Creation of Texas Great Plains State Park

Texas Panhandle Plains

Great Plains Restoration Council
www.GPRC.org



Llano Estacado/ Texas Panhandle Plains

Statement

Great Plains Restoration Council (GPRC) has convened an A-team of subject matter experts from State agencies, conservation non-profits, foundations and banking to: *"Establish a historic, landscape-scale shortgrass prairie preserve (up to 100,000 acres or more) in the Texas Panhandle for wild Texas bison, pronghorn, black-tailed prairie dogs, elk, grassland nesting birds, swift foxes and more that also offers multicultural human engagement, including ancestral connections for Indigenous Kiowa and Comanche people, through a combination of public and private land partnerships."* Additionally, this will be a new kind of wild Park for America, explicitly interweaving recreation and wellness, mental health, and personal recovery into conservation while addressing the alarming decline in native biological diversity and the rapidly vanishing sense of place that is Texas and the West.





Working Group

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, including:
Caprock Canyons State Park
Great Plains Restoration Council
The Conservation Fund – Texas
The Kiowa Tribe
Southern Plains Land Trust
Former officers from the charitable foundation and banking worlds

Background

The Southern Great Plains, particularly the Panhandle of Texas, once teemed with wildlife comparable to that of the African Serengeti in such abundance that John James Audubon was moved to write, “it is impossible to describe or even conceive the vast multitudes of these animals.” (Flores 2016.) Massive herds of bison spilled across the open grasslands alongside a profusion of pronghorn and elk. Abundant lesser prairie-chickens conducted their ancient mating rituals, their booming sounds echoing for miles. Songbirds and raptors graced the skies and nested in the shortgrass and mixed grass prairies, and sprawling prairie dog colonies sustained a unique community of life. Industrious beaver created rich stream habitats with cottonwood galleries towering overhead. Indigenous cultures lived alongside and as part of this “ocean of grass” landscape for thousands of years before the arrival of Europeans. This arrival precipitated the Indian Wars and the Great Slaughter of bison, whose nadir was reached in the 1870s. Surviving Indigenous people, particularly Kiowa and Comanche, were moved out of Texas as the Indian Wars drew to a close.

Right before their final extirpation, a few of the genetically distinct Southern Plains bison were saved by rancher Charles Goodnight at the behest of his wife Mary Ann (Molly) (Repanshek 2019). Their direct descendants reside today down in the canyons of Caprock Canyons State Park near Quitaque, TX, but at present they do not have access to their extensive ancestral grasslands up on top the Llano Estacado Caprock. Other prairie wildlife has also suffered declines.

But history is not over.



Genetically distinct Texas bison / direct descendant of the Goodnight Herd that saved the Southern Bison from extinction

Action

The Texas Great Plains State Park is a project for native wildlife and people of all colors, cultures and communities, and has commenced to accomplish the following:

a.) Increase the area available to the Texas State Bison Herd at Caprock Canyons State Park to include prairie up on the Caprock/Llano Estacado contiguous with the park, allowing the bison opportunity to more closely follow millennia-old cycles of migration in their seasonal pursuit of grass and shelter. This goal could be accomplished through acquisition or management agreements with willing private landowners.

b.) Acquire and permanently preserve a stand-alone preserve, beginning at a minimum of 5,000 acres, with a goal of reaching truly landscape-scale proportions of 100,000 acres or more, with sufficient habitat to support a second herd of Texas State bison that meaningfully addresses recovery goals for the bison and the Panhandle Plains ecosystem, of which the bison is just one iconic species. In the vast expanses of the Texas plains, an area of sufficient scale to accommodate a truly immersive visitor experience is necessary to communicate a vanishing sense of place.

This project helps meet several other desperately needed ecosystem services. America’s healthy, deep-rooted, native prairies absorb carbon from the atmosphere and store it in the soil. The decline in a number of species of greatest conservation need will be addressed. America’s grassland birds are disappearing faster than any other avian taxa due to habitat conversion and loss. Migratory birds, raptors, small mammals, reptiles and amphibians, and species that require large expanses of habitat, such as pronghorn antelope and predators, are in decline.

The Texas Panhandle frontier is pervasive with intense multicultural human history and story. The working group will ensure that multicultural history, storytelling, and engagement (Native American, Anglo, Black, Hispanic, and more), is baked into the conservation program. The Texas Great Plains State Park will preserve and interpret real-life Indigenous knowledge (including botany) and provide a restored native grassland for Southern Plains Indigenous people to reconnect with and foster ancestral cultural/religious practices of the Texas Panhandle Plains shortgrass prairie ecosystem.

Additionally, ecosystem restoration opportunities can offer pathways to hands-on community engagement, deeper diversity and inclusion, paid outdoor green job-training, and nature-based work therapy through GPRC’s Restoration Not Incarceration™ program and the Ecological Health initiative, where people take care of their own health through taking care of native ecosystems. (Norton, 2012.)



Llano Estacado shortgrass prairie in springtime on the Texas Panhandle, wide open but missing its buffalo, prairie dogs, elk, antelope, burrowing owls and many other native wildlife.



George Catlin, *Buffalo Hunt under the Wolf-skin Mask,* 1832-1833, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr., 1985.66.414

This new ecoregion preserve, with its associated ecological and cultural restoration on the Texas Panhandle Plains, can connect history to the future via new participation and new stories, so its rich past isn't relegated to some bygone era in the history books. Instead, it will showcase a living, timeless heritage. As a destination for nature and history lovers, hikers and other recreationists, travelers, sightseers, bird watchers, universities, people interested in the growing field of eco-psychotherapy, and more, the Texas Great Plains State Park is expected to become a regional economic engine as well. Many studies have quantified the local economic benefits of conservation and recreation areas.



Black-tailed prairie dogs

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Nearly two centuries ago, in 1832, famed artist George Catlin became unnerved and concerned about the impending loss of animal, plant and human life on the Great Plains, and expressed the first idea of an American National Park, a "nation's Park".

While today, in 2022, there still is no Great Plains National Park under the United States National Park Service, through this project at the State level, Catlin's idea is in the early stages of coming to life on the Texas Panhandle Plains.



Caprock Canyons State Park, which needs to be expanded up onto the High Plains shortgrass prairie.

> "It is here, and here chiefly, that the buffaloes dwell; and with, and hovering about them, live and flourish the tribes of Indians, whom God made for the enjoyment of that fair land and its luxuries…. what a splendid contemplation too, when one (who has traveled these realms, and can duly appreciate them) imagines them as they might in future be seen (by some great protecting policy of government) preserved in their pristine beauty and wildness… amid the fleeting herds of elks and buffaloes." — George Catlin, 1832

- https://www.thoughtco.com/proposed-creation-of-national-parks-1773620
- https://www.nps.gov/fous/learn/historyculture/a-nations-parks.htm
- Full citation: Flores, D. 2016. American Serengeti: the Last Big Animals of the Great Plains. University Press of Kansas.
- Full citation: Repanshek, K. 2019. Re-Bisoning the West: Restoring an American Icon to the Landscape. Torrey House Press.
- Full citation: Gray, Mel; Norton, Dr. Christine 2012. Environmental Social Work. Routledge Press.
- Lubbock Lake Landmark/Yellowhouse Draw 12,000 year record of Indigenous human life on the Southern Plains/Texas Panhandle https://www.depts.ttu.edu/museumttu/lll/about.html