

Encouraging dialogue between cattlemen, conservationists

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A Sandhills rancher from Nebraska and a Masai tribesman from Africa don't share the same language or culture.

But they both know cattle and they both know land.

Mike Kelly, a third-generation rancher northwest of North Platte, traveled to Kenya last year where he met the Masai, who live semi-nomadic lives raising cattle on the east African savannah.

"It was easy to see they had more wildlife amongst the cattle than they did on the preserves set aside by the government," Kelly said.

Research in the United States shows that well-managed grazing programs can produce greater wildlife benefits than land that isn't managed in such a way. Yet many environmentalists hold fast to the notion that a healthy grassland is an ungrazed grassland.

In an attempt to foster dialogue between cattle ranchers and environmentalists, the Lincoln-based Grassland Foundation is sponsoring a new lecture series on grassland conservation and sustainable communities. The first lecture in the series will be April 6 in Lincoln and it is free and open to the public.

That day Kelly will introduce the speaker and will also participate in a roundtable discussion between ranchers and environmentalists. He wants to demonstrate his belief that ranchers should keep an open mind on environmental issues. He hopes environmentalists will do the same about ranchers. Both groups might discover their interests aren't as far apart as assumed.

"I think most ranchers in the Sandhills grew up with a culture of if you take care of the land, it will take care of you," Kelly said. "I think most ranchers are appreciative of wildlife and they like to have wildlife on their ranches."

The purpose of the lecture series is to promote broader understanding of biodiversity science with the goal of promoting healthy grasslands for wildlife and sustainable economies for rural residents, said Tyler Sutton, president of the foundation.

On April 6, Courtney White, director of the Quivira Coalition, will give the lecture. The Quivira Coalition, based in New Mexico, is a nonprofit organization dedicated to building bridges between ranchers, conservationists, public land managers and scientists.

White's lecture is titled "The Working Wilderness: A Call for a Land Health Movement" and is based on an his essay included in Wendell Berry's new collection entitled "The Way of Ignorance."

Based upon his own observations of western landscapes where cattle and biodiversity are compatible, White argues "pristineness can no longer be the bottom line of the conservation movement." He suggests the concept of "land health" is a better standard, which uses scientifically based indicators to assess the land's condition.

The goal should be to move all land toward greater wildlife biodiversity and human productivity, rather than focusing conservation efforts entirely on a preservation/protectionist model.

"I am convinced that land health and restoration, not wilderness and protection, will become the

principle paradigms of a new conservation movement in the not-so-distant future,” White wrote in his essay.

The lecture series is co-sponsored by the Center for Great Plains Studies, the Center of Grassland Studies and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln School of Natural Resources.

The inaugural lecture on “Grassland Conservation and Sustainable Communities” will be at 3:30 p.m. April 6 at the Great Plains Art Museum, 1155 Q St. For more information, go to www.grasslandfoundation.org or call 477-2044.

To learn more about the Quivira Coalition, go to www.quiviracoalition.org.

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