources defiled flora and fauna alike and interrupted thousands of years of human-nature harmony. This history is important when considering current and future land management plans. Prairie Pines, as will be discussed in further depth, is in the midst of change. This paper and concurrent video will attempt to show the land as it currently is. It is the author's hope that a greater knowledge and appreciation for land conservation will be conveyed to the audience. It is the unique and intrinsic value of Nebraskan and Great Plains habitat that is being explored for the audience. The author sought to explore this topic through various means. Original videography, photography and interviews and shoot were collated to produce and edit a video short. Within this presentation is a statement of intention, synopsis, personal reflection of experiences, running script, list of referenced material and a visual depiction of Prairie Pines.

Intent:

With next to no experience or background with storytelling, this project offered me many obstacles. Learning to supplement my primary disciplines of Environmental Studies and Fisheries and Wildlife with video production proved exceedingly difficult.. My interest in the work of NET photographer Michael Forsberg initially brought me into the studio at NET. I was curious at the prospect of learning a few of the techniques that gave his work such a compelling and realistic depth and refocused the Great Plains through a dynamic and exciting lens. I had several goals and intentions that I hoped to accomplish by years end. First and foremost I wanted to learn basic journalistic techniques that would allow me to learn how to create a story, capture the detail that would support my story, and package it into a memorable, yet laconic digital short. While working with my instructors (Forsberg and Michael Farrell), and in my mission of achieving a cohesive and complete story about a specific aspect of Prairie Pines, I was encouraged to leave my comfort zone behind, to get into the field, to experiment with different journalistic approaches, and to leave all self-doubt in the classroom. *He who hesitates is lost.* That proverb summarizes the beginning of this new endeavor. Allowing myself to develop at a pace that was comfortable, feel my way into a story, and find the confidence and skill that would allow me to artfully express myself were all of equal importance. If this piece of work were to positively affect one person's day then I would be satisfied with the work put in. Intangible objectives such as these are not my strong-suit and it took time for me to get over the caprices of misaligned camera shots and incongruous pixelation. These challenges lent their hand to my continued maturation and growth as a human being and for that I am incredibly grateful.

Intent and Synopsis:

Once stretching across 150 million acres of land, tall and short grass prairie dominated the lay of America's breadbasket. For over 10,000 years this ocean of grass was preserved naturally via drought restoration, faunal grazing, natural fire, and the deliberate burning by indigenous American peoples. The beauty that once existed on these plains is unfathomable. The vast quantity of resources that was available is incalculable. By the 1900's 2 percent of (the original 150 million acres) pristine habitat was left. Today less than 1 percent remain in pristine condition. This landscape has been converted into one of the most intensive crop producing areas in North America. Nebraska is not immune of guilt nor responsibility for the transgressions done to prairie grasslands. The unsustainable norm that was ecosystem destruction has become a rallying call and driving force for local, regional, and national action to take charge and protect these voiceless entities. Non-profit organizations, governmental agencies and ranchers and farmers collate scientific and anecdotal research for the betterment of the land. Smart technologies and techniques and public outreach and education all have benefited this movement. Additionally, the University of Nebraska – Lincoln has become a pioneer, both locally and nationally, for responsible land use. These bodies are working together to preserve what is left of prairie ecosystems and begin restorative processes.

Prairie Pines, a 145 acre plot of land, was founded by Walt and Virginia Bagley north and to the west of Lincoln. This minute-sized bit of land has long benefited from the Bagley's professional interest in preserving the 'natural' quality of their landscape. Upon the purchase of the Bagley's house and land in 1959 the property was transformed

from farmland to an area of diverse woodland and grassland habitats. “Included in this property are 20 acres of woodland containing more than 200 species of woody plants, 10 acres of virgin prairie, and 30 acres of seeded prairie grasses and wildflowers.”¹ As the years passed word of this land reached the ears of UNL's College of Agriculture and School of Natural Resources. Professor of Ecology James Brandle saw a lucrative opportunity for students and staff to take advantage of a unique academic resource and struck a relationship with Bagley. This friendship blazed a new direction for a post-Bagley ownership. Possession of the land would be delegated to UNL and attended by staff and various departmental heads.²The land was to be used to teach students, preserve prairie ecosystems, and, eventually, reinvigorate the land with a new wetland habitat. Partnership between UNL and the Bagley family caught the attention of wildlife photographer Michael Forsberg and Nebraska Educational Telecommunication's producer Michael Farrell. These instructors, along with UNL, decided to offer UNL students a creative outlet to tell a story about different aspects of Prairie Pines. Documentation of this land was an important project that would help spread word about Prairie Pines, the juxtaposition Community Crops, and their respective importance to the community of Lincoln. The course brought together students from CASNR with a simple mission: bring to life a unique characteristic of Prairie.⁵

I was first introduced to the equipment I would be working with throughout the year in the Fall of 2013. NET provided me with the equipment with which I would capture an aspect of Prairie Pines. After several trips to Prairie Pines I found that a centrally windmill and tank shed attracted a lot of attention from wildlife. It stood as a reminder of the lands previous function: irrigation for cultivating crops. The windmill

has seen its status elevated to that of Great Plains antiquity. A beautiful, yet forgotten, relic and reminder of the ever-changing schemata of the human-land relationship. This Fairbury (Nebraska) product is entrenched into a perched water table that spans across a large part of Prairie Pine's most easterly strip. Between April and October each year the well is active. Wind propels the pump to leak water from the spigot directly below and into a tank shed. The pooling of this water provide animals with a source, albeit inconsistent, source of energy. I quickly learned the importance of this sight; vociferous and persistent wildlife activity characterized this area during the windmills months of operation. I believed that a concurrently-acting visual would provide a thematic and chronological element to the story.

The process of capturing visual data was arduous and painstakingly tedious. Trial-by-error was the predominant technique in understanding which shots would work to the pieces arc. This method bred mistakes, frustration, but, most importantly, learning. Having the ability to successfully determine which images were needed came with time and patience and, eventually, manifested itself in the form of a holistic video. Before the video was finalized, however, the process of culling images from the masses and collating information into a sequential format were needed. This required a trained-eye; to effectively find the images and video that were able to be suitably paired together was a difficult ask. It was this effort that most of my newly found journalistic identity derives its credit. Identifying varying light, aspect ratio, aperture, and shutter speed for a suitable outcome was oft-deliberate. In addition to this, familiarizing oneself with the software of the various creative platforms (Adobe Premiere Pro, Adobe Bridge, Adobe Photoshop) took time and patience. Mastering the software was crucial in creating a

finished video or photoblog. Despite the monotonous tone that accompanied learning these different skills, the finished product was anything but monochrome. The vivid and varied quality of the videos and pictures I published were simply a product of a systematic learning process – much like one would experience in a budding or nascent course, class, or discipline. I can speak to the importance of establishing a schedule that allows for trial-by-error practice and plentiful time to rectify said error.

¹ Prairie Pines Management Plan, University of Nebraska – Lincoln

² In MARCH of 2013 a land easement was officially filed by the City of Lincoln, in joint custody with UNL, to preserve the property of Mr. Bagley in perpetuity.

Reflection:

The time I spent on this project was truly rewarding. My appreciation and respect for wildlife in its natural state was bolstered; my understanding of storytelling vastly improved - as did my skill in video shooting and editing, time lapse photography, and still photography - the technical knowledge I learned is now invaluable to me. Learning about the historical significance of Prairie Pines – and the dedication that stakeholders have for the land - is an incredible thing to witness. It came as no surprise to me that many are involved in the preservation of its aesthetic, the vehement passion that motivate these stakeholders, however, was powerful. As Mr. Bagley verbalized in our conversations, people may not fully understand why he isn't committed to our society's 'constant growth' status quota, but the people who do understand his intransigence are better for it. Whether this opinion be true or false isn't for me to say. What matters is his altruistic attitude towards that which he loves. It was a meaningful lesson I learned from him and empowered me to remember why I think of nature with respect.

As a child I always cherished family vacations to Nebraska. The rustic, free quality of life was different than that of the stuffy, urban environment I was used to at home. These trips inspired the sensibilities of someone who enjoyed life with few boundaries, and plenty of open spaces in between. When I eventually relocated to Nebraska I felt as if I was reunited with an old friend. The bluffs along the Missouri River became a second home to me; it was there that I learned of my love for all things wild. My childhood experiences lent for a natural segue into this project. It allowed me to express my feelings about my home and the things I care deeply about – making the process much more smooth along the way.

Even so, the ups and downs were very much a presence and part of the undertaking. Personal and technical mistakes and failures slowly subsided as time passed and, largely, I was able to adapt to most complications. The hiccups and hurdles enabled me to better understand the project, refashion insubstantial ideas and further clarify insightful pieces. Initially, I had wanted to tell a story about the history of Prairie Pines and why effective leadership would be important to the future of land. The broadness of that story would have been impossible given the time and resource constraints; it was necessary for me to choose a topic that fit in with the class' larger, more comprehensive, goal of Prairie Pines' story. I did find the overall history of Prairie Pines pertinent, however, and added a small bit of it in my 'Synopsis' treatise.

This process unfolded slowly and in many shapes and forms. How to appropriately select a project, the development and, eventual, execution of said project all were issues to address along the way. In the classes nascency I attempted to find specificity and a clear thesis statement. This would be crucial to give the project a unique and aphoristic feel. I set about identifying noticeable and important aspects of the land. Key features included waterways, a windmill and tank shed, Community Crops farmland, and numerous windbreaks (predominantly pine, maple, and cotton trees) - among other things. My time at Prairie Pines showed me many project ideas but one in particular drew my attention: the lands limited supply of water. Water attracted a variety of species of wildlife throughout the landscape and allowed for an interesting opportunity to gain insight into the biodiversity of Prairie Pines but there *wasn't* much of it. How would I impart the significance of a resource that wasn't always present? By following the movement of water and focusing on the on-site water sources (windmill and tank shed) I

believed I would be able to convey the tenuous relationship between nature and wildlife. From there the story unfurled into a lesson about urban wildlife surviving on the precious resources afforded by responsible stewardship and a forgiving climate.

In retrospect, the patience and persistence I showed was the spearhead for creating something that was natural. Allowing the story to run its own course free from excessive oversight and permissive editing was key. This, let's call it a compromise, with myself was aimed to make the story larger than a thesis project (and myself), a statement about a certain place, free of bias and full of objectivity. And finally I would be remiss not to mention what I feel to be the largest success of this project; learning to translate and communicate scientific information into an easily understood, tangible work. I believe that this form of communication is more effective in evoking a compelling and emotional response from the viewer than raw data. An effective form of arousing empathy for nature and recognition of our need in protecting her. My ambition is for the viewer to come away from this visual short with more knowledge of the dynamic at Prairie Pines. Overall, I am proud of the gains I have made throughout the course of the year and excited about the prospect of others continuing this story after I have gone.

Work Cited:

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