

## Restoring America's Northern Great Plains

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Temperate grasslands are the least protected biome on Earth. North America grasslands, or the Great Plains, stretch across 1,300,000 km<sup>2</sup>, from Canada to Mexico. Less than 50% of the Great Plains remain unplowed, however, these lands are typically heavily grazed by livestock. In recent years, a growing interest to preserve this endangered ecosystem inspired an ambitious initiative to create the largest grassland nature reserve in North America, the size of 13,000 km<sup>2</sup> - An area large enough to protect its native species and restore the ecosystem. In 2018, Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute launched its Great Plains Science Program. This fast-growing research and outreach program addresses conservation challenges on public and private lands around the American Prairie Reserve in Central Montana. The program's mission is to study ecosystem level changes in relation to landscape level restoration efforts in Northern Great Plains systems. Part of these efforts include reintroduction of native species (Plains bison, black-footed ferrets, swift fox), restoring connectivity and mitigate permeability for large mammals (ungulate migrations, large carnivore recolonizations), and restore native ecological processes and habitat by restoration of keystone species (black-tailed prairie dogs). In my talk, I will use examples from various research projects that demonstrate the challenges in developing a science program in rural America and the successes.



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