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On Community and Conservation

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The Spiritual Mechanics of Labor and Rest
Jack Baumgartner

ON COMMUNITY AND CONSERVATION

AN ENCOURAGEMENT

One of the great joys of my life has been getting to know many of the stewards of the Flint Hills, first as a ranch kid, later as a conservationist and now as a neighbor.

As a kid, I loved riding along with Dale Kirkham, the Greenwood County District Conservationist, and John Wilson, my dad and all-time favorite rancher. Those rides led to a lifelong love of range management.

My first boss out of college was Barry Barber, who trained many young range conservationists. His advice was to do what is best for each acre and recognize that no two acres are the same. Every acre has unique soil-forming factors, including the stone from which it comes, the lay of the land, the climate over centuries, the passage of time and the organisms encountered. Other differences result from the treatment of each pasture in terms of grazing season and intensity, type of animals grazed and the timing, frequency and intensity of burns.

Only time could teach me about the variety of people with whom I would work. By the time I'd toured someone's place and saw what worked well and what they were struggling with, I knew them pretty well. I met wonderful people, prize-winning hound dogs, young colts destined for greatness and, on one particularly memorable morning, a family who had adopted squirrels.

As time went on, it became beautifully obvious how each of these people's gifts were a part of their stewardship. Their quirks became their niches. One of the gifts this country gives is space for characters to fully develop.

Loving the prairie is falling in love with a community comprised of a cast of fantastic characters, much like that of a small town. I know that my neighbor having a bad day with three flat tires will be uplifted by the broad smile of the beloved local tire guy, just like a glimpse of the joyful fringe-leaved puccoon in spring after the cold, dark winter brings delight to a winter-weary soul. Generations of neighbors make the compelling argument for goodness having a genetic component; so, too, I marvel at how prairie grasses are truly made for this place right down to their DNA.

Just as I am grateful to those backbones of our community — teachers, farmers, ranchers, coaches, bus drivers, county commissioners — I appreciate the fundamental roles of the big bluestem: feeding the grazer, filtering the water, holding the soil and enriching it with carbon from its own discarded roots, creating a nurturing microclimate for smaller plants and creatures, and keeping its growth points below the soil so it's untroubled by fire ripping across the prairie. Even Scribner's panicum, a short, hairy, adorable little cool season grass tucked between the far more majestic warm season grasses, fills a niche and meets a need when those big boys are just warming up. Plant communities and people prosper when all have a role and bring their unique charms and best gifts to the table.

Diversity is a strength. A robust ecosystem has many different organisms filling different

roles. A company town may fold up in hard times, while more economically diversified communities will weather the storm. We need both diverse plant communities and diverse minds and gifts in our stewards to navigate the storms of life and nature.

Many ranches are loved and cared for by families for generations, each of which will face its own challenges. Still, a business doesn't survive for five generations without its stewards knowing what they are doing, enjoying it and being able to do it in an environmentally and economically sustainable way. "If you take care of your grass, it'll take care of you" is a deceptively simple phrase, but much like "raising a child," both contain a mountain of complexities and choices.

Stewardship is a journey. Not only do the needs of the land change as time goes by, but our priorities as managers change as well. Maybe after completing extensive brush clean-up, it's time to move into maintenance mode by tweaking burning and grazing plans. Surviving bad markets, navigating trends and changes in the cattle markets, handling changes in family life, and the changing strengths and abilities in our own bodies — all are part of a lifetime of stewardship. Even mistakes are a part of doing. I try to keep the scientific method in mind when approaching life and management. A willingness to test ideas and gather information for future decision-making is helpful for progress and the soul.



Walking Man in the Tallgrass Prairie
Jack Baumgartner

Stewardship is love in action. As we live out our days on the last four percent of the tallgrass prairie in North America, it would be easy to put it on a pedestal, sit in admiration of it and feel the sacred duty to protect it. It's much like watching children sleep. Living ecosystems and living organisms are dynamic and simply

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won't abide inaction. To admire but never act would soon leave us sorrowfully gazing at a dense grove of cedar trees — because prairie needs fire. To admire but never act would leave a tallgrass prairie less diverse — because grazing pressure is needed to maintain biodiversity, its greatest strength.

Exponential good can come from small acts of stewardship, such as fighting invasive woody species. Each little cedar that is burned up or nipped off saves the trouble of dealing with a bigger version of it later and eliminates all the seeds it would produce that would be a scourge on the land, burdening our children and grandchildren and generations of wildlife.

Franklin D. Roosevelt once said, "A nation that destroys its soil destroys itself." From the salinization in Egypt

to our own painful Dust Bowl, we have learned that soil is critical for civilization and that its conservation is patriotic. Choosing to build soil and organic matter is an honorable and essential act for future generations. Our prairie grasses replace about one-third of their roots each year, storing that carbon in the soil, which increases fertility and serves as a carbon sink from the atmosphere. While carbon sequestration in some ecosystems is vulnerable to fire, ours is not. When we cut down a cedar or other invasive tree, we protect the bare ground beneath it that is so susceptible to erosion.

We can pray for rain, stare longingly toward the heavens and watch the weather report in grim silence, but we can't control how much rain we get. But we CAN darn sure make the best of every drop that falls, and that is empowering. One way is to eliminate cedar trees. Kansas State University studies have shown cedar trees capture more than 50% of water that falls on them in their branches, where it evaporates, never reaching the soil. They create even more drought-like conditions by using gallons of water for themselves that they soak up from the soil. Research from Oklahoma State University shows that a 12-inch diameter trunk cedar tree can use up to 42 gallons a day. Even a little two-inch trunk tree can use up to seven gallons a day. It's hard not to see the large-

scale impact of these invaders as evil, especially during dry times when every drop is precious.

Brush removal on our land saves soil and protects both water quality and quantity downstream. It's a way of loving our neighbors. Water falling on bare ground under trees will run off, gathering speed and picking up soil particles. However, water falling on healthy prairie soaks in and adds to groundwater or trickles slowly into streams, free from sediment and pollutants. The water that falls on our land joins greater and greater watersheds: the Middle Creek watershed that joins the Cottonwood River on its way to the mighty Mississippi serves as a water source for towns and cities along the way, transports goods and provides recreation.

To me, brush management truly is like battling evil. We do our best, and we

prepare the next generation. I'll never forget the day my little girl killed her first cedar. I told her she was too little to run the loppers, so she had to prove me wrong. There comes a point in parenting when, despite our best efforts, we realize we're passing on a deeply flawed world to our children. And yet this is followed by the realization that these tiny little people who curl into our arms each night, our seventh generation here on the ranch, are actually lionhearts — a force for good possessing a purity of spirit and strength of character that leaves us feeling that they are anything but unmatched to the challenges ahead of them. Maybe they were born for this.

We put our trust in the prairie. As we prepare for the future, we look to the past, managing toward the remaining historic "climax" community: steady, balanced and diverse. It is the most trustworthy choice we can make.

Katie (Wilson) Hancock grew up on Flint Hills ranches. Katie earned her degree in range management from Kansas State University. She is honored to have worked with ranchers as a rangeland conservationist. She and her husband Travis have returned to the family ranch where they are raising Lily and Charlie, seventh-generation Kansans, while helping her parents, John and Annie Wilson.