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Conserving the Platte: A Documentary Short

by Steven Speicher

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Abstract:

With a history of litigation, deliberation, and conversation, the Platte River's waters have been topic of much debate. In recent memory, historical decisions have been made regarding how to successfully manage this crucial water resource that sustains life in the Great Plains. The Platte River Recovery Implementation Program, a federally mandated tri-state conservation organization, began after years of consideration and an adamancy to avoid major litigation battle. Audubon Society has been a major player in conservation of habitats and protecting endangered species; Audubon Society's Rowe Sanctuary, in specific, has worked in a variety of community-centered ways to conserve the central Platte and wildlife from competing interests. With the federal listing of endangered species such as the Whooping Crane, Piper Plover, and Interior Least Tern, as well as the presence of migratory Sandhill Cranes, how has the Platte River's waters and wetland habitat management been influenced? The author sought to explore this topic and, in the process, record interviews and shoot original footage to produce, write, and edit a documentary short. Here within is a DVD, the director's intent, a synopsis of the project, the working video script, a personal reflection of the project, and a literature review of referenced materials.

Director's Intent:

With this creative project, I sought to combine facets of both my disciplines, Environmental Studies and Video Production/Film Studies. Previous to and in conjunction with my work on Michael Forsberg and Michael Farrell's Platte Basin Time-Lapse project¹, I had an interest in telling a story about the Platte River and its complex history of resource management and conservation. With Michael Farrell's expertise and perspective on the topic of the Platte's history, the story organically unfolded into its current form: a story about a community of organizations working to sustain a valuable resource, in both a big-money federal system and small grassroots community-based approach.

My attachment to the Platte River grew from being raised in my hometown of Fremont Nebraska where I spent significant time on the banks of the river, playing in its shallow, sandbar-covered riverbed. Our family's cabin was a short walk to the bank and another family friend's cabin was nearby, both providing ample opportunity to explore the area, forcing myself to ask questions about what happened around the bend, up the stream beyond the limits of a young boy's imagination. This early exposure to the river system laid a curious interest in me that was sparked again by a degree in Environmental Studies and an internship at Nebraska Educational Telecommunications on the time-lapse project.

While much of this project was academic, research-driven, and journalistic, an equally important component of my work was the personal development, which came as I exposed myself to uncomfortable situations, attempting to shed my self-consciousness and grow in my social and journalistic skills. I wanted to step out of my comfort zone and challenge myself in a different way than my prior academic experience had, putting them into application and practice.

¹ See www.plattebasintimelapse.com for more information about that project

Synopsis

Over 65% of Nebraskans live in the Omaha and Lincoln metros², just at the tip of the Platte River Basin (see Figure 1³) before it drains into the Missouri River. Though not located inside the basin itself, these urban centers rely on water that has traveled through 84,910 square miles to reach the lower Platte's main stem where it is pumped into urban developments in

Eastern Nebraska. The water's journey is long: subtle and quiet at times and loud and powerful at other times. Beginning high in the Rocky Mountains, moving

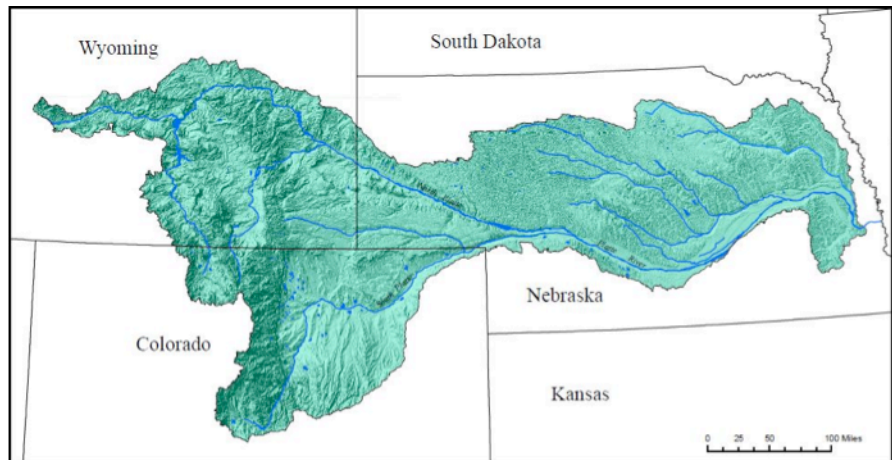


Figure 1 - The Platte River Basin

through dams and reservoirs in Wyoming and Western Nebraska, trickling through the Great Plains and over the expansive Ogallala aquifer and eventually spilling into the Missouri, the Platte River's waters are used in various ways along this journey. History has proven that water management policy has been contentious, as many try to (over)use the river. Spanning a great distance, through many peoples' backyards, fields and faucets, and, most notably, habitats, there is certainly a story to tell in *and with* the Platte's abundant water users and uses.

After years of study of the Great Plains, conservation photographer Michael Forsberg and Nebraska Educational Telecommunication's producer Michael Farrell sought to document the entire journey of the Platte's waters. The project aims to "time-lapse the Platte River Basin from the headwaters high in the Colorado Rockies to the confluence of the Platte and Missouri rivers

² United States Census Bureau

³ Image taken from University of Nebraska – Lincoln, School of Natural Resources

along the Nebraska-Iowa border - a stretch of geography that encompasses nearly 90,000 square miles, parts of three states, Wyoming, Colorado and Nebraska, and includes most of the Nebraska Sandhills with its majority share of the vast Ogallala Aquifer that lies beneath.”⁴ Over 40 cameras take a photo every daylight hour of every day for several months or even years. These photos are assembled into videos that show the ecosystem in motion, bringing to life something that sustains life. The videos are marketed towards an interactive website that distinguishes the Platte’s water into five distinct areas: North Platte River, South Platte River, Central Platte, Loup Basin and Lower Platte. During the current stages of the project, the visual documentation of the Platte River is concentrated on the natural resource itself, focusing on the journey of the water from its watershed to confluence, visually linking each of the five regions through water flow.

Inherent to each separate region are unique water uses, users, and policies. While these remain different across the tri-state basin, the water itself does not. Natural resource management unites all stakeholders vying for appropriate use of the Platte’s resource. History has proven the resource to be contentiously claimed and current policy continues to reflect the basin-wide efforts to successfully manage the dynamic water supply.⁵ How might policy, advocacy, and conservation strategies differ from varying organizations while the water and end goals may remain the same?

The purpose of this creative project is to tell the story of contemporary water conservation strategies in the Central Platte through the viewpoints of two stakeholders, Audubon Society’s Rowe Sanctuary and the federally mandated Platte River Recovery Implementation Program (PRRIP), both working in central Nebraska, along the route of the

⁴ Michael Forsberg; taken from project website

⁵ Freeman (2010) discusses at great length the history of policy leading up to the implementation of PRRIP

central flyway where hundreds of thousands of migratory birds stop including the endangered Whooping Crane, Piping Plover, and Interior Least Tern. Though the goals of each extend far beyond the Spring migration period, there is a unique public face and recognition to this season that warrants so much attention, lending itself to be one of the primary talking points regarding conservation issues on the central Platte River.

Audubon Society's Rowe Sanctuary mission statement is "to protect Sandhill cranes, whooping cranes and other migratory birds, and their habitat along the Platte River in south-central Nebraska" through conservation, education, and advocacy.⁶ PRRIP seeks to meet three goals:

- Increasing stream flows in the central Platte River during relevant time periods
- Enhancing, restoring and protecting habitat lands for the target bird species
- Accommodating certain new water-related activities⁷

Though these goals have similar outcomes, the philosophies and methods of approach are fundamentally different with each organization; Rowe Sanctuary is community-centered, maintains grassroots advocacy, and executes small scale restoration projects, while PRRIP has tri-state, governmental focuses using big money restoration projects to research and implement conservation strategies. It is my thesis that both of these organizations, in their fundamentally different methods of approach, are equally important in conserving the Platte River and bird habitats. *Conserving the Platte*, the resulting documentary short, embodies this thesis as I tell the story as it has been revealed to me during my trips to central Nebraska.

⁶ Taken from Rowe Sanctuary's website

⁷ Platte River Recovery Implementation Program. (2006) *Final PRRIP Document*.

Reflection

This project was an incredible learning experience, both in how I understand and appreciate the central Platte and in how I have improved my interviewing, video shooting and editing, and storytelling skills.

It came as no surprise to me that the project encouraged in me a new-found deep appreciation for the Platte River and the people working to conserve water and habitat. Because I grew up on the river already having a sense of awe and wonder about the physical space of the river and how it disappeared beyond the southern bluff facing Fremont, I found a part of myself in the central Platte waters, something that I knew I loved before even seeing the first of the cranes land at dusk or take off at the morning's first light. As Keanna verbalized in our conversations, people may know about the migration and may be able to see the cranes in the morning and evening, but only some really *see* the cranes on the river. What she might have meant by that comment is of course a mystery. Whether it is some sort of spiritual, emotional, transcendent, or existential attachment that goes beyond the innate sense of sight we have with our eyes, and instead is a sense of sight with our souls, our lives within. Whatever one may choose to define it as, it becomes immediately clear when you feel it, connect with it, and feel yourself in awe watching the birds land at dusk or take off at dawn. It is hard to argue with that but is easy to sense and to *know* you have seen something magical, something that is sustained from the river, something that must be cherished, protected, conserved.

Additionally, I now better understand the process of documentary filmmaking, improving my skill set in this area. Perhaps the best word to describe this process and method is *adaptation*. I found myself constantly adapting and changing my expectations based on what was available and possible. The most notable example of this is how my story changed as I set out 'in the

field.' I initially wanted to tell a story about how tri-state basin management led to such debate in the central Platte: how decisions hundreds of miles up the river have immense implications for downstream users. This story was far too broad for the time and resources I had; it required extensive travel and a certain position of influence to get access to, or so it seemed. And perhaps it was still too fresh in people's minds; something so touchy and political is hard for an undergraduate to find a place in. Focusing on what was happening in central Nebraska seemed to be the most reasonable, to focus on the spring migration since it held such a strong visual component and public following. I found that this was the most compelling story and that I could fully engage in how Rowe Sanctuary and PRRIP worked to preserve suitable wildlife habitat through conservation strategies. This realization of working *within* a story rather than working *on* a story was profound to me. My role as a storyteller and filmmaker was not to regurgitate a story I had read about or heard about but rather to jump into the story and let it lead me, just as the Platte winds, creating its own banks.

I was also forced to adapt to small events that were out of my control. I had wanted to shoot video of a PRRIP meeting but some felt uncomfortable having a camera present during the meeting, resulting in me having to cut a scene. I did get to follow a PRRIP habitat restoration project during a prescribed burn but Mr. Tunnell requested to not be on camera and was reluctant to finally let me interview him with my audio recorder only. It was an awkward exchange but my persistence paid off with an incredibly short but concise interview that worked marvelously in the final piece. Given that this was my first experience in documentary production, I will be better equipped and ready to handle small failings such as these. It became necessary for me to not take any particular day or shoot as definite. Anything might come up and force me to reconsider and approach the material with a different angle or find a way to work around it.

In retrospect, one of the major goals and successes I can take away from this project has been an exercise in communicating scientific information both in visual and narrative ways; how can one effectively communicate scientific and environmental messages that both compel and inform a viewer. There are of course varying degrees of ways to do this such as sensationalism, strictly academic, or purely aesthetic. I wanted to focus on the scientific aspects of these organizations while still allowing for aesthetic and emotional responses that are inherent to the migration season. These decisions manifested themselves as I transcribed my interviews and pulled out practical talking points, avoided music as the primary means of emotional response, and, all the while, allowed the themes and characters on screen to carry the message. Overall, I found this to be a rewarding and exciting challenge and am proud of the resulting documentary short.

Script

Conserving the Platte
by Steven Speicher

Titles

Scene: Introduction: *Calm before the storm. Set the stage for my subjective travel through Central Nebraska and how I learned about wildlife habitat conservation. Goal: To pique interest of viewer and to hook for final payoff.*

SFX: footsteps and door opens

Keanna: This is the first place people are gonna come in. This is, this is, this is the view they're gonna get when they walk in. They get to see this. I mean, how can you, how can you not go oh my goodness.

*SFX: Up and steadily stay under throughout
Music up and under*

Keanna: We want them to be able to see the river and the importance of the river.

It's the middle of winter along the central Platte River near Gibbon Nebraska. These few hundred miles of interstate are known to most as simply a route West.

SFX: Cars on highway

Actually, on my trips here this Spring, I found that these vast agricultural lands and wet meadow habitats contain much more than drive by scenery. Adjacent to the Platte River, this land is crucial for hundreds of thousands of migratory bird. The most known of these is the Lesser Sandhill crane.

SFX: Sync video sound.

Here, the cranes, and many other species, fatten up for several weeks before heading North for summer nesting.

Because of a history of water diversions and intense agriculture, the Platte's water and habitats face threats never before seen.

SFX: Steps and mouse clicks.

I set out to see how different conservation organizations worked to preserve habitat and to continue to encourage the public's awareness of the spectacular Spring Migration when hundreds of thousands of Sandhill cranes stop in Central Nebraska. One stop for many is Audubon Society's Rowe Sanctuary. I spent a day or two here in late winter.

SFX: Steps in the snow

The premises are empty now, but all that changes in a few weeks when close to 15,000 visitors come to Rowe Sanctuary to witness the spectacle.

SFX: Music slowly up

Bill: The cranes bring so many different people together. It's just something people from all walks of life enjoy seeing and experiencing. So we get people from all over the country like I said, East Coast, West Coast, Florida, everywhere you can think of. Everywhere from schoolteachers to CEOs of major companies.

The birds attract not only people from the Midwest and around the country but from all over the world.

Keanna: We have a map in here that we have been running for the last several years and what we do is we ask people to put a pin in where they're from and we have gotten over the years, all 50 states and I think last year 54 different countries that came here just to see the cranes. That's amazing. It's amazing, amazing.

SFX: Running water

Now, the maps sit empty, waiting for first visitor to mark their travel. In late February, the first of the birds will make their way to central Nebraska and Rowe Sanctuary staff and volunteers begin six weeks of dawn to dusk work. Until then, there's only empty skies.

SFX: Music intensifies

Transition: The Birds Arrive: *Smooth transition. Fading river to birds' arrival signifying the connection between the two. Goal: To take the viewer to Rowe Sanctuary.*

Birds fade in over running water.

SFX: Bird calls and field soundscapes

Less than a mile from the interstate, as I drove through county roads, it quickly became clear the cranes had returned. Winding through cornfields, I finally arrived at Rowe Sanctuary, where things were coming to life.

SFX: Music drops under

Bill: And really our goals from the very beginning are to let them know that this great migration is happening and how important the Platte River was to an entire species of birds like the cranes.

Bill: Our mission is to preserve Platte River ecosystems for cranes and other wildlife through conservation and education.

Scene: Rowe Sanctuary Crane Viewing: Non-linear editing. VO of Keanna and Bill as I, and visitors, go on a crane viewing trip. Goal: To show a blind trip rather than tell.

SFX: Cars on gravel

Music fades in slowly and under

One way Rowe Sanctuary educates is through volunteer-guided morning and evening crane viewing trips, striving to connect people to place.

Bill: Well, really it's personal experiences out in nature that make that connection. So we try to provide opportunities for people to make that personal connection. Whether it's on our walking trails, or through our programs or having a place for families to come out and enjoy the river and to make that personal experience connection.

Keanna: During crane season I wanna make sure people understand the importance of what's happening here. Have a little bit of idea of the biology of these birds, where they are coming from and where they're going. And then just understand what we do here on the Platte River does affect those cranes.

SFX: Walking in gravel

Even though the fog scared away the cranes earlier in the morning and left us with a gloomy view, there was still something beautiful and eerily captivating by the empty river; how the morning light pierced through the fog.

SFX: Birds on water

Voices of gather crowds

Though this morning, rowe staff and volunteers say no two days on the river are the same, just as the water that constantly flows East always changes.

Back inside, guests arrive for the educational offerings, the crane carnival.

SFX: Music resolves

Scene: Platte River Recovery Implementation Program: Set stage for PRRIP work. Goal: To briefly introduce PRRIP

Perhaps the most comprehensive organization working to conserve Platte River habitat is the federally mandated Platte River Recovery Implementation Program, under the direction of Dr. Jerry Kenny. Using a paradigm of Adaptive Management, the Program is governed by a committee that meets several times a year, managing Water and Land resources. The Program acquires land and decides on specific on-the-ground restoration projects.

Jerry: Then you have to do rehabilitation work which is you know, a lot of clearing of trees, restoration of grasslands, in the channel itself, clearing vegetation, trying to restore the broad, shallow, braided, bar sand river form that we believe is beneficial for the species.

Scene: Controlled Burn: Lively scene of habitat restoration. Explain science behind habitat restoration. Goal: To show and tell how a prescribed burned works.

SFX: Music up and under throughout scene

On Program land, I met Land Manager Tim Tunnell who oversees all land-based projects. Today, he was supervising the beginning stages of a multi-year process of grassland restoration.

Tim: This wooded area here is going to be slated for tree removal in the future. And we're doing a prescribed burn on this to kinda... The theory is to return it to a grassland using fire rather than dozers as a potential tool to get it done.

SFX: Natural sounds, talking, wind, and motors

The Program hires outside contractors to implement Tim's burn prescription. They work to circle the area, assess the weather conditions, and, eventually, to start the flames, constantly keeping the flames in check. It's an amazing process to observe, seeing such composure and calculation in a seemingly unstable procedure.

Tim: The goal in the future is to open up this wooden area to the river, the main channel, the main channel of the river is just on the backside of these trees. And there, we'll have managed island habitat.

We watched the day's events from a nearby gravel mound the Program built which will serve as nesting sites for the endangered Piping Plover and Interior Least Tern. With the constructed nesting site, the traditional wet meadow habitat, and island sandbar habitats, the Program hopes to attract birds, restoring fragmented, threatened populations.

The basic idea of Adaptive Management is to design, implement, measure, analyze, assess, and adjust. With the two areas adjacent to each other across the traditional wet meadow habitat, the Program can assess which nesting site is more attractive to birds. The knowledge gained from these efforts will prove invaluable in the long-term sustainability of habitat restoration projects conducted on the Platte River.

SFX: Car engine

Burn Boss: Hey Bruce, I'm comin' in with Tim and the photographer. We'll be in the big dumptruck.

SFX: Car engine continues with sync sound talking

Tim: Ultimately, the wet meadow habitat is there in the understory. This is kinda an experiment if you will to on trying to take the top down approach to getting back to that wet meadow.

SFX: Music fades in and out

Transition: Two Stages of Conservation: *Two dimensions of conservation. Goal: To realize conservation has many dimensions, each important: education and habitat restoration.*

SFX: River soundscape

With a network of organizations like the Audubon Society's Rowe Sanctuary and Platte River Recovery Implementation Program, the Platte River has many people looking after it in a variety of ways, working to sustain a valuable resource. Whether it's education or habitat restoration, a community of organizations provide necessary effort to conserving river and wildlife.

Scene: Community and Final Payoff: *Community aspects and RAWC. Lead viewer to final evening show. Goal: To generate interest in conservation and Central Nebraska and to provide final payoff.*

Every year during the Spring Migration, Kearney hosts the Rivers and Wildlife Celebration, dedicating a weekend to celebrating a resource that unites so many people. The event features wildlife-viewing trips, booths full of information, educational presentations, and guest lectures.

SFX: Rooms full of people and lecture

Just as a river runs through the landscape, meandering through many communities and towns, I found people from all over the state and country.

And all of these people, and myself, can agree, central Nebraska's Platte River is an amazing place worth sharing and conserving.

*SFX: Sound of birds take over
Music builds*

Fade out picture

SFX: River soundscape lingers

End credits

Literature Review

Note: These sources are readings I have consulted and summarized; they are not necessarily needed as a framework to be used in or to understand my study and resulting video project. For my work in qualitative design and creative exploration, literature reviews do not serve as strong a purpose as they may in scientific, quantitative design.

Barbash, I. & Taylor, L. (1997). *Cross-Cultural Filmmaking*. Berkeley, CA: California UP.

Primarily a handbook for documentary or ethnographic filmmaking, the authors outline every phase, including theory and history, for producing a work of documentary film. The text is split into three parts: part one describes various documentary styles, theorizes the ontology of filming reality and explores the collaborative process inherent to filmmaking; part two, the densest section, describes the technicalities of recording images and sound on both film stock and video; finally, part three explains the pre-production, production and post-production phases of filmmaking, ending with a discussion of distribution. This book mainly served as a reference for filmmaking skills, styles, and theories.

Freeman, D. (2010). *Implementing the Endangered Species Act on the Platte Basin Water Commons*. Boulder, CO: Colorado UP.

Freeman, a sociology professor at Colorado State University, attended Platte River negotiating meetings over 10 years as an impartial observer, documenting the positions and issues that emerged through the contentious use of the Platte's waters. He outlines the problem in the Platte Basin as well as social climates that affected policy and implementation. He discusses various stakeholders and the interests each had in creating policy for management of the water resource. A cross state dispute, Freeman crosses the state lines, documenting a variety of voices and challenges from many interested parties. This served as the primary reference text for my research in telling the story of conservation on the Platte.

NET Foundation. (1991). *Platte River Road*. Dir. Michael Farrell. NET Television. Film.

This 1991 documentary produced by Nebraska Educational Telecommunications under the direction of Michael Farrell, tells the history of the Platte River road, an early route used by settlers to gain access to the West. The story brings us up to then-modern day 90s as the fate of the Platte's waters remained in controversy and intense deliberation. In a way, this film is a prequel to what was on the horizon, a series of lawsuits and an eventual federal mandate of a regulatory organization managing the water, the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program, putting to rest the economic, environmental, and political debate that follows towards the end of the film and on after the final credits rolled.

Platte River Recovery Implementation Program. (2011). *PRRIP Bi-Annual Report 2009-2010*.

The PRRIP bi-annual report offers a quick letter from the Executive Director, Jerry Kenny, and a brief history of the program. The report mirrors the organization of the Program, outlining four main sections: land, water, adaptive management and program administration and outreach. Each section highlights the sections objectives and key concepts, addressing the program as a whole as well as the 2009-2010 years of the Program's implementation. This was

valuable background knowledge when approaching the Program for access to facilities, staff, and visual documentation of conservation efforts.

Platte River Recovery Implementation Program. (2006). *Final PRRIP Document*.

The official final program report submitted by the Governance Council in 2006, the Final PRRIP Document outlines the Program's purpose, goals and elements. The Document also lists related Attachments that were published in accordance with the Final Document.

Platte River Recovery Implementation Program. (2006). *PRRIP Attachment 5 – Water Plan*.

Attachment 5 to the Final PRRIP Document consists of the 11 sections which aim to better manage water usage upstream from the Project's target site in Central Nebraska. The Attachment cites studies from years past as well as current studies relating each of the sections to the overarching goals of the Project. The 11 sections of the PRRIP's Water Plan are Program Water Management Process; Channel Capacity of the North Platte River Upstream of Highway 83; Colorado's Initial Water Project (Tamarack I); Wyoming's Pathfinder Modification Project; An Environmental Account for Storage Reservoirs on the Platte River System in Nebraska; Reconnaissance-Level Water Action Plan; Depletions Plan, Platte River Basin, Wyoming; Nebraska New Depletion Plan; Colorado's Plan for Future Depletions; Federal Depletions Plan for the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program; and Water Plan Reference Materials.

Rabiger, M. (2009). *Directing the Documentary*. 5th Ed. Elsevier, Focal Press.

A comprehensive guide to documentary filmmaking, this text covers methods, technologies, thought processes, and judgments a director has to make. There are many practical tools and experiences provided that aid an amateur or student filmmaker working on a limited budget. It shows how to bypass technical shortcomings and difficulties with a focus on storytelling and project development. This guide was referenced throughout the filmmaking process from idea generation, to interviews and shooting, and all the way to editing and post-production.

Various Authors. (2006). *Platte River Odyssey*. Lincoln, NE: College of Journalism and Mass Communication.

A work of investigative journalism, the various authors of these articles explored the Platte River and a variety of issues making up aspects of the water's use including recreation, natural habitat, irrigation, municipalities, and drinking water supply. Written within the 2005-2006 school year, University of Nebraska-Lincoln journalism students and Lincoln Journal Star writers reported on timely issues surrounding the Platte and were supported by chart and graph infographics as well as color photographs. The resulting magazine was designed and laid out by UNL journalism students and distributed throughout the year. This was simply an interesting piece of investigation that aided in the accumulation of journalistic knowledge regarding the Platte River.