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How about a little love for prairies?

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In the effort to combat global warming, trees get an inordinate amount of attention. On the eve of Earth Day, it's time grasslands got more respect.

That point was underscored by a study reported recently in The Economist. Researchers at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California, the magazine said, "found, rather counter-intuitively, that removing all the world's trees might actually cool the planet down. Conversely, adding trees everywhere might warm it up."

Trees fight global warming by taking carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas, from the atmosphere and replacing it with oxygen.

That's why consumers are urged to plant a tree to reduce their "carbon footprint." In the exchange during photosynthesis, carbon is sequestered in the tree.

Grasslands do the same thing.

A few years ago, a study published in the scientific journal Nature explained that environmentalists too often give too much credit to trees because they ignore what's going on underground.

The root system of the natural prairie extends many feet deep underground — in some cases, as deep as 25 feet. "Grasses are deceptively productive," one researcher said. "You don't always see where all the carbon goes, so there is a misconception that wood species store more carbon. That's not always the case."

But determining how effective various plants are in fighting global warming is not as simple as measuring how much carbon they sequester. Other factors also are at work.

The more recent study noted that forests generally are dark in color. Even in winter, pine trees quickly shed snow. Being dark, they absorb more of the sun's energy, which warms them and the atmosphere.

The computer model used by the California researcher was complex, also taking into account factors like transpiration, or the release by plants of water into the atmosphere. Forests are more effective at this than other ecosystems, the Economist said.

The environmental benefits of grasslands should be recognized by the carbon-offset exchange programs that have sprung up to offer consumers a way to balance their production of carbon dioxide when they drive, heat their homes and so on.

In such programs, consumers purchase credits and the money is then used to fund projects that reduce carbon in the atmosphere.

Predictably, one popular use for carbon-offset funding is reforestation and other tree-planting endeavors.

Projects to restore the natural prairie also should be a major beneficiary. Environmentalists already are hugging trees; prairies need love, too.