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A New National Trail?

By Scott A. Wails, Deborah E. Popper and Frank J. Popper, 9/12/2008 8:58:40 AM

Our country has 26 National Scenic or Historic Trails, many world-famous, that draw visitors from everywhere. The tourist or native can hike, say, the Appalachian Trail in the East or the Pacific Crest Trail in the West, savoring the nature, land and culture of the Shenandoah Valley or the Sierra and Cascade Mountains. Or he can explore the Gulf Coast on the Florida National Scenic Trail. National trails offer the wanderer access to treasures in almost every region of the country. But there is no trail devoted to America's heartland, the Great Plains—a serious gap.

The shortgrass Plains cover a ten-state swath, nearly a sixth of contiguous America, from big chunks of Montana and North Dakota in the north to much of New Mexico and Texas in the south. The region saw Indian wars, land rushes, homesteading and the Dust Bowl. It has inspired artists like George Catlin, Willa Cather and Louise Erdrich. The Plains offer some of the country's most subtly sublime terrain. Their somber-serene beauty, oceans-of-grass vistas, and natural landscapes with buffalo and antelope and prairie dogs always entrance travelers when they get there.

Yet they too rarely do. To many American and international visitors the Plains, if they think of them at all, are a source of food and energy, but lack the natural attractions of dramatic Western peaks or picturesque Southern beaches. Instead the Plains are flyover country, dropped from the nation's awareness even as vast stretches of the rural Plains underwent generations-long economic losses, erosion and water-table damage, and population decline.

Since the late 1980s two of us, the Poppers, have called for making ecological restoration the core of the region's long-term development, a vision we called the Buffalo Commons. Today the approach makes even more sense than it did then. In fact Plains farmers, ranchers, Indian tribes, state governments and preservation groups such as The Nature Conservancy and Nebraska's Grassland Foundation are creating the Buffalo Commons in countless ways that help the economy and the environment. A new north-south Great Plains National Scenic Trail would be a splendid addition to that vision.

As with the other national trails, this one would begin by charting a conservation corridor linking existing amenity sites, often the holdings of state, federal, tribal or other nonprofit agencies. To people unfamiliar with the Plains, the region has a surprising number of enthrallingly beautiful places, sometimes already arranged as trails.

In the northern Plains alone one finds, for example, Montana's Missouri River Breaks, Nebraska's Oregon Trail Monuments and its part of the American Discovery Trail, North Dakota's two units of the Theodore Roosevelt National Park, South Dakota's state and federal Black Hills parks, Wyoming's Devil's Tower, many Forest Service National Grasslands and large Indian reservations.

The region's south provides equal bounty, starting with Colorado's state-lead Front Range Trail, Kansas' Castle Rock, New Mexico's Santa Fe National Historic Trail, Oklahoma's Wichita Mountains, Texas' Llano Estacado and numerous National Grasslands.

These and other Plains sites of national scenic or heritage significance yield prime nodes for the proposed trail, but further research, which we are now undertaking, should find more. Naturally, the choices about actual routes and the facilities along them need formal public scrutiny, federal study, and congressional and presidential approval. In some cases multiple routes could work.

The overall idea is to link public and private holdings into a long-distance, foot-accessible, attraction-rich path (or paths) through or adjoining different kinds of shortgrass country—rolling and flat, badland and butte,

mesa and canyon, and various animal and plant habitats. The trail would help small struggling Plains towns by making them its gateways, giving them a big stake in the region's ecological protection, promoting nationwide consciousness and reacquainting America with some of its most threatened rural places—benefits very much needed by Plains communities and the nation.

The Plains trail, like other national trails and countless similar public and private conservation-based economic-development projects throughout the country, would prove again what Americans increasingly know: preservation can pay. This is the basic principle of the trail and the Buffalo Commons.

In 1892, after a trip across the country, the great American poet Walt Whitman wrote, “while I know the standard claim is that Yosemite, Niagara Falls, the upper Yellowstone and the like, afford the greatest natural shows, I am not so sure but the Prairies and Plains, while less stunning at first sight, last longer, fill the esthetic sense fuller, precede all the rest, and make North America's characteristic landscape.” In 2016, when the National Park Service celebrates its centennial, here's hoping that a Great Plains National Scenic Trail will be part of the festivities.

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