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### The Change on the Range

When you think of an endangered species what comes to mind? Maybe the Giant Panda or the Siberian Tiger? These both come from far away exotic places, but there is something else endangered right before our eyes. It isn't an animal or a bird, or even a particular kind of plant species. What I am referring to is the destruction of our tall and mixed-grass prairie ecosystems particularly in the Northern Plains Region.

I live in an area known as the Prairie Pothole Region. The Prairie Pothole Region is the core of what was once the largest expanse of grassland in the world, the Great Plains of North America. When the glaciers from the last ice age receded, they left behind millions of shallow depressions that are now wetlands, known as prairie potholes and home to thousands of migrating waterfowl. Within this region is the Coteau des Prairie which is French for Hills of the Prairie. The Coteau is a plateau approximately 200 miles in length and 100 miles wide extending from eastern South Dakota, to southwestern Minnesota and into Iowa. The Prairie Coteau is the largest remaining tract of native northern tallgrass prairie in the United States with approximately 1 million acres of native grass remnants.

Today, I am going to share with you why rangeland ecosystems are important, what values they provide, and what can be done to protect them.

First, why are rangelands important?

Forty-seven percent of the earth is rangeland; however, some estimates were that at one time this was as high as 70 percent. But, there is a Change on the Range. In recent years, with the increase of crop commodity prices for corn and soybeans these unique landscapes and ecosystems are being plowed up. According to the National Agricultural Statistics Service, the grassland conversion from 2006 to 2011 in the Northern Great Plains also known as the Western Corn Belt states of North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Minnesota, and Iowa was 1.3 million acres. Specifically, in South Dakota, about 450,000 acres of grassland were converted to cropland during those years – this equates to 6 football fields every hour. As a consequence, populations of grassland nesting birds are declining faster than ever. Soil carbon sequestration is at a deficit, and the loss of native grasslands is impacting watersheds. Conversion of these native grasslands is comparable to the deforestation rates in Brazil, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Once these ecosystems have been destroyed it is irreversible to get them back.

Rangeland which includes native grasslands is valuable. Socio-economic influences currently do not put the same monetary value on an acre of native grassland as compared to an acre of cropland. But, if we started putting an intrinsic dollar value on the multiple uses they

provide we would begin to have society and the agro-economic industry view native grasslands and rangelands differently.

These lands are of great economic and social importance, because they offer a livelihood to millions of people around the world. Rangelands provide grassland habitat for livestock, and wildlife habitat which are especially important for pollinators. Rangelands provide increasingly important recreational uses such as hiking, hunting, camping, and mountain biking. In addition, they also provide for renewable energy wind farms and alternative medicines known as ethnobotany.

Finally, what can we do to protect our rangelands and grasslands? We can educate others about the importance of these unique ecosystems. We need to tell our story about how grassland ecosystems are important for grazing livestock, they hold the future for unique prairie grassland birds, insect populations, and for pollinators that will help feed our world. We need to support groups like the American Forage and Grassland Council and the Society for Range Management to promote and educate others about the importance of rangelands.

In closing, we all know our story. We understand the importance of rangeland and grassland ecosystems the values they provide us and our livelihood; the importance for all the other plants and animals that rely on it. Now we need to share our story. We need others to know the intrinsic value these ecosystems have because once this resource is gone, we cannot recreate it.

*Kiera L. Leddy* 11/28/2014