

GREAT PLAINS CONSERVATION NETWORK

GPCN Handbook

Principles, Policies, and Guidelines

6/11/2021 update

The Great Plains Conservation Network (GPCN): An Introduction

The Vision

When Meriwether Lewis and William Clark traveled across the Great Plains region two hundred years ago, they encountered “one vast plain in which unnumerable herds of Buffalow were seen attended by their shepperds the wolves.”¹ In addition to bison and wolves, this seemingly endless expanse of grass contained abundant elk, pronghorn, prairie dogs, grizzlies, prairie birds, swift fox, and much more, making it one of the most productive areas on earth.

The explorations of Lewis and Clark marked the beginning of great change for this North American Serengeti. Within a century, commercial hunters slaughtered millions of bison for their hides and meat, and Native Americans were pushed onto reservations. European settlers exterminated large predators to safeguard their domestic livestock and plowed native prairies to plant crops, opening land for homesteads, farms and livestock pastures.

Despite these considerable changes to the prairie landscape, significant tracts of the land and much of the wildlife of the Great Plains remain intact. Some remarkable habitat has never been plowed, and few species that existed in the region at the time of European settlement are extinct. However, the ecological role of several species, like black-tailed prairie dogs, bison, black-footed ferrets, wolves, and grizzly bears, has been largely eliminated across the region. Through management and conservation actions, portions of the Great Plains of the United States and Canada can be restored into a fully functional grassland ecosystem, replete with habitat to nurture healthy, viable populations of the grand icons: expansive bison herds, immense prairie dog towns, and even wolves and grizzly bears.

Ours is a vision for the future of the heartland of North America, a vision of a sea of grass supporting healthy wildlife populations and vibrant communities of people. Implementation of the vision will result in the broad-scale restoration of this once-great landscape. Accomplishing this will be testimony to a society prudent enough to recognize the necessity for such restoration and progressive enough to implement it.

The Mission

The mission of the Great Plains Conservation Network (GPCN) is to restore and maintain the native species, habitats and natural processes of the Great Plains.

Our strategy is to work in partnerships with those who live, work, and recreate in this region to identify and maintain the areas that best contribute to this mission. Through collaboration, we seek to prevent loss or fragmentation of these areas, restore wildlife where possible, and facilitate wildlife movement and other important processes.

To succeed, we must identify and link much larger areas than are designated for wildlife and natural habitat today. We must begin to think and to act on a different scale – the scale

¹ Meriwether Lewis, at the convergence of the Marias and Missouri Rivers, June 3, 1805.

of natural processes (wildlife migrations, fire, hydrology) that transcend municipal and political boundaries.

Code of Conduct

We act with respect, are committed to diversity, have constructive conversations with a variety of viewpoints, practice sustainability, are good stewards of resources, avoid conflicts of interest, and safeguard the GPCN reputation through our advocacy efforts.

Our Code of Conduct is the bridge between our values and our policies and procedures, as conservation advocates. Our Code provides each of us, regardless of how we interact with GPCN, with affirmative actions that we can take to demonstrate our commitment to act with integrity in all we do and live by our values so that we can make the greatest impact for plains wildlife conservation possible.

The Program

GPCN is comprised of dozens of conservation groups, tribal organizations, and individuals who have recognized both the necessity and the advantages of coordinating their efforts on a scale that mirrors the area they seek to conserve. Within GPCN, science, public education, private sector initiatives, and advocacy are being employed to promote the GPCN vision and to enable, energize, and inspire participating organizations and individuals by linking their efforts to support that vision. By employing new tools to support conservation work, and by adopting mechanisms that foster the exchange of ideas and the coordination of action among participants, GPCN hopes to restore North America's grasslands, and to ensure the continued survival and health of its wildlife, wildlands, and human societies.

GPCN Structure and Roles

Structurally, GPCN is a network of groups and individuals who support, promote, and work together to implement the GPCN vision. The Network is not a legal entity. GPCN has adopted a structure composed of the larger network, a steering committee, and working groups that are created on an as-needed basis.

The Network

The Network seeks input from all participants and is committed to being inclusive as overall policy and specific programs are developed. Any individual or group may join the Network so long as they share the GPCN vision and agree to abide by the GPCN principles and values contained herein. Individuals or groups fitting these criteria will be added to the listserv upon request.

Network decisions regarding actions, policies, or formal positions are made on a "consensus/acquiescence" basis at network meetings. If a decision cannot be reached in this manner, a 2/3 majority vote will be required at formal meetings or via network communication channels with objections recorded in the minutes. The Network meets at least once and preferably twice a year. At these meetings the Network will consider edits to this handbook.

The Network's mandate includes (but is not restricted to):

- Promoting the GPCN vision;
- Informing people locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally about the vision, and about the ecological values and characteristics of the Great Plains;
- Identifying local, regional, national, and international initiatives needed to implement the GPCN vision;
- Developing opportunities for greater participation in key GPCN issues;
- Accessing and analyzing data needed for furthering the GPCN vision; and
- Sharing approaches and information about common issues of concern to GPCN participants.

Everyone in the Network will be notified well in advance of Network meetings. No set quorum has yet been declared necessary for the Network to conduct its business.

The Steering Committee

The Steering Committee is committed to implementing the policy and programs set by the Network. The Steering Committee is self-selecting, composed of 5-10 Network participants who are willing to work on specific GPCN issues, programs and projects. The Steering Committee will hold monthly (or, at a minimum, bimonthly) conference calls, and will meet in person at least once a year and, preferably, twice a year. Decisions are made on a "consensus/acquiescence" basis or, failing that, a 2/3 majority vote with objections recorded in the minutes.

The Steering Committee draws its authority from the Network. Membership is to be reviewed, and authority granted anew, at each Network meeting. The Steering Committee chair is to be approved by the Network.

The broad mandate of the Steering Committee includes (but is not restricted to):

- Developing the vision, mission, goals, and principles of the GPCN effort, circulating them for comment, and completing a concise statement of them;
- Addressing funding and staff needs;
- Overseeing and giving strategic direction to GPCN working groups;
- Discharging other tasks assigned to it by the Network;
- Keeping GPCN participants informed about progress on tasks by, for example, circulating minutes of Steering Committee meetings;
- Supervising the GPCN Coordinator (when resourcing permits the hiring of a coordinator).

Coordinator

The Coordinator, who draws his/her authority from the Steering Committee, is committed to managing the day-to-day operations of the Network, including (but not restricted to):

- Promoting the GPCN concept;
- Assisting the Steering Committee in managing the GPCN budget;
- Enabling internal and external communications systems;

- Identifying new constituencies of support; and
- Traveling as necessary to fulfill any of the above.

Working Groups

The Network and Steering Committee may form and disband working groups as they see fit.

GPCN Principles and Values

General Principles

- GPCN is a network whose governance is democratic, consensual, and participatory. GPCN participants acknowledge and value the work of all individuals and all organizations seeking to conserve native wildlife and their habitat across the GPCN region, and they encourage any and all of like mind and ambition to help develop the GPCN program and implement the GPCN vision.
- GPCN seeks to enable, inspire, and energize all individuals and organizations engaged in bringing the principles and practices of conservation biology to localities within the GPCN region. In conjunction with its support for native wildlife and their habitat, GPCN supports, promotes, and encourages the development of sustainable human communities and actions of those communities that are compatible with the principles of ecosystem restoration and biodiversity conservation within the GPCN area. Of particular note, GPCN supports the efforts of Native American and First Nations communities to safeguard traditional cultures that conserve native wildlife and their habitat, as well as the efforts of private landowners to implement compatible stewardship practices that conserve native wildlife and their habitat.
- GPCN encompasses conservation initiatives that transcend political and cultural boundaries and borders. Regardless of political boundaries, GPCN seeks to protect the full range of biological diversity across public lands; national, state, and provincial parks; wilderness areas; and tribal and private lands protected through voluntary conservation programs.
- GPCN may generate products and tools designed to serve the conservation needs of its participants and the needs of the region.
- GPCN may initiate and promote events and activities that further the principle of “doing together what we can’t do alone.”
- GPCN will raise funds solely to support those activities and projects individual groups would not or could not do by themselves. It will do so in full coordination with network participants.

Participant Values

- GPCN participants subscribe to the GPCN vision and, in their actions and public communications, support its intent;
- GPCN participants will not use any of the work of GPCN to the detriment of GPCN, and will not attach the GPCN logo or name to their organizational communications or policy positions without the express permission of the Steering Committee;

- In working together, GPCN participants will promote the values of:
 - Inclusiveness;
 - Respect – for diversity of other GPCN participants’ interests, views, and values, with an explicit acknowledgment that no one participant has a monopoly on the truth, and that Network participants will occasionally agree to disagree on a particular issue or concept;
 - Open and frank discussion in which issues, not personalities, are the focus of discussion.

GPCN Policies

GPCN is a network of groups and individuals with a confluence of interests in restoring the Great Plains and realizing GPCN's vision and mission. The Network supports its participants by:

- Promoting the GPCN vision; and
- Communicating among organizations and individuals committed to implementing that vision.

Issues Advocacy

GPCN takes positions on major issues of significance to the region when:

- The positions are formally approved by the entire Network;
- The decisions are adopted by the consensus model; and
- Groups promoting such issues bear the burden of bringing the issues to an in-person meeting and obtaining consensus from the participants present.

Unless these provisions have been realized, it is neither appropriate nor permissible for participant organizations to invoke a position in the name of the Network, or to imply that their own positions are endorsed by the Network.

In cases where consensus is not reached, the Network can be used by participant groups to find allies regarding specific issues and initiatives. The allies can then support those initiatives under the name and letterhead of the lead group or that of each local group, but not that of GPCN. In using the Network to find allies, participants should act in accordance with the principle of “do no harm.” Specifically, if participant A anticipates that its pursuit of a specific issue or initiative will be problematic for participant B, then A will seek out B for one-on-one discussions of their mutual concerns.

From time to time, participants will want to invoke the GPCN name and network to support their position on specific issues in written materials. When that issue arises, it is appropriate to use the GPCN vision to promote such issues as fall within the vision, but inappropriate to speak on behalf of GPCN itself. The following paragraph models an appropriate use of the GPCN name and can be used as a template for written materials.

“We believe that any comprehensive conservation strategy for the Great Plains eco-region must include sufficient areas of habitat to conserve the full suite of biodiversity, connective corridors to allow for migration and long-term movement, and insulating buffers to ensure the long-term viability of area-sensitive wildlife species. Such a strategy, as advocated by the GPCN and based on the principles of conservation biology, should be an important consideration in [the issue].”

Network Participation

Although GPCN is by intent an inclusive network, there are nonetheless criteria for participation. Accordingly, GPCN participants agree to:

- Share the GPCN vision and operate within the intent of the Network;
- Appreciate and concur with the values of GPCN and its operations;
- Use the adopted mechanisms for resolution of any conflicts; and
- Be respectful in any and all GPCN-related activities.

Conflict Resolution

Mechanisms for conflict resolution

When a conflict arises, GPCN participants agree to use the following mechanism:

- Discuss the issue with the person with whom they have the conflict to determine if some accommodation can be made. The discussion should take place face-to-face, by telephone, or by e-mail or regular mail: it should not be aired publicly on any of GPCN listservs or the GPCN website;
- If such discussion does not resolve the conflict, the issue should be taken to the Steering Committee for resolution;
- If the Steering Committee is unable to resolve the conflict, the issue will be arbitrated by a panel consisting of the chair of the last GPCN meeting and two other persons, one selected by each side to the dispute, but both being members of the GPCN Steering Committee. The panel is to make its decision based on the values of the participants of GPCN. Members of the panel will not sit in judgment on their own panel.

Conflict of Interest Guidelines

GPCN participants agree to abide by the following guidelines regarding conflict of interest:

- No participants will let personal interest interfere with their duty to GPCN;
- When a participant finds him or herself in conflict regarding a specific issue – in which, for example, duties are owed to GPCN and to another organization – the participant will not participate in public discussions on behalf of GPCN.

Finances

Remuneration and Accountability of GPCN Participants

If there is an issue concerning the overseeing of a contract that needs to be discussed by the Steering Committee and the person named in the contract is a member of the committee, or the contract involves his/her organization, that person will be recused from discussions related to the contract.

Bank Accounts and Signing Authority

The Coordinator, on authority of the Steering Committee, or a fiscal agent appointed by the Steering Committee, may open and maintain GPCN accounts. Signing authority will include one designated person from the Steering Committee and the Coordinator or, in the absence of a Coordinator, two Steering Committee members. All individual GPCN expenses in excess of \$1,000 must be approved by the Steering Committee. The Coordinator has the authority to spend GPCN funds under \$1,000 on behalf of the Network. All expenses incurred in the past 3 months by the Network will be reviewed by the Steering Committee on a quarterly basis.

Fundraising: Priorities, Principles and Process

Priorities and Principles

- GPCN's first fundraising priority is to get money to the Network's top projects, which should be weighted according to their level of importance and the urgency with which they need to be addressed. The Steering Committee will make these determinations based on discussions at Network meetings.
- GPCN's second fundraising priority is to direct funds to sustain grassroots conservation action and education, based on criteria of need and estimated on-the-ground return.
- Fundraising can be conducted on behalf of the GPCN network, but only on projects approved by the Steering Committee.
- Types of fundraising other than seeking large grants are permissible, but they should not conflict with the funding initiatives of participant groups.
- GPCN will not seek funding from primary extractive industries or, on Network's review, from any foundation which any GPCN participant flags as inappropriate.
- Groups which act as fiscal sponsors for GPCN proposals will receive 10% of any money raised.

Coordination of Funding Proposals

Because all GPCN participants need money, and some may wish to invoke the GPCN name when seeking it, we have instituted the following rules to govern organizational and GPCN fundraising:

- Participants may refer to GPCN in their proposals, or refer to themselves as GPCN

participants, but such references should not be made in such place and such way that funders could construe the proposal as one being made on behalf of GPCN.

- In seeking funding for a particular project, a participant should make it clear either in writing or verbally that local/regional projects are not governed by or endorsed by GPCN.
- To avoid tiered proposals and other funding confusions, participants should inform the Coordinator (or Steering Committee in the absence of a Coordinator) of any pending proposal that invokes the GPCN name in a substantive way (i.e. not simply by mentioning GPCN in passing), including who is being approached, for what, for how much, and for when. If a participant is unwilling to accept this requirement, it should not refer to GPCN at all. By “substantive” we mean that the work for which the proposal seeks funding will focus primarily on GPCN activities or priorities.
- The Coordinator will not act as a gatekeeper, but rather will inform groups of opportunities to work together for particular initiatives by serving as an information steward regarding proposals going out under the GPCN name.

Appendix I

A Great Plains Vision Statement

Preamble

Encompassing hundreds of millions of acres, the Great Plains is the largest grassland ecosystem in North America and one of the largest in the world. Grasslands are probably the most altered by human impact of any of the continent's terrestrial ecosystems. This ecosystem once supported one of the world's largest populations of grazing wildlife species and associated predators. Bison played a dominant role in the ecology and human culture of the Great Plains, and many other species, including elk, grizzly bear, and wolves were also present in abundance. Prairie dogs and beavers occurred in great numbers, and were responsible for the creation of vast habitats essential to many other wildlife species. While numbers of some species have been reduced dramatically, recovery is underway and significant parts of the Great Plains still have sufficient habitat to restore healthy populations of most species while also reinvigorating local economies and inspiring people to value intact grassland habitats around the world.

Our overarching vision for the Great Plains focuses on restoration of ecologically important areas of the Great Plains to an ecosystem that sustainably supports the assemblage of native large mammals and grassland birds that once thrived here, with free-flowing rivers hosting healthy populations of native fish species. These ecologically important areas are large enough to restore not only wildlife populations, but also traditional migration patterns and other natural processes. The restoration of other species, such as black-tailed prairie dogs, black-footed ferrets, and mountain plovers will reestablish the wildlife diversity that was once interwoven into the prairie landscape. Restoration efforts also offer unique opportunities for helping build and diversify regional communities and economies; support and participation from local communities and landowners is essential to achieving this vision.

Specific Features of our Vision for the Great Plains

We share a vision for the Great Plains that restores and preserves in perpetuity:

- A network of large, healthy grasslands and shrublands from southern Canada to northern Mexico;
- Healthy populations of all native animals within these landscapes, including large herds of bison, pronghorn, and elk, as well as native carnivores and scavengers;
- Large, fully functioning colonies of prairie dogs and other important small grazers and their associated species such as raptors, small predators, and grassland birds;
- Free-flowing rivers and abundant wetlands in their natural state carrying healthy populations of fish, migratory birds, beavers and all other native river and wetland species;
- Natural processes, including floods, fires, and animal migrations;

- Widespread areas where sustainable human economic activities support healthy people and native habitats and wildlife;
- Healthy human communities that benefit from and value these restored natural landscapes and the amenities they provide.