



THE DOCENT NEWS

Of The Tallgrass Prairie Preserve Docent Program



NOVEMBER 2006

For the Volunteers and Supporters of the Oklahoma Chapter of The Nature Conservancy

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DOCENT RECOGNITION LUNCHEON

—Andrew Donovan-Shead

About thirty docents attended the Docent Recognition Luncheon in the Research Station on the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve. Harvey Payne commented on the dedication required to forego the critical football games in progress on Saturday, 28 October 2006, but perhaps we were not much interested in football.

It was an absolutely gorgeous day. Some of us arrived early in time for a walk on the trails before lunch. Colors of the fall foliage were vivid despite an extended drought that has dried Sand Creek to a series of large puddles. Though the weather was perfect for walking docents, perfection for Harvey would be six inches of rain, as we will discover further into this article.

After lunch, Dennis Bires invited the ladies from Pawhuska who provided the food to take a bow, and thanked Deana Brewster for making the arrangements. Dennis recognized Anita Springer who is preparing the Docent Reorientation for 3 March 2007; Anita said that we can expect an excellent presentation from our guest speaker Dr. James P. Ronda. Dennis recognized Van Vives for his efforts to encourage us to fill the vacancies in the docent schedule; Van said that there are a lot of openings in November that need to be filled; he said that it would be

best if there were two or three docents on duty each day during the roundup. Dennis recognized Andrew Donovan-Shead for his work on behalf of the this newsletter; Andrew said that he tries to publish every month and that, now the season is drawing to a close, he is soliciting articles from the scientists and



philosophers associated with the preserve; Andrew recognized Van Vives for his reliable contributions of articles and pictures about the preserve; Andrew said that were it not for Van, the newsletter would be very short of material.

While Dennis was conducting the meeting, Dave Dolcater passed around a tub of the 2006 North Dakota quarters that picture a pair of bison and invited us to take one. Dave also displayed an interesting book of bird songs that consists in 250 color illustrations and accounts of notable American birds and an electronic player



attached to the side of the book that will replay recordings from the Macaulay Library at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, indexed to the page numbers of the book; it seems like a good way to facilitate learning the characteristic songs of birds; the book is available from Barnes & Noble as well as Amazon.

Dennis recognized the various levels of



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shifts worked by our docents. Van Vives has now worked more than two hundred shifts at the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve, quite an achievement.

Dennis Bires introduced Harvey Payne. Harvey spoke highly of Dr. Ronda and strongly recommended that we make a point of attending the docent reorientation to listen to his remarks. Harvey recognized Dennis for his leadership of the docent program. Harvey said that the dedicated volunteer docents make a material difference to how The Nature Conservancy and the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve is perceived by the public; he said that the docents are vital because they are the ones who have direct interaction with visitors to the preserve. Harvy cited an



article in the October issue of the Tulsa Garden Center newsletter that had been brought to his attention by Mrs Ralph Tolson of Pawhuska; title of the article was VOLUNTEER NEWS FROM LINDA. Linda reported that she visited the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve for the first time in September, but didn't arrive at the Visitor's Center until about 4:30 pm when she found the parking lot empty and the door locked. She noted that the Headquarters closed at 4:00 pm. As she peeked in the window, she heard a friendly voice behind her say: "Hello, if you would like to see the gift shop, I can unlock the door for you." Linda reported that the volunteer docent had worked at the gift shop all day and was on her way home when she passed Linda going in the other direction, turned around and returned to the shop. Apparently, this person told Linda that: "If someone cares

enough to drive all the way out here, I want to be sure they can see the place." In talking with this very special Tallgrass Prairie



Preserve docent, Linda discovered that this person lives 100 miles away and that she had worked two days in a row to fill in for another volunteer who was ill. As a result of her pleasant experience with our docent, she gained a keen understanding of the importance of the volunteers who work at The Tulsa Garden Center. In his turn, Harvey Payne is keenly aware of the importance of all the docents who volunteer their services at the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve. So, to the docent who turned around, you know who are if you are reading this and know too that your dedication has been influential far beyond that afternoon.

Harvey finished his remarks by saying that he thought the bison roundup would proceed as scheduled. He said that the preserve is suffering a serious drought that could have prevented the roundup from happening because each bison drinks 20 to 30 gallons of water each day, which means



that the herd of 2,500 needs between 50,000 an 75,000 gallons of water daily. Ever resourceful, the cowboys have been using the



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firetrucks to convey water from Sand Creek to the ponds around the corrals; they have constructed a series of lift pumps connected by two-inch pipe between the ponds. So, the roundup will proceed. However, Harvey is worried about next year if the drought persists, which is why perfect weather for Harvey is weather that brings six inches of rain.

After Harvey's remarks, Dennis introduced Chuck and Maxine Tichenor of the Tulsa Historical Society who were invited to entertain us with a talk about the cowboys and customs of the old West. Maxine thanked us for being volunteers, saying that it is the volunteers of the world who make things



possible for other people.

Normally, Chuck and Maxine's presentation is aimed at children. Well, we are all children at heart, more or less, and so the presentation was an interactive instructional entertainment. Maxine explained the accoutrements of Chuck's cowboy attire, such as his hat that can be used to dip water for his horse as well as to shade his head. She herself was dressed as a

school-marm in plain clothing mandated by the terms of her contract, of which Chuck narrated a representative sample. As a school teacher, Maxine would not only teach children but the cowboys of the time who were often illiterate. Illiterate they may have been, but they did know their alphabet that helped them to design and recognize the brands on cattle, an important skill necessary to the indentification of ownership. Chuck passed around the Tulsa Historical Society brand, a hefty chunk of metal that I noted would remain scorching hot for a long time away from the fire. We had an opportunity to design our own brands and affix them to the hindquarters of a steer drawn on paper. We examined some examples of barbed wire used to fence the open range. And finally, we got a chance to practice roping a static steer. We were reluctant to accept Chuck's lasso and lesson; he said that, usually, children are eager to try roping. All we needed to get us going was for a shameless exhibitionist to lead the way; even so, we clearly needed a lot more practice as we certainly weren't channeling Will Rogers.

Dennis Bires closed the luncheon at about 2:30 pm, pointing out that the weather outside was ideal for a walk before returning home. We agreed that the Docent Recognition Luncheon was a success.

ON NATURE CONSERVATION

—Achilles Schnetzer

Through the good offices of Van Vives, readers of The Docent News will remember Achilles Schnetzer who visited the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve on his way home to Switzerland from presenting a scholarly paper on Human Echolocation at the University of Phoenix. On discovering that Achilles is a PhD candidate in philosophy at the University of Freiburg in Switzerland, in addition to his interest in nature, I solicited him through Van to provide some essays on Humanity's relationship with Nature.

Below is the first in what I hope is a series of essays from Achilles. These essays are just that, an effort by Achilles to exert his faculties in elucidation of our relationship with Nature. Purpose of an essay is to provoke, to make us think, perhaps cause us to see things from a different point of view. So let us see where Achilles takes us.—Editor.

Protecting locally, destroying globally. What is nature conservation all about?

Having heard news just a couple of weeks ago that in forty years there will be no more fish, no more life whatsoever in the oceans, I started wondering in a rather fatalistic



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manner why we ought to even bother about conserving nature on a local scale — patches of prairie here, patches of forest there — when at the same time we are destroying nature on a global scale. In face of this, isn't the project of local nature conservation just obsolete? If we were really in the business of saving nature from destruction by the human hand, what we really ought to do in order to be successful would be to make a dramatic shift in our attitude towards nature. Given that with all the nuclear weapons left, we can still blow-up our planet more than sixty times, it has occurred to me, from childhood, that worries about the welfare of nature seems hardly to be on top of mankind's priority-list.

I also find it interesting to note that — at least in Switzerland — even among environmentalists, nature as such is not really the focus of protection and conservation. Often, when new environmentalist projects are brought forward, it is not, strictly speaking, (natural) ecoregions that are up for protection but rather certain forms of landscapes. Landscapes, however, as I understand these terms, belong to a different category than ecoregions: The former fall under an anthropological, the latter under a biological category. Our tendency to protect a given landscape as opposed to a given ecoregion reflects a human perspective: We want to protect it because it strikes our human eye as particularly beautiful, diverse, interesting, extraordinary and so forth. By contrast, ecoregions as a strictly biological category need not and often do not fall under this type of description. There are certainly some ecoregions that do not strike our human eye as particularly beautiful, interesting, or extraordinary. Some of them may even be rather monotonous and not very diverse at all. Yet, they still qualify as ecoregions from a purely biological perspective. Indeed, one might add that — as Darwin taught us — nature is all about the survival of the fittest, and there surely isn't anything romantic or beautiful about this.

To sum up: Protecting landscapes means protecting something that is aesthetically attractive. Protecting ecoregions means protecting something that is merely biologically attractive.

One might then argue that protecting nature means protecting ecoregions since nature as such is in the first place a biological category, and indeed the paradigmatic example for this category. So, labeling the protection of landscapes as nature conservation is actually a misnomer.

At this point, one might wonder whether excluding landscapes and only including ecoregions in programmes of nature conservation isn't a bit too demanding. After all, maybe what most of us ever meant by the protection of nature is just that we would like to see a few trees when stepping out of our houses. So, ecoregions are actually far beyond our everyday way of perceiving nature, and therefore far beyond what we think of when asked about what in nature ought to be protected.

How distorted our perception of nature has become, or rather what we have come to think nature is supposed to be, can be demonstrated when we consider the belief of many people that nature should be clean. So, there must be no pollution, no litter, etcetera. This in itself is certainly right. But in my experience, the cleanness belief doesn't stop there. It further stretches to a belief in tidyness. No fallen trees in the forest; no rotting leaves on the ground. Why? Because untidyness would conflict with our aesthetical judgements: Nature is beautiful, isn't it? And being beautiful has to do with being tidy and surely not with being dirty. Fallen trees and rotten leaves however are certainly not beautiful in this sense. So, let's clean up nature and keep it tidy, just like we keep our homes tidy and neat. But seriously: isn't this attitude towards nature rather chauvinistic?

Let me give you another example. We only started treating domestic animals — I have especially horses and oxen in mind — from an ethical perspective, e.g. granting them certain rights, when we had no use for them any longer because their work could be replaced by machines. But of course, this ethical stance on our part came a bit late for the animals. And if they could talk, they would probably tell us what hypocrits we are.

Maybe, a similar sort of reasoning applies to our undertakings of conserving nature. It seems to me that quite a few people figure



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that since technological progress is occurring at such a fast pace, we needn't worry too much about the destruction of nature. We might wreck it, but we will also be able to fix it thanks to our technological advances. So, of course, the protection of nature is a good thing in the sense of being morally good. But since we don't really depend on nature any longer, we don't really need to conserve nature as a biological category. Rather, it suffices to take the more anthropocentric route and conserve those portions of nature which strike us human beings as particularly beautiful, extraordinary and the like.

Let me recap. I want to argue that the way we perceive nature has direct consequences for what we take the conservation of nature to be about. Since our perception of nature is argueably somewhat distorted, our project of nature conservation must consequently be wrong-headed.

But didn't I jump to this conclusion a bit too quickly? After all, who is to tell us how we should perceive nature? And if there are no objective ways of discriminating between the right and the wrong perception of nature, on what basis are we to judge whether or not our project of nature conservation is wrong-headed?

This reasoning is not wrong, and I just might have been convicted of having jumped to conclusions too quickly. However, let me offer this: Given that large parts of nature are on the brink of being destroyed for good by the rather careless human hand, it does seem that we have the obligation to at least reflect upon the way we perceive nature. And there is — in my opinion — ample reason to think that our perception of nature is distorted. Different perceptions of nature or, for that matter, different attitudes towards nature will then lead to different opinions about what the conservation of nature is supposed to be. If, for example, we take nature to be intrinsically valueable, then when we harm nature, we do something morally wrong, and this holds true even if we are able to fix the harm through technology. So, attaching an intrinsic value to nature leads to very harsh constraints on nature conservation. But then again, maybe people who are intrinsicalists about nature have a distorted conception similar to Jean-Jacques

Rousseau's, namely that nature is always good and culture is always bad.

From a philosophical standpoint, the question that lies at the bottom of all this is the following: On what basis can the mere idea of nature conservation be justified. Is there any rational justification for this at all? And if there is — and I am sure that there really is—, what sort of implicit and explicit assumptions are involved in this justification? In sorting out these questions in a small series of articles for this newsletter, maybe we will learn what nature conservation is all about, and just maybe this will help us take the great project of nature conservation a step further.

IS THE DUST BOWL RETURNING?

—Van Vives

With the current drought situation in Oklahoma, I have been interested in the Dust Bowl era and have been reading about it. I recently came upon an article with the above title which contains data from the United States Dairy Association (USDA). The unfortunate thing is that they do not answer the question. The data is current, Oct. 26, 2006. A map, called the U.S. Drought Monitor, shows that almost all of Oklahoma is still under drought conditions. Most of the state is considered to be in the Severe Intensity, with a section in north-central



Oklahoma being in the Extreme Intensity region. A similar area in the south-central part of the state is also Extreme and it extends into Texas.

The present drought started in Oklahoma in June of 2001. In eastern Montana the drought started four years ago and has had a drastic effect on wheat farmers, with over a thousand farmers giving up on farming. Another result of the drought is that the affected states have had over four times the number of wildfires.



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The Dust Bowl of the 1930s was a major disaster. It is usually considered to have started in 1931 and ended in 1939, but some claim the ending was in 1941. The causes, besides lack of rain, started in the 1920s. The farmers at that time seemed to be worried about insect outbreaks rather than the drought. The Indians pleaded with the farmers to leave the grass where it was.

After World War I the farmers saw a great opportunity to make enormous profits during



the post-war era. Consequently, they plowed every acre they could, even those areas that would have been considered poor farming soil. Wheat farmers pushed the bison herds, which normally had fertilized the soil, off their land. Large portions of land were denuded of grass and trees for plowing. All of this may have been successful with sufficient rain and proper farming techniques. The rush to the markets was a compelling force.

I came to Oklahoma in 1952 and remember the dust storms we had almost every weekend. One could look to the west and see the orange dust cloud approaching over the Osage Hills. Sometimes with a little moisture, it rained tiny mudballs. The storms were not nearly as severe as in the 1930s, but it was interesting that they still occurred at that late date. I have not seen a dust storm since the late 1950s.

But the rain slacked and slowly stopped. The farmers were deep in debt and crops failed one after the other. Over 500,000 Americans were left homeless. Many went west to find work, while a few stuck it out on their homesteads. As the rain slacked and the winds came, so did the storms. April 14, 1935 was known as "Black Sunday," with one of the worst "Black Blizzards." Visibility was down to five feet. It was known as a "roller," because the black cloud seemed to roll

across the plains. On that day Woody Guthrie saw the black cloud coming and he began to write the song, SO LONG, IT'S BEEN GOOD TO KNOW YOU. His inspiration was the fact that he thought his life had come to an end.

Five inches of topsoil were blown to the eastern states and much landed in the Atlantic Ocean. New York had red snow. Cars and tractors were almost completely buried and banks of dirt collected against houses, much as snow banks do today.

One wonders how anyone could survive those days, but some did. I am reading a firsthand account of what a woman living in the Oklahoma Panhandle had to do to survive. Her name was Caroline Henderson. She was a gifted writer and obtained a Master's degree in literature at the age of fifty-eight. She made a small amount of money by writing articles, LETTERS FROM THE DUST BOWL, for the Atlantic Monthly. In the hardest of times survival came from chickens and eggs that she sold. Her husband planted wheat, corn and other grain crops, but often they only reaped enough to feed the chickens and pigs. Wheat sold for 31 cents a bushel, eggs were 7 cents a dozen, hens at 8 cents a pound, calves at 3 cents a pound, steers at 2 cents a pound, and milo, maize and Kafir corn at 30 cents per hundred pounds.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt, during



his first 100 days, set up governmental programs to try to restore the nation. He formed the Soil Conservation Service, now the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Recovery was to take time, with the Great Depression following upon the heels of the Dust Bowl. Even when the rains came there was a reluctance to take another chance at



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farming.

Hopefully we will not have to hear that phrase, "If it rains..."

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THE DUST BOWL

<http://www.usd.edu/anth/epa/dust.html>

IS THE DUST BOWL RETURNING? Oklahoma Dept. Of Libraries

<http://www.odl.state.ok.us/usinfo/maps/dustbowl/index.htm>

DUST BOWL, Wikipedia

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dust_Bowl

THE CREATION

—Andrew Donovan-Shead

On 30 September 2006, New Scientist magazine published an interview with E. O. Wilson under the title CAN E. O. WILSON REALLY SAVE THE WORLD? and continued with this introduction: "Often cited as Darwin's true heir, E. O. Wilson has an audacious strategy for saving the planet: encourage evangelical Christians and scientific secularists to unite in caring for the ecosystems and biodiversity that he calls the Creation in his latest book." Dr. Wilson is on The Nature Conservancy board of directors. Also, I noticed that New Scientist has made the full version of Ivan Semeniuk's interview available as a podcast, in two parts. The podcast is in mp3 audio format that should be audible when you double-click on the file name, thereby starting Windows media player.

Download part one of the podcast to your computer and listen to the interview by clicking on this link:

<http://media.newscientist.com/data/av/podcast/newsci-20060928-eowilson-part-1.mp3>

Download and listen to part two of the interview by clicking on this link:

<http://media.newscientist.com/data/av/podcast/newsci-20060928-eowilson-part-2.mp3>

I made the links active so that you can

click on these links and initiate the download from within Acrobat Reader. **Note:** Each file is approximately 14 Mbytes in size with a running time of about 30 minutes.

While we are on the subject of The Creation, prior to the Industrial Revolution, landowners once considered themselves temporary husbands of the land where it was their job to leave the land in better condition than they found it; at least, this was so in agricultural Britain. I understand that in pre-settlement America, some American tribes considered their actions in terms of the effects seven generations into the future. Since the Industrial Revolution in Europe and European settlement of North America, I don't think it is too strong to say that we have been raping and pillaging the land.

Van Vives reports that the Evangelical Christian community is now concerned that we have, collectively, been careless of God's Creation. Recently, Van watched the Bill Moyer's television program where Moyers interviewed leaders in the Evangelical churches. Apparently, Evangelicals have found support in the Bible for the command to take care of the Earth and be good stewards. They are establishing recycle centers in their churches and are mounting their environmental programs supported by a lot of publications giving facts and figures. The Evangelical Environmental Network has some quick facts available at this Internet address:

<http://www.creationcare.org/resources/sunday/facts.php#warming>

This is good news for the environment because Evangelicals are a powerful force in the United States of America, passionate in their commitment to the things in which they believe. Perhaps it really is possible for the secular scientific and spiritual religious communities to meet on common ground and work together to save The Creation from loss of biodiversity and irreparable change.

NEWSLETTER BACK ISSUES

Back issues of the Docent Newsletter, to October 2006, can be found in the two green zip-binders, stored in the Perspex rack by the file cabinet in the office of the Visitor's Center.



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NEWSLETTER PUBLICATION

Deadline for submission of articles for inclusion in the newsletter is the 10th of each month. Publication date is on the 15th. All docents, Nature Conservancy staff, university scientists, and philosophers are welcome to submit articles and pictures about the various preserves in Oklahoma, but of course the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve in particular.

PICTURE CREDITS

- ▶ Docent recognition luncheon by Andrew Donovan-Shead.
- ▶ Dust storm pictures, in the public domain.
- ▶ Near dry pond by Van Vives.

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