

Our mission...
to preserve Kansas' ranching heritage and
open spaces for future generations through the
conservation of working landscapes.

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(Above) The rolling topography of the Smoky Hills, taken in western Saline county, Kansas. Photo taken by Hillary Loring.

Presentation by Jane Koger at RTK BBQ in Emdale, KS

Editor's note... The following is an excerpt of a presentation by Jane Koger that was given at the June 13, 2009 "Friends of the Ranchland Trust" barbeque prior to the 4th Annual Symphony in the Flint Hills. Koger owns and operates the Homestead Ranch near Matfield Green, Kansas. The RTK event was hosted by the Mushrush Red Angus Ranch near Emdale, Kansas.

Fifteen years ago, we had a concert on the prairie east of Matfield Green, much like the one you will be attending later today. I had ranchers come up to me after the concert to say that they had a new appreciation for the prairie after experiencing it in a different context.

How could anyone NOT appreciate the prairie? From a purely physical viewpoint, I feel that whether you live in Bazaar or Boston, the prairie is important. Of course, if you live in Bazaar it's likely you make your living from the grass by grazing cattle that will become someone's steak or a Big Mac. If you live in Boston, you reap the benefit of the Flint Hills' ability to remove tons of carbon from the atmosphere. Prairie plants are great at removing the excess carbon dioxide created by burning fossil fuels and transforming it from life threatening to life sustaining.

Prairie is one of the most rare and

complex ecosystems in the world, surpassed only by the rain forests of Brazil. The limestone and flint under our feet are 250 million years old, formed by an ancient Sea. The native grasses have been growing here for 10,000 to 12,000 years, ever since the last retreat of the glaciers.

The tallgrass prairie is home to a rich diversity of plant and animal species -- a diversity that is in direct proportion to the quantity of prairie that has been undisturbed by the plow or any other kind of development: more than 400 different types of plants, 40-60 of which are native grasses; more than 240 species of birds; 45 known species of mammals, 43 of reptiles, and 12 of amphibians; and butterflies, bees, and other flying and crawling creatures too numerous to count.

But for many of us, that information is far removed from our interactions with

the prairie for we are the farmers and ranchers who make our living here. We get totally focused on beef, corn, soybeans or a hay crop. We forget to listen for prairie chickens on a booming ground in early March when we're more concerned about locating that heifer that's gone off to calve, or we cuss the flint and limestone when we break a section on the swather.

For me, one of the results of having a guest program for fifteen years was learning from visitors just how lucky I was to live in the middle of so much

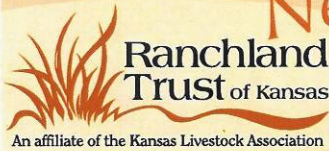


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Presentation by Jane Koger

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natural beauty with so much room to breathe. Of course, I knew I lived in a wonderful place, but it's easy to lose sight of that when you're working in it.

I used to be pretty single-minded about cattle, but my focus has expanded. I can still tell you that we have 125 cows in our cow herd and lease pastures for 100 head of cows in the summer, 500 head of double stock steers, and 200 head of full season steers, but I can also tell you that we tallied 560 birds in our spring survey and have at least 57 different species of butterflies on the ranch.

As I've begun looking at the prairie from the point of view of living things other than cattle, it's been amazing to me just how much life is out in those pastures besides quarter pounders on the hoof!

I've come to realize that my ranch isn't just a collection of pastures. After all, the National Park Service thinks that the Flint Hills are important enough to have a presence here with the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, so I've decided that my ranch is just as important as their Preserve--the flora and fauna are nearly identical, and it is my job to be the steward of this ecosystem.

In light of this, I chose to put 3300 acres in the Farm and Ranchland Protection Program in 2005 and 575 acres in the Grasslands Reserve Program in 2006. Basically, from my travels to Wyoming and my visits to the Tetons and Yellowstone, I knew that conservation easements for ranches were probably the only reason those folks could still own their ranches. Development would swallow them up otherwise.

Of course, since my Grandmother Beedle had been such an ardent opponent to the "prairie park" proposal, I struggled with the idea. I'm sure I heard my Grandfather's voice asking me what I

was doing working with the government and an environmental group!

But the pressure today on the Flint Hills is completely different than it was 30 years ago when I began ranching. We, who make our living from the prairie, must become her most fervent protectors. Green spaces, wide open prairie vistas, places to hunt and fish and enjoy concerts, are important for all people, not just those who work the land.

We will need support and help from groups such as the Ranchland Trust of Kansas, Kansas Land Trust, and The Nature Conservancy. We also need funding and support from our state government and federal programs such as FRPP and GRP.

Basically a conservation easement is a legal deed with a stated purpose. In the case of my land that purpose is to assure that the Protected Property will be retained forever substantially unchanged from its present natural, scenic, agricultural and open space condition.

Today as you enjoy the Symphony in the Flint Hills, I hope you will take a few extra minutes to look out over that beautiful Tallgrass prairie and appreciate the uniqueness of the ecosystem. If you own tallgrass prairie, please take good care of it.

If you don't own any, I hope you will find a way to help keep it as it is now. Donate to a land trust in Kansas, volunteer at an open space near you, or teach your children and grandchildren about the unique heritage of the tallgrass prairie.

The hills are alive with the sound of music...not just an orchestra once a year, but a chorus of meadowlarks and dickcissels, peepers and bullfrogs, the timpani of a thunderstorm and a Kansas breeze through the cottonwood leaves, and other wild music...enjoy it! 