

Society of Grasslands Naturalists
Issues Committee Annual Report 2021

The Issues Committee met only once in person. However, much discussion occurred during the weekly GN nature walks and many emails were exchanged. The members of the committee included John Slater, Martha Munz Gue, Gerry Ehlert, Paula Munro, Tina Regher, Marty Drut, and Phil Horch (GN President: ex officio).

At the brief Issues Committee meeting with Phil, it was agreed that he and Martha would arrange to meet with the new City mayor and/or council as well as any committee to press for a comprehensive Environmental Master Plan; based on the studies previously commissioned by the City with the River Valley Study (1972) and the Environmental Roadmap (2008) as well as other Plans adopted by others such as Red Deer and Calgary. Subsequently, Phil and Martha met with the newly formed City Environmental Department to present GN views and discuss the way forward.

When a GN member identifies a new issue that they would like to pursue, the Issues Committee works with that person to address the issue. Listed below are some of the issues we have continued to tackle in the year 2021.

- 1. Nature Deficit, Appreciation and Awareness. Weekly Nature Walks, and Adopt a Pond Initiative:** These activities have got members outside regularly to observe and care about nature whether with families or friends to enjoy their neighbourhoods or throughout the city. The Adopt a Pond project has individual, families and organizations caring for 17 ponds in the city, and also most paths along the creeks and river, for a total of over 30 specific sites, and well over 100 individual people. Also, according to the GN Field Trip 2021 Annual Report, over 40 Nature Walks and 4 Birding Field Trips as well as special activities on Water Day and Earth Day, Litter Cleanups, and Spring and Christmas Bird Counts involved many members. GN's wildflower brochure and website, the butterfly website, the Birding Trails Guide all helped support the learning of curious participants. Through a separate Ad-hoc Committee, the "Scenic Views" web-based project, Gerry Ehlert with the help of John Slater, Paul Thibault, David Gue and Len Moser is hoping to raise awareness of the enormous personal and planetary value of native grasslands including ecological goods and services, economic environmental and health and wellness value of our native grasslands and riparian areas. An EcoTrust grant was obtained for signage, and an article in the Tourism magazine "Experience Medicine Hat" will soon appear.
- 2. Climate Change and Biodiversity Emergency.** These two huge global emergencies are being addresses by various endeavours. In the fall of 2019, we participated in the Climate Conversations (Fridays at Four) at a cafe until the pandemic moved us outdoors for the summer and then to online bi-weekly zoom gatherings. In 2020, Rob Gardner established a local group under the "Transition" umbrella with promoting the Transition garden. And a new program by Brent Smith at the MH College is focused on Agro Ecology. Phil Horch is lead with the Symposium on Climate Change which we look forward to holding. The 2021 GN "Case for Conserving Prairie Grasslands" is a useful tool to support these endeavours. We look forward to celebrating "UN Special Days" in collaboration with SEAWA and Council of Canadians to draw member and public attention to Water, Earth, Energy, and care for the Environment.
- 3. Invasive Species focus on Eurasian buckthorn (GN and City), leafy spurge (City), and Russian Olive (SEAWA Connaught Pond).** Identifying and reporting invasive species continues to be a challenge. Gerry Ehlert and John Slater, in collaboration with the City Parks & Rec Dept have continued to report on location of Buckthorn city wide; and in particular have undertaken a

project to gradually eradicate Buckthorn from Police Point Park. And the City is controlling Leafy Spurge in the Park by the use of goats. In consultation with the City, SEAWA has undertaken an extensive riparian restoration of Seven Persons Creek and Connaught Pond with control of Russian Olive and planting of native shrubs such as Wolf-willow, Red Dogwood, Thorny Buffaloberry and various Currant as well as Cottonwood saplings. Further workshops are planned by Gerry and Marty to help the general public with identification of Invasive species and reporting using the EDDMapS app to the Alberta Invasive Plant Council. Pond and Creek adopters are also reporting invasive species.

- 4. Governments, Change in Coal, Parks, Solar and Wind Farms, and Irrigation Expansion.** These land-hungry projects have the potential of affecting natural spaces and therefore people living nearby, as well as throughout SE Alberta, and beyond. The Issues Committee and the GN Board have discussed these issues, including information by emails from CPAWS, AWA, NATURE Alberta, South Alberta Group for the Environment (Cheryl Bradley), and others, and participated in local discussions with Council of Canadians, and Climate Conversations. President Phil Horch sent a letter to the Alberta government concerning the effect of coal mining on downstream water, as well as the destruction of ecosystems in the foothills. Further correspondence was sent to the companies and government concerning the effects of renewable solar and wind farms on native grasslands and wildlife. Here in the Hat, a lengthy process of consultation preceded the adoption of the new Municipal Development Plan and Recreation Master Plan, and now ongoing discussions are taking place with regard to drafting the Environmental Master plan. We recommend stronger emphasis on sustainability in all municipal departments and plans, since both reduction of carbon emissions and protection, conservation and restoration of ecosystems are of utmost importance for continued health of species and planet.
- 5. Environmental footprint of outdoor recreation.** Meetings and field outings have been held with the City Parks & Rec Dept and Cycling Clubs concerning the effects of mountain biking on native grasslands and sensitive environmental areas. Protection of the area between Gas City Campground and Echo Dale Regional Park is of particular concern due to numerous trails carved into the hillside and along the riparian area bordering the river. A careful watch for erosion and spread of invasives is necessary to care for the area. Ranchlands' Phase 2F&G Archaeological Conservation Education Area is another area which underwent a major change due to construction of an extensive trail system with interpretive signage. The City Parks & Rec Dept with GN and the SEA Archaeological Society are addressing the issues of the signs and protection of the remaining native grasslands to encourage appreciation of the natural spaces next to the trails. Unfortunately the initial work at the site disrupted the native ecosystems and destroyed some of the stone circles that dated back hundreds of years.

Respectfully Submitted April 2022

by Co-chairs John Slater

Martha Munz Gue