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The GRAND ISLAND TO COLUMBUS PLATTE RIVER  
CORRIDOR INITIATIVE

**The Grand Island to Columbus Platte River  
Corridor Initiative**

By Bill Whitney

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**WHAT A DIFFERENCE A RIVER MAKES!**

Some of my earliest and strongest memories in life are about the Platte River along the northern edge of Hamilton County. I remember seeing goldfish, a form of glorified carp, in a sandpit near what is locally called Marquette Park. I drank right out of the river on a hunting trip with my father, and sneaked a first horrible taste of a beer at a river cookout and trail ride. Prior to becoming a swimmer, I remember falling headlong into the water off of the bank of Hord Lake sandpit near Central City.

On most weekends - often both days - in the summers before 1963 learned there to respect the treachery of sandpit swimming, how to spin cast for largemouth bass, and some basic sail boating and canoeing skills in the boats I helped build in our basement. I definitely got more thrills than I bargained for ate age eight or nine when a violent May squall suddenly tipped our sailboat enough to take in about five gallons of water.



A family weekend at Hord Lake, a popular public sandpit.

When I was a fifth grader, in 1963, the folks were able to buy a cabin at a sparsely developed sandpit lake north of Hordville. Our cabin was by no means luxurious (having been created by previous owners from a couple of old chicken houses) and was in the most wild of locations, hidden back in a nook at one end of the lake near a cattail marsh. The sign of wildness for us at the time was the occasional flight over the cabin of the prehistoric-looking great blue heron that lived in the area. We had never seen herons before.

Summer weekends were spent fishing for bass, or spear fishing for carp and gizzard shad. Once a foot-long gizzard shad even jumped into the boat! Endless days were spent swimming, and eating wonderful meals cooked on the old cook stove used as an outdoor grill. Fourth of July was always memorable for the fireworks. Once I made a firecracker cannon to shoot marbles out into the lake, consisting of a drum Majorette's baton stuck in the sand. I'd light a two-inch firecracker, drop it into the pipe and put a marble on top. Future archeologists may dig deep in the Platte River sands some day and find one of the hundreds I shot - maybe an emerald cat's eye, or a dark red purey - and wonder how it got there.

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The historic Prairie Island wooden bridge near Hord Lake (burned down in November 1999).

As a teenager I remember trips with friends up to the Platte west of Marquette after Legion baseball games, to a place called Gerloff's Landing. We'd spear carp there for hours. Later outings would include jeeping to the bluffs shortly after blizzards to hike or sled in a crystalline wonderland.

In college I became interested in natural science. Finally I could begin to satisfy my curiosity about the cabin sandpit, the plants, fish, and birds, as well as the Platte's channels. After learning the birds at Lake Itasca in Minnesota I returned to the area to test my knowledge and to see what Nebraska had to offer. My first new-bird discovery was three nighthawks swooping over our canoe while we fished at the cabin. My first plant collection was weedy prairie plants collected from the beat-up lowland pasture that the cabin lane winds through and along the river near the wooden bridge by Hord Lake. In graduate school my major was limnology, the study of freshwater ecosystems. During one summer I took samples at the cabin lake to check for dissolved oxygen, temperature, and depth and to inventory the lake's plankton.

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The Platte at Bader Park.

The environs of the Platte have always had an important place in the life of our family. Over the years there have been numerous family cookouts, fishing trips, parties, and kids' activities. Jan and I were married on the old cabin boat dock in 1974, and had our tenth and twentieth anniversary parties there. Every time I yell at our kids not to swim out too far in the sandpit I can hear my mom yelling the same things at me thirty-some years ago (as a Grandma she's most likely there too, scolding along with us).

Both of our daughters have had formative experiences at [SOAR](#) in various Platte River spots such as Bader Park, Pence's Lake Mary sandpit, and Griffith's Pasture, as well as at the cabin. They are learning, as I did at Hord Lake, how to canoe and swim confidently in dark and deep lake water. With [SOAR](#) as part of the family's normal summer routine, it's only natural that we have our own family "nature camp" in the small south channel of the Platte that now runs just behind the cabin, feeling for mussels with our toes, and finding crawdads, minnows, and aquatic insects galore.

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River activities at SOAR.

Because of our personal familiarity with this landscape, it has always been important in the organizational life of PPRI. As the most scenic country in our immediate vicinity, and as the main locale with substantial amounts of remnant native grasslands and wildlife, it was a natural PPRI focus. Our first PPRI annual meeting included a visit to a scenic bluff prairie, followed by the gathering afterward at the cabin. In our first [Prairie Plains Journal](#) (No. 1, 1981) we published a short article on Hamilton County prairies with pictures of a Platte hay meadow and that same bluffs prairie. Later on, in 1987, we fantasized about a Platte River greenway project from Grand Island to somewhere beyond Fremont.

Since 1980 I have spent considerable time along the bluffs and the lowlands near Prairie Island north of Hordville, and along the bluffs southwest of Central City, frequenting about fifteen miles of county roads. These roads contain in their ditches many species of prairie grasses and wildflowers from which I have gathered seeds. Many of these seeds went into the establishment of Lincoln Creek prairie restorations, which now flourish. Subsequently, many of the seeds from these creek plantings made their way back to Platte River lands planted since 1992 in PPRI's large [prairie restoration](#) projects.

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The Platte Bluffs - rugged loess hill grasslands.

On many gravel (Platte River gravel, of course!) road trips with PPRI board member, fishing friend and landscape painter, Ernie Ochsner, we have marveled at the beauty of the clouds, hills and birds, and most everything else along the river. At the same time we've always questioned why the farms were going to pot, why so much of the bluffs pasture looked so beaten down, and why so many people thought Nebraska was ugly or inferior to mountains and forests. We have always tangled with ideas about how important this river corridor is to the area, and about what might be done to protect its unique values from the ravages of people who don't care about the land or who unwittingly would love it to death. We haven't yet come to any profound conclusions, but vignettes of those trips are now recorded in more than a few of Ernie's best paintings.

PPRI's project history in this corridor area includes an association with Gene (Mert) and Gwen Griffith and their pasture, one of the best Platte River prairie natural areas in the county. We have worked together on SOAR and rangeland burning. Gene stores our fire equipment during the winter, we burn in the spring, and SOAR kids converge on the land for a few days at least every other year.

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Prescribed burning - a necessary tool to restore native Platte grasslands and remove cedars.

PPRI has been enjoying other private land and education partnership with the Zeilinger family and their land near the Clarks Bridge (see "The Dexter Farm, Pawnee Hill and Village" in [Prairie Plains Journal #13](#)). The Dexter Farm and its surrounding area have great potential as a large educational preserve containing river, wetlands, and bluff and lowland prairie. In addition, the locale is a rich archaeological area of recent Pawnee times.

Bud and Mary Ann Pence have similarly offered their Lake Mary site near Central City for many [SOAR](#) summers. This site inspired us to add such activities as fishing and canoeing to the curriculum.

Finally, but certainly not least, the Bader Memorial Park Natural Area has been the anchor site for [SOAR](#) as well as for continuing activities throughout the year since 1982. Bader Park is a vital area, the only major Platte River park between Grand Island and Columbus. Its value as a recreational and an educational resource cannot be overstated.

In fact, the people living along the Platte east of Grand Island are very lucky to still have the river and its wildness. If this were the eastern part of the United States, these Platte River lands would have been completely built up with recreational and residential housing long ago; the rural agricultural setting, as well as the prairies and wildlife, would most likely have disappeared decades ago all along the corridor. Could what has come to pass elsewhere be our future on the central Platte? I am deeply concerned about the future of land along the river from Grand Island to the Columbus Area.

### CHANGES COMING IN THE CORRIDOR?

In the past, under private ownership, the Platte Valley landscape has been maintained as an open agricultural area – a combination of river channel mixed with cropland, native rangeland, and hay meadows. Under this land use regime there was also recreational use by the public at bridge crossings, a few public sandpits, and on private lands depending on farmers and ranchers granting friends and acquaintances access.

Recent times have brought about major changes in the valley that are accelerating. The population is increasing - a trend projected to continue - especially in the larger towns of Grand Island, Kearney, and Columbus. People are more mobile, therefore more willing to live away from towns. Access to most of the area from Lincoln and Omaha is only one to two hours by car. Many are able to afford new homes in scenic surroundings. Land values are rising as more single home acreages sprout up; the number of people looking for river lands is increasing. These facts imply that development pressures on open space and natural land will inevitably escalate in the next decade. This has already created a market momentum that has driven land away from agricultural buyers toward small acreage residential buyers.



High-density building development on a sandpit.

## Sheet1

A similar market trend exists regarding privately owned hunting and cabin lands along the river. This parallels a rising public demand for many different types of recreational opportunities. There is no effective conservation-based policy or institutional focus (neither conservation organizations nor government agencies) on land protection for public purposes in this section of the river, including river access sites, parks, and public hunting, hiking, and fishing lands. A pertinent community economic development question that growing towns up and down this segment of the river may soon ask is: "What recreational activities are available locally to our new residents?" It will become increasingly difficult to provide such opportunities for a growing population in light of increasing competition for land. [There are only three small public access areas between the Grand Island Highway 34 bridge and Columbus: Bader Park near Chapman and Tooley Park near Marquette; Hord Lake is now a private area.]

Finally, demographic and economic changes in agriculture are in many areas contributing to a marginalization of lands that generate less revenue than crops, i.e., the native grasslands. A growing red cedar tree problem is getting worse on both upland and lowland prairie sites. It is not deemed worth the effort or expense to reclaim the prairie, and landowners may not know the best way to do it. To many of these landowners it will no doubt be more desirable at some point to cash in this declining resource base for home sites. In addition, as lands sell at elevated prices for recreational use or home building, the adjacent land becomes taxed at a higher level - often cutting significantly into the agricultural profitability of the land.

## Sheet1

### WHAT IS MEANT BY A RIVER CORRIDOR'S PUBLIC VALUES?

A strong chord resonating in American culture is that rivers represent a wellspring of esthetic, economic, and cultural values for all people, not a select few. The problem comes in determining how to apportion these bounties fairly and the often-fragile natural resource.

In a general sense we may tend to think of public and private resources along the Platte River corridor. Most of the land is now cropland, pasture, river channel and accretion forest in private ownership. Public values exist specifically for public use; people also gain access to the main Platte channel on public road rights.

However, the term public value has little to do with who actually owns title to this land. Public values are those that we appreciate, and use as members of a greater society or community. We all know it is important to keep lowland prairie acts as a water filtration and groundwater recharge area, and as a place to locate municipal water treatment plants. It provides a significant health value to the public. The same is true of wildlife habitat. It provides for the needs of children and that can be enjoyed by the hiker, motorist, or hunter. Below is a list of Platte River corridor values that therefore represent public values related to the Platte Corridor.

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>>> Scenic landscape vistas

>>> Unique educational sites (such as the SOAR Program requires)

>>> Recreational areas

>>> Our natural heritage of native prairie, forest, and wetland plants and wildlife

>>> Archeological and historical landmarks

>>> A sustainable no-input agricultural rangeland resource (i.e., native prairie) that also acts as a water filtration area, and a wildlife habitat

>>> Ecosystem services provided by grasslands and riparian woodlands, including water filtration and sediment retention and absorption

>>> Sustainable economic development opportunities as the community benefits from corridor protection

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A final note on public values: Land is a source of production whether for wildlife, agricultural products, or recreation. We argue that building developments are a form of production as well, but we contend that when land is built up and replaced by a non-productive, or consumptive, use. What is the public value of maintaining a unique riparian landscape?

If present trends continue, society's response to the attendant environmental problems created by rapid, poorly planned development - water quality degradation, ecological fragmentation caused by breaking the landscape into small-acreage ownerships, congested roads, disputes over land and river access, etc. - will become reactive, even crisis-oriented. This will mean more government regulation, among other things. Eventually, the qualities that attract people to the river land will be gone.

No one can be blamed for wanting to live in an area rich in scenic beauty, wildlife, and recreational opportunities. The trouble is that there is not enough land to serve unlimited individual desires, and to protect public values and agricultural land, without encountering serious problems down the road. One of these future concerns, for example, is the strain that unlimited moderate- and high-density development may create on rural tax-supported public services. At some point many of the best things about the corridor will be negatively impacted by the consequences of unplanned development. It's happening all around the country and can happen here very quickly - perhaps within a decade.

Again, if these trends continue, we will see the future river valley still in the hands of private landowners, but the nature of ownership and land use will be vastly different. The rural character of the corridor will become more urban. There will be more landowners with smaller parcels, followed by more houses, driveways and roads, yard and street lights, more and larger sandpit complexes with high-density residential construction, more weedy tree growth concurrent with a loss of native grasslands. Eventually the native plant and animal diversity of the area will dwindle away. Water quality problems in the corridor related to roads, runoff erosion and septic systems will become common. As the corridor becomes more urbanized there will be less river land accessible to the public, less agricultural use of the area, and more demand for services that might not be covered except by higher property taxation. Along with these changes we will see less opportunity and potential for the public to enjoy prairie and river lands close to home, and there will be less variety and abundance of many species of plants and wildlife. Agricultural rangeland will become even more marginal.

### **SUBDIVISION, BUILDING DEVELOPMENT, AND CHANGING LAND USES ALONG THE PLATTE - TWO CHOICES**

**Building development in this Platte River corridor is going to happen one way or another. It is not necessarily bad, and we are not against it, per se. But it matters a great deal how building development and land subdivision is done. If planned carefully, and in context with the natural qualities of the land, the built human environment can be complementary to other land uses such as farming or ranching, and scenic or natural area preservation.**

## Sheet1

There are two public policy choices; one is pro-active and the other is policy by inaction:

1) By creating a task force made up of interested individuals, businesses, local government agencies define the various aspects of the river corridor that have public value; b) determine threshold limits for the corridor; c) attempt to orchestrate Platte corridor building development accordingly through a sensil establish sustainable economic development projects based on natural resource stewardship of corridor leadership, and a visioning process for all, but especially for the youth, that integrates natural resources,

-OR-

2) By doing nothing, we can allow free reign to individuals and market forces to dictate for the ma to develop cooperative ventures as described above, and to choose not to see the opportunity in looking offer in addition to agricultural commodities and scenic building locations.

The first option gives us the opportunity to protect the unique features of the corridor, protect important water-related functions of the river system, plan for more public availability of the corridor's natural resources, and still allow development in the built environment.

The second option will undoubtedly create some good places for people to live, but ultimately at a greater public cost if this one use of the land becomes the dominant use. It will have a profound effect on the Platte's natural ecosystem. Future landowners, natural resource managers, and policy makers will be forced to deal in a crisis-oriented way with more intense land resource conflicts, and a variety of inevitable negative environmental consequences.

Prairie Plains Resource Institute stands behind the first option. There are many unique features of the Platte Valley Corridor that are part of the public trust. They should be protected, restored, and maintained for the benefit of future generations. Protection of this public trust can best be accomplished if we maintain the rural openness of the landscape, if we maintain the native grasslands, forests, and river frontage in large tracts, and if we educate people about natural resources, agriculture, water, nature, and local history so that they care about and understand this valuable cultural and natural resource. This option will also create local economic development opportunities that will benefit from protection of the rural scenic and natural corridor.

## WHY PLATTE RIVER ECOSYSTEM PROTECTION AND RESTORATION?

Native prairie grassland is, by nature's design, the most effective system that exists for purposes of water filtration, domestic well field buffering, floodwater retention and naturally regulated water return habitat for countless native plants and wildlife, and if managed slightly differently could be a potential retreat for the area's population and visitors alike. In addition the most scenic and many of the most historic sites and floodplains of this section of the Platte Valley.

In conjunction with the prairies, and also having important roles in water recharge and regulation cottonwood and willow forest (the forest on accretion land or islands) is a vital habitat. Together, the river and the diverse natural system composed of up to 300 species of birds, more than 300 species of plants, abundant wildlife, and scenic views are a place to retreat to and enjoy.

Corridor planning that includes protection and restoration of large tracts of native grasslands and riparian zones and islands, with extensive river channel frontage and forest/shrub plant communities for various purposes. Unplanned urban-type building development on these lands will incrementally sacrifice - irreversibly - the benefits of relatively few individuals. On the other hand, innovative planning gives us the opportunity to locate and design building developments. It would be a win/win situation for the corridor community.

## THE CORRIDOR INITIATIVE PROJECT'S BEGINNINGS

My memories and experiences along the river have intersected in the last two decades with the ideas and dreams of others. Some of these ideas were introduced in this publication over a decade ago. I cannot forget the first mention by a friend, John Jasnowski, more than two decades ago that the bluffs of Hamilton County are a special place that should be preserved as a big prairie - perhaps someday with a wandering herd of bison! (They're already on the bluffs at the Gale Stevens family farm near Hordville.) - and as a place for people to enjoy the river and wildlife.

Past PPRI board member Norris Alfred often wrote about the Platte in his Polk Progress editorials and birding columns during the 1980s. The lowlands, river, and bluffs were the subject of many of his sketches and paintings as well. The cover of our first issue of [Prairie Plains Journal](#) (1981) was graced by one of his bluffs sketches. To Norris, river land was a refuge from the weekly grind of writing and publishing the Progress on antiquated letterpress machinery, and a refuge for the wildlife he went looking for ("Tribute to Norris Alfred," [PPJ](#), No. 11, 1995). His weekly birding column was the result of travels on Platte River Birding Road (which is actually Prairie Island Road from near the Central City Bridge to the Clarks Bridge), and Swedenburg Road past Pawnee Hill ("Dexter Farm - Pawnee Hill and Village," [PPJ](#), No. 14, 1998) to the Havens Bridge.

Emiel Christenson's writings are another deep well of inspiration pertaining to this corridor (we have highlighted Emiel in past [Prairie Plains Journals: PPJ](#), No. 5, 1983, and No. 7, 1989). An architect and planner from Columbus, Emiel is often remembered for developing the Nebraska Community Improvement program and for the design of Schyler's Oak Ballroom, now on the National Historic Register, among a long lifetime of other accomplishments. The following thoughts by Emiel reflect the intended spirit of this Corridor Initiative with regard to recreation and cooperative community efforts. They were posted inside one of the shelters constructed at PaWiTo, Emiel's family Platte River Bluff refuge near Shelby.

**contact or intimacy with such features of the landscape as a sweeping coastline, woody slopes, grassy prairies, or undulating sand dunes knows what majestic views can mean to the inner consciousness of man. We need such experiences to evoke the diversity of moods and responses so essential to the broader understanding and clearer perceptivity required to continue the upward and onward march of mankind. Inspiring leisure is just as necessary to the intellectual and spiritual growth as is invigorating exercise to physical well being.**

**"Although our national, state, and local park and wilderness programs are, in many cases, commendable, they are woefully inadequate from the standpoint of building up citizen enlightenment and stimulating unity in creative use of leisure time.**

**"Local, private, and corporate efforts are much needed, not only to supplement the public effort, but even more to guide its further development."**

On a visit to PaWiTo in 1982, Emiel, then 88 years old, explained how he and his sons began 30 years earlier to develop the overgrazed bluff pasture into a cohesively designed system of trails, shelters, and forest. He recounted a neighboring farmer saying he should have started doing this when he was a young man and beautified the whole system of abused bluffs. We sensed that Emiel wished it could have been so.

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Emiel Christenson at his family retreat, PaWiTo.

Emiel was a social visionary. He lived to tell of the horrors of trench warfare in World War I, but he believed in things that reflected the virtues of humanity. He was far ahead of his time in thinking about the value to local people and communities of a dream like restoring the Platte bluffs. We were lucky in 1987 to see Emiel again at a PPRI Annual Meeting at Lou and Geri Gilbert's Pahuk area north of Cedar Bluffs. The topic of discussion was how to develop a greenway plan for the Platte River. It was again a pleasure to hear Emiel, now 93 years old, explaining his views about people and their relationship to the Platte River landscape.

#### WHAT DOES A PRAIRIE AND RIVER CONSERVATION PROJECT HAVE TO DO WITH COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT?

Economic development encompasses many things. A land project such as this does not provide a number of jobs created. Over time it can create a number of sustainable small-scale family service business things not yet conceived. The greatest economic benefits will be related to how people appreciate and use the land, and how they develop community leaders.

This project represents a sustainable diversification of the land-based economy. It involves developing business leaders, government, and organizations. The process is about knowledge, about integration of the spark of life to rural people. Ultimately economic development occurs from a motivated community of

## Sheet1

So, here we are almost 20 years later. It is time to begin the process of transforming dreams into reality. Presently the stretch of the Platte from Grand Island to Columbus seems to be largely unnoticed by conservationists and resource agencies, and is somewhat taken for granted by local people as nothing too extraordinary. However, a few others and we disagree with this outlook. We value it mightily because it is an extraordinary place! Moreover, we are concerned that land use trends occurring in other sections of the Platte may work their way into this river segment, harming many of the qualities that make it special. Trends that we believe are negative cannot be changed unless we offer a better alternative.

Late summer and fall of 1998 was a critical time to pull together many of the things PPRI does in central Nebraska into a geographically focused new project. We were desperate for significant funding to continue PPRI's work, and wanted to capture the imagination of potential donors. As a result the Grand Island to Columbus Platte River Corridor Initiative was born. It took its initial form as a PPRI grant proposal describing a cogent and visionary project - an attempt to create that better alternative by protecting the Platte River ecosystem and promoting a planning process to guide future stewardship and development. It is fundamentally a marriage between 1) PPRI's existing projects and areas of expertise (such as SOAR, Olson Nature Preserve educational developments, and prairie land management and restoration), and 2) regional planning and community development concepts, applied along the entire 60-mile corridor between Grand Island and Columbus.

For the corridor scenario to succeed, a consortium, or task force, of participants needs to be organized. This group of dedicated people needs to apply imagination and initiative, locate funding, and go about the task of creating a master vision for the corridor. This will involve collaboration among institutions such as local city and county governments, local economic development corporations, local, state and federal agencies, farm organizations, civic service groups, sportsmen's groups, educational institutions, and private businesses and industry. It will also require an effective partnership with many individuals, especially with private landowners.

PPRI's mission is to play a leadership role in establishing such a task force, then continue its educational activities to increase awareness of the corridor and the Initiative, to protect land with unique natural, historic, and educational resources, and to restore productive parts of the ecosystem. In so doing we intend to carry forth and build upon dreams such as Emiel's.

WHAT IS LAND PROTECTION?  
DOES PPRI WANT TO OWN THE LAND?  
HOW WILL IT BE MANAGED?

It would be ideal if all individual landowners were good land stewards, passing their land ethic on unfortunately. These days many landowners do not even live close to their land, and economics is dictating conservation or agriculture. However, if the goal is to keep the natural and rural qualities of the land government agencies, and individuals can work together to reach the goal.

Land protection refers to placing land under some type of conserving ownership or conservation easement supported conservation organization, that prevents it from being used for another purpose or restricting this could mean protection from excessive housing subdivision of a gravel mining operation occurring or lack of cedar management. Many private grasslands are being lost (this can be a temporary situation stands of red cedar because of the way some landowners manage pasture.

On a large-scale land protection is not a matter of a land trust entity buying out all private interest money to do that. A large-scale protected landscape as envisioned here would probably be a combination of rancher-owned tracts can be conserved by conservation easements. Easements represent partial ownership and are bought, sold, or donated just like full ownership interests. Each is a tailor-made agreement between lands in private ownership can be conserved by individuals who are good stewards, and with incentives. Land trust-owned lands can comprise another component of conservation land (all property taxes will pay county or state-owned lands, too. All lands would be acquired on a willing-seller basis.

Large-scale natural land protection also does not mean locking the resource up with no economic value unused. Almost all protected prairie land will be incorporated into a grazing or haying rotation system to protect the native ecosystem with its multitudes of plant and animal species. Under this scenario the corridor will essentially become a long ranch with multiple owners. On a sizeable preserve income from growers can provide significant resources to fund educational program development.

If PPRI is able to purchase land it can then under some circumstances be re-sold with a conservation easement held by PPRI). The lands will most likely sell at an agricultural price since development rights will be retained.

Depending on the particulars of each area, it will be possible to add uses to the conservation lands include education programs, agricultural and scientific research, compatible types of public recreation such as equestrian use, river access, limited private and public-use cabin developments, etc. Recreation areas will be part of community economic development plans of local towns.

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**THE MISSION  
of the  
GRAND ISLAND TO COLUMBUS  
PLATTE RIVER CORRIDOR INITIATIVE**

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The purpose of this Initiative is to create a visionary program for ecological protection, restoration, and future management, as well as sustainable community educational, recreational, and economic development of the Platte River Corridor between Grand Island and Columbus. Its goals and objectives are as follows:

## Sheet1

1. GOAL: Knowledge of what is there

OBJECTIVE:

To conduct a resource inventory in the corridor to identify, describe, and classify ecological, historic, and cultural resources - public and private.

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2. GOAL: A protected and maintained Platte River Ecosystem

OBJECTIVE:

To preserve, restore, and manage Platte River corridor lands necessary to maintain a continuous Platte River wetlands, river channels, and riparian woodlands.

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3. GOAL: Protected cultural resources

OBJECTIVE:

To preserve significant historical, cultural, archaeological, and local interest sites.

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4. GOAL: Managed growth that minimizes negative human impacts on the river corridor native grass agricultural open space.

OBJECTIVE:

To establish a set of corridor land use and development guidelines that will outline to planners, develop Guidelines must operate within the limiting context of natural resource protection and sustainability, an process.

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5. GOAL: Public appreciation and understanding about Platte River natural history and land stewardship

OBJECTIVE:

To create and maintain education and leadership training programs, with an emphasis on youth, so that appreciate the Platte River corridor's diverse natural resources and their important relationships to people.

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6. GOAL: Integration of the corridor into the lives of citizens

OBJECTIVE:

To integrate into community life the recreational, educational, and economic opportunities and benefits of the corridor.

### **THE CORRIDOR INITIATIVE'S TWO COMPONENTS:**

- 1) PPRI's specific organizational focus on land and education,
- 2) A corridor task force to lead community visioning, planning, and development processes.

This project has two components: One is PPRI's specific conservation plan detailed below. The other concerns aspects of corridor protection and community development that fall outside of PPRI's specific mission. The two components complement each other. Various private and public community projects can result from land trust efforts; resource protection cannot occur without community and local government involvement and support.

In practice we hope to prove that a grassroots non-profit organization, local governments, and citizens' groups can accomplish broad goals if they work together. Under this scenario the Corridor Initiative will involve many different players. It is vital that potential participants see in such a concept the opportunity to benefit themselves and their communities. We hope that the Corridor Task Force becomes a catalyst spawning new projects as diverse as the participants, including government and private actions to manage building developments in the corridor and to create sustainable community economic development projects. Some projects may be very closely related to PPRI's mission, perhaps involving PPRI directly. But others, particularly economic development spin-offs, could evolve in a multitude of directions.

**PPRI'S PLAN:**

**A LAND BASE AND EDUCATIONAL CENTER ON THE PLATTE**

Our Platte Corridor mission, as practiced on all PPRI lands, involves ecosystem preservation, restoration, and education. Land resource protection will create the foundation for everything else that eventually results from the Initiative. Part of comprehensive resource protection in the corridor will include action by PPRI to identify, acquire, restore, and manage unique corridor land through the methods outlined below.

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Collecting prairie seeds for restoration activities on the Bluffs.

By January of 2000 we will create and unveil to the public a plan detailing PPRI's primary mission in the corridor - land and educational goals and objectives to be met over the ensuing five years. Briefly, it will include creation of a land base along the Platte (probably scattered sites within the corridor) to protect some of the best natural areas remaining. We will then develop and restore these lands as "stewardship laboratories" exhibiting ecological restoration and management as well as agricultural activities, as intern training grounds, as educational preserves for schools and the general public, and as controlled-access recreational lands. This is very similar to what takes place, for example, on the Olson Nature Preserve in Boone County.

The plan will also include creation of an actual "campus," or retreat center consisting of a modest building or two. It will serve an educational function by providing a meeting space and overnight accommodations for students of all ages. It will also be the research and educational base for corridor conservation activities as well as PPRI activities in the entire Platte and Loup Basins.

## Sheet1

The objectives and strategies available to PPRI to carry out this plan include:

### Resource Inventory

Geographic Information System (GIS). Using computerized aerial photos and information from a database that can be used to store resource and management information and to produce high-quality maps to prioritize, and plan protection strategies for different landscape components in the valley. Such classifications include recreational potential, excellent outdoor education sites, the most desirable sites for planned building development, and areas susceptible to water quality degradation. GIS maps are also excellent communication tools for presentations and education.

### Acquisition of interests in land to protect specific land features

Conservation Easement Acquisition. A conservation easement is a tailor-made agreement between a landowner and a conservation organization whereby the landowner conveys specified interests in land to the organization while retaining primary development rights. Easement interests are acquired by purchase or gift. If conveyed by gift or bargain sale (sale below appraised value), the donor may qualify for a charitable tax deduction with IRS. Easement interests are enforced by the holding organization.

Fee Simple Land Acquisition. To accomplish PPRI organizational goals where considerable conservation value is also necessary to acquire full ownership, or fee simple, rights to some properties. Fee simple acquisition can be achieved through purchase from a willing seller, acquisition by gift, or by a bargain sale (as with easements a full or partial gift to the organization depending on the tax and estate situation of seller/donor).

Fee Acquisition and Re-sale with an attached conservation easement. To make conservation fund-raising easier, PPRI will purchase land, re-sell it to a conservation-minded buyer with a conservation easement attached to the deed (and held by the buyer), and purchase of another piece of land. In addition, during the land trust ownership period improvements can be made to restore productivity; then sold in excellent condition.

Leases. Leases offer a flexible tool for long- and short-term land protection; although not as desirable as ownership, they are useful in attaining some conservation goals.

### Land Restoration and Management

Information and Technical Assistance Outreach. Much like Cooperative Extension outreach, PPRI will provide information and technical assistance to hunters, and small acreage owners to provide information about their land resources and to offer assistance efforts within the corridor will include information about how their lands fit into an overall corridor conservation plan. Other efforts might include Holistic Resource Management (HRM) training, locating conservation funding assistance through programs such as Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQUIP), Wetlands Reserve Program (CRP).

Prescribed Fire/Timber Removal. This category is partly contained by the preceding landowner acquisition section. Removal of invasive woody vegetation growth, predominantly eastern red cedar, is a priority on the Platte lowlands and bluffs. We will increase fire management and cedar removal assistance to private landowners.

High-diversity Prairie Restoration. Lands such as marginal sandy or wet croplands and abused rangelands can be restored back to high-diversity prairie. As restored prairies, they will serve multiple purposes, such as groundwater recharge, wildlife conservation, rangeland production, and specified recreational uses.

Infrastructure Improvements. In order to make lands self-supporting regarding upkeep and taxes, and management flexibility, PPRI will make infrastructure improvements on its land, e.g., windmills, access roads, etc.

Rangeland Bank/Grazing Coop. A rangeland bank or grazing coop offers management flexibility and can be used to take use pressure off of lands that need some time to recover from over-use, or it can be used to provide a source of income for landowners.

### Education Programs

Long-term land stewardship of the corridor depends on educating present and future generations about the corridor (e.g., Orientation About Rivers) and educational preserves such as the Olson Nature Preserve near Albion where the civic groups are good examples. Other options include creating educator workshops, starting a nature area, developing a resource-based economic development leadership program, a summer intern program for college and high school students, and natural resource programs in conjunction with Cooperative Extension and local schools.

### Land Use Guidelines and Economic Development Projects

Sharing of Resource Inventory and Locating Pertinent Technical Information. PPRI is not a zoning authority, however we can be a conduit for information and referrals to people in the know about resource, planning, and economic development issues. PPRI will also share with government and public entities the extensive information gathered in developing guidelines and new projects.

## **MORE BACKGROUND: BRIEF ECOLOGICAL OVERVIEW OF THE CORRIDOR**

The Grand Island to Columbus Platte River Corridor Initiative focuses on bluff and lowland native grasslands and wetlands, and the main channel of the Platte River within a valley corridor from about the Highway 34 Platte River Bridge near Grand Island to roughly the mouth of the Loup River near Columbus. A most notable area within this stretch is Prairie Island, a large historic island roughly from Central City to Clarks. Prairie Island is defined by one of the small ancestral south channels of the Platte and contains grasslands and wetlands of exceptional ecological, educational, and recreational value.

There is a large gap in general awareness about the Platte River because this stretch of the river is most often left out of discussions about the watershed. In Nebraska most of the resource attention for two decades has focused on the Big Bend reach of the Central Platte from Overton to Grand Island – much of it due to intense conflicts regarding migratory birds, endangered species, irrigation and river flows.

The Lower Platte corridor in eastern Nebraska also receives a great deal of attention because there are a variety of serious urban development issues surrounding it. Fremont, Lincoln, and Omaha are growing rapidly and this is creating a large demand for land. The land use conflicts in the Lower Platte relate to the vast acreages of small-lot sub-divisions, a proliferation of acreages on scenic river lands and away from the city, a demand for commercial properties along the interstate corridor, and land to serve a growing demand for recreation, wild land, and open space protection. All of these issues represent major and sometimes unpleasant changes in what was, until recently, a rural agricultural area.

Although it is understandable why these other segments of the Platte River have captured all the attention, we should not fail to recognize the value of the unique segment of the river located in between. This overlooked section from Grand Island to Columbus offers great opportunity if we act now to prevent some of the problems plaguing other stretches of the river. Furthermore, and most importantly, the residents along the corridor can ultimately benefit from any action that places the conservation of river lands as a priority. But this corridor's potential as a linear grassland preserve system serving multiple ecological and societal purposes has as of yet only been recognized by a few.

## Sheet1

The corridor is not presently politicized by the issues that have made conservation protection on other parts of the Platte River so challenging. Because of this, a well-designed grassroots initiative has great potential to succeed here. It must be carried out in a way so that people can see opportunity and benefit for themselves and their communities.

### PLATTE RIVER PRAIRIES

From Grand Island extending eastward past Columbus, the Platte Valley is flanked on the south side by a nearly continuous system of bluffs. The bluffs contain a few high quality examples of native prairie, and many degraded prairies that can be relatively easily restored through improved management and species enrichment. This resource of hilly grasslands is nearly unbroken east-to-west from Grand Island to Columbus, and encompasses more than 25,000 acres.



Purple coneflower on bluff prairies.

## Sheet1

With a little imagination it is possible to envision a 60-mile linear grassland preserve along the bluffs system. This system of upland prairie has tremendous potential as a recreational corridor, as a historic corridor for protection of Pawnee archeology sites, settlement era landmarks, and westward migration trails, and as a wonderfully diverse natural area. Such a concept may at first seem threatening to agricultural landowners; however, a prairie preserve of this type will also be classified as an excellent rangeland, and be managed by grazing and prescribed fire. Recreational uses can be developed and managed within the context of this type of land management.

In the entire Grand Island to Columbus stretch there are also extensive lowland native meadows that are ecologically important for their biological diversity and as aquifer protection and infiltration zones. One such sub-irrigated meadow system west of the Chapman Bridge and Bader Park already contains two municipal water wells and may in the future contain more. For this reason, this entire Chapman meadow system should be maintained as a groundwater source protection area. Under such a designation the only appropriate uses are for wildlife, passive types of recreation, and agricultural grazing or hay production. Unbroken native lowland prairies encompass upwards of 30,000 acres in the 60-mile corridor stretch.

Between Central City and Clarks is Prairie Island, a long and narrow piece of land defined on the north by the Platte's main channel and on the south by one of the many south channels of the Platte. Between Silver Creek and Columbus there are two more small streams draining into the Platte from the south, another so-called south channel, and Clear Creek. These streams and sloughs are surrounded by considerable acreages of native lowland meadows in some areas, and in a few locations by slightly higher sandhill-type rangelands.



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South Channel near Hordville.

All Platte River grasslands are important for containing runoff, groundwater filtration and percolation. Their highest and best uses may ultimately be as groundwater protection zones and multiple use rangelands. These upland and lowland prairies are now mostly in a state of ecological and agricultural decline. Invasive cedar trees are increasing their hold, much like what is happening in rangeland (non-sandhills) areas in Buffalo, Custer and Loup Counties. Along the Platte many landowners are primarily crop producers with less time to devote to pasture management and improvement. They do not as a rule use fire for cedar control, and many have an inadequate understanding of the fundamentals of sustainable native rangeland management. Consequently, much of the land has become marginal pasture, and in many places the cedars are becoming dense stands. Once a pasture reaches a certain point of decline there is little to no economic incentive to improve management. The result is loss of species diversity, loss of rangeland economic potential, and a decrease in the area's habitat value for most species of wildlife.

### PRAIRIE ISLAND

([view a GIS Map of Prairie Island](#))

Prairie Island has already been mentioned, but it deserves special attention. The south channel of the Platte that defines Prairie Island from Central City to Clarks is a small stream; however, it has a number of wetland sloughs and side channels that are wet during much of the year. Many grasslands along this South Channel require drastic restorative management, but they also have excellent potential to become high-quality diverse native grasslands for education, wildlife, and sustainable rangeland use. In addition, they comprise the largest single area of connected grasslands in the corridor.

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Tall gayfeather on a Prairie Island native hay meadow



Regal Fritillary butterfly on showy milkweed.

Prairie Island stands out on the map as the centerpiece of the corridor project, being physically located in the middle and having the greatest grassland resource. It stands out in other ways, also. The island was a significant Pawnee cultural site, one of the locations of their sacred ceremonial lodges. At the east end of Prairie Island is the Pawnee Village and Burial Hill on the Dexter Farm (see PPJ #13, "Dexter Farm, Pawnee Hill and Village"), also know as the Clarks Site in archeological circles.

## Sheet1

The greatest threats to the Prairie Island lowland ecosystem are a combination of red cedar infestation combined with poor rangeland management, the potential for rapid and ill-conceived sandpit development followed by high-density recreational cabin or second home development, and small acreage developments. There are areas along the south channel that contain old sandpits with low-density cabin development. These areas have maintained much of their natural character as well, and illustrate that some human uses are not at odds with ecological protection if moderation and planning are practiced.

### PLATTE RIVER MAIN CHANNEL

The Platte River main channel and its associated riparian zone (the pre-1940s river channel was wider and mostly treeless; what used to be part of the main river channel is now dominated by cottonwoods, willow, and dogwood) is an outstanding scenic and ecological resource. While natural resource managers might argue over the values of the riparian forest versus the relatively treeless historic prairie condition of the river, the fact remains that the river and its immediate riparian zone is very diverse in native plants and wildlife when compared to most of the agricultural landscape outside of the Platte Valley. People generally find this component of the corridor most attractive.

The Platte's very nature is defined by disturbances caused from flooding. As such, the riparian area is a very resilient system; it has the capacity to absorb a tremendous amount of public use if that use is managed properly. The riparian zone could potentially become an ever-greater public recreation area with little impact on surrounding land uses.



A wide braided Platte River channel.

### A FEW PLATTE VALLEY CORRIDOR OPTIONS

\*\*\* Clustering building developments at strategically planned sites along the corridor may be more desirable than using a zoning acreage limitation that gradually chops the landscape up into small parcels. Such developments should be limited to those places that are not the most scenic, that are not the largest grassland tracts, and are not unique archeological or historic areas (i.e., protect the unique sites). Yet, they can occur near enough to these unique areas to enjoy the benefits from them.

\*\*\* PPRI would like to establish a number of preserves dedicated to the memory of significant individuals who have supported PPRI's Platte River vision - Norris Alfred, and Jim and Alice Wilson from Polk, Emiel Christenson, and Naomi Brill (see the tribute to Naomi in this issue) - and devoted to educational use (such as PPRI's Olson Nature Preserve or Bader Natural Area) between Grand Island and Columbus. Each of these will be a potential location for the SOAR Program, places for local schools to run their own similar programs for students, and a site to train educators about natural resources, and teach about science, nature, local history, land management, and agriculture. Some sites should include farmland in addition to prairie, river, wetlands, and woodlands, making the sites valuable technical training and leadership development sites for youth entering all natural resource fields, including agriculture. Each would involve volunteers and educators in ongoing stewardship activities, and act as demonstration areas for prairie restoration and management.

\*\*\* Very marginal too-sandy or too-wet croplands in the corridor should be restored back to prairie. These lands are perhaps more important for water quality (filtration, recharge, flood retention, etc.) and biodiversity concerns. They can still be managed as rangeland.

\*\*\* The invasion of trees in the existing native grasslands should be reversed. The best wildlife habitat potential of these areas is as well-managed prairie. People, particularly small acreage residents, are mistaken about the wildlife value of letting trees take over the rangeland or planting more trees for wildlife on their acreage. The best wildlife lands will be the big, open grasslands adjacent to the bottomland forests. If grassland tracts include as little as 5-10% tree cover existing as island-type stands within the prairie, and if the prairie is managed to maintain residual grass cover throughout the winter, this is conducive to large game populations; also, if these sites contain a lot of prairie plant diversity many more animal species will be attracted to the area.

\*\*\* PPRI would like to restore native diversity of this rangeland through interseeding of plant species, the use of fire, appropriate sustainable grazing intensities, and haying or grazing rotations. Diversity will improve nutritional quality of the range as well as wildlife diversity and abundance.

\*\*\* We believe it is feasible to establish a few of the most scenic and larger rangeland tracts, particularly a few that also are adjacent to the river, as multiple-purpose public recreational use areas for hikers, fishermen, equestrian groups, or scouts. Again, it could be possible with careful people management to have rangeland use compatible with some recreation.

\*\*\* By partnering with developers in the creation of low-density planned development areas, some recreational cabins could be constructed to accommodate seasonal rental use. Some private cabins and homes could be constructed by local residents; and surrounding areas could have various public uses for outdoor recreation - all complementing one another and existing in a natural setting.

\*\*\* The community should encourage capitalizing on new economic opportunities that could co-exist with the natural river - related to recreation and tourism, education, etc. (e.g., Elderhostel programs, Bed & Breakfasts, River Valley Festivals, Family Range Camps, Church-related camps such as Timberlake Ranch Camp, etc.).

\*\*\* PPRI will promote the creation of a demonstration project for an environmentally sensitive gravel operation. It could show and interpret: 1) balanced attention to site selection and land-use tradeoffs; 2) a well-designed mining plan from beginning ground breaking through reclamation, including renderings showing size, relationship to the river and surroundings, bank configuration, depths, wetlands, restored prairie, etc.; 3) a proposed limited and strategically planned building development, including waste treatment, storm drainage and other public works concerns, landscaping, etc. [a sandpit demonstration may occur best under broad-based partnerships between landowners, public agencies, counties, and trusts].

## Sheet1

### HOW CAN THIS PROJECT BE PAID FOR?

This project will require millions of dollars. The conservation of corridor natural resources at the future of the corridor communities. Sources for money will include federal, state, and local seed and m grants, and private donations. Money that can be attracted from outside the region for the purchase and economy.

### HOW CAN PEOPLE HELP IN ADDITION TO GIVING FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE?

The Initiative will require a lot of effort by PPRI staff and members, volunteers, and cooperating c restoration and education projects it is clear that people want to be involved with land conservation and groups, youth groups, and others will be able to help out immensely as project coordination develops.

### POTENTIAL TASK FORCE MEMBERS

Prairie Plains Resource Institute

Cooperative Extension

City Government representatives (from Aurora, Chapman, Central City, Clarks, Polk/Hordville, Silver Shelby, Rising City)

County Government representatives (Hall, Hamilton, Merrick, Polk, Platte, Butler)

Natural Resource Districts (Central Platte, Lower Platte North)

Business People/Development Corporations or Chamber Representatives

State and Federal Agencies (Game and Parks Commission, Fish and Wildlife Service, NRCS and RC&

Non-Governmental Organizations (TNC, Nebraska Cattlemen, Corn Growers, etc.)

Community Service Organizations

Educators (K-12, Educational Service Units 6, 9, & 7)

[Prairie Plains Resource Institute Home](#)

[Land Projects](#)

[Member Volunteer Opportunities-2](#)

[Educational Landscape-scale Publications](#)



















conomic, natural, and recreational values for all  
how to do it in a way that protects and maintains

ridor as simply defined by ownership. By this  
ip. A few relatively small county-owned parks  
s-of-way near bridges.  
alue refers to aspects of the land that we all need,  
our water clean. If a piece of Platte River  
pal water supply wells, then this prairie has a  
creatures that do not abide by human ownership  
ridor items that are important to us all, and that

purification and erosion control system, a scenic

groundwater recharge, erosion control, floodwater

ion

oduct, or recreational opportunities. One can  
ilt upon a productive landscape is most often  
ver landscape in a productive state?



es, and organizations we can work together to a)  
protecting and restoring the natural ecosystem in  
ble on-going planning process; d) work to  
lands; e) involve our communities in education,  
, economic opportunity, and quality of life factors.

ss of local citizens the corridor's future, to not try  
; at what our area natural river landscape has to

f groundwater recharge, runoff control, surface  
to the stream. The Platte's native prairies are also  
y enormous source of recreational enjoyment by  
of the corridor are contained in the grassland hills

as well as wildlife, the riparian, or riverine,  
iparian forests and prairies make up an extremely  
nt game and fish animals, and places people can

aged for ranching and biodiversity, and protection  
can provide for a large array of public and private  
eplaceably – an important public resource for the  
to protect the area and still have appropriately  
ity.



#### COMMUNITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT?

... visible factory we can point to and then recite the  
... inesses related to tourism, and perhaps many  
... understand where they live, how they educate the

... opment of a local partnering process among  
... new ideas to rural areas, and about creating a new  
... concerned citizens.



to the next generation. Such is not the case, making changes that may not be in the best interest of the landscape intact, there are ways that organizations,

an easement to be held in trust by a publicly owned trust at the level of a certain use. In the Platte corridor, there are some privately owned areas from overgrazing (because these prairies are restorable) under solid

s. Most land trusts such as PPRI do not have the same distinction between private and public ownership. Some farmer-owned land interests; they have a market value between the buyer and seller or donor/donee. Some land trusts receive assistance from USDA or state wildlife agencies. (This is not the case on PPRI land). Finally there could be a few

uses. A prairie preserve is not left alone and is often managed to provide excellent livestock forage and habitat. The potential protected landscape of the Platte corridor includes grazing leases with neighboring livestock

an easement attached to the deed (the easement is restricted by the deed). In addition to livestock grazing. These uses may include such as hiking, biking, camping, hunting, and fishing. These uses will become ever more important in the

archaeological, cultural, esthetic, and economic

River ecosystem consisting of native grasslands,

lands and riparian zones, scenic areas, and

owners, and the public their land use options.  
should be developed through an open decision-making

ship.

all people can learn about, understand, and  
local and communities.

resulting from protecting what is unique in the





Corridor ground surveys, PPRI will create a maps. GIS maps will enable us to identify, classify, categories might include rangeland quality, developments or sandpits, or areas most vulnerable educational activities.

On a landowner and a conservation organization ownership. Normally an easement outlines the acceptable, and those that are explicitly prohibited. raised value), an easement that protects a resource elements require ongoing monitoring and possible

Control and oversight on the land are necessary, it will attention may be obtained by full-market purchase a land trust may qualify for tax deductions

As they extend farther, PPRI can acquire property, then by PPRI). Money from re-sale can be put toward can be made (wells, fences, etc.) and the land's

Available in many cases as easements or full

UI works with landowners such as farmers, assistance in prairie restoration and management. Such conservation scheme. Specific types of assistance and government landowner options such as the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP), and Conservation

Assistance category above, but is so important it that, is necessary to reclaim native grasslands on landowners, including easement partners. Rangeland can and in many cases should be restored after infiltration, native plant and wildlife

, and allowing rangeland renters a prime resource and fences.

to participating landowners. Land in the bank become a grazing safety valve during drought.

About the area. Programs such as SOAR (Summer it is used by many Boone County schools and and agriculture science camp, developing a natural high school students, and other agriculture and

ing or economic development organization per se, ing, and sustainable economic development the resource inventory, and work with others to

















is scale should be viewed as an investment in the  
atching funds, individual bequests, foundation  
restoration of land will remain in the regional

organizations. In the last few years of prairie  
education. Landowner participants, service

Creek, Duncan, Columbus, Osceola, Stromsburg,

ED offices)