



Overview: North American Grassland Species of Common Conservation Concern

(Updated version by Jürgen Hoth, jhoth@ccemtl.org 25 May 2002)

Why is a North American Grassland strategy needed?

Grasslands are considered one of the most threatened environments in North America. Many conservation initiatives have been carried out to protect this ecosystem at a national and binational level, especially within and between Canada and the United States. Mexico's potential importance, however, cannot be overstated; this country, for instance, hosts the largest black tailed prairie dog colony remaining in North America. Since 2000, the three federal Wildlife Services of North America have agreed to work together to protect 17 species of wild birds and mammals considered "*Species of Common Conservation Concern*" (SCCC)¹. Given that the majority of these species are associated with grasslands, the CEC organized a workshop to establish the foundations of a conservation strategy for these species. The workshop took place in Nuevo Casas Grandes, Chihuahua, Mexico, March 2001, and involved government representatives from Canada, USA and Mexico, as well as representatives from NGOs, academia and landowners. One of the key results of this workshop was the elaboration of a shared vision, which emphasizes the need to protect grassland species through the conservation of their habitat. To achieve this vision, it will require, among other, a shared understanding of the current status, needs and trends of grasslands throughout North America; the joint identification of areas of conservation and protection priority; learning from current grassland use practices, and the development of mutually agreed upon outreach efforts. The resulting report can be obtained at http://www.cec.org/files/PDF/BIODIVERSITY/Chihuahua_Meeting_Final_report-Reporte_final.PDF

Potential role of the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC) to develop a trinational Grasslands strategy

Based upon the strengths of the CEC and previous and ongoing biodiversity-related efforts, and acknowledging the suite of recommendations resulting from the Trinational Grassland SCCC workshop held in Chihuahua, the CEC will promote the following activities:

a. A map of grasslands in North America.

Context: An updated land use map will be produced for all grasslands. This will allow the integration of conservation planning units, including ranges of distribution of all SCCC species, Important Bird Areas, Bird Conservation Regions, natural protected areas, priority

¹ These species include the Ferruginous Hawk, *Buteo regalis*; Peregrine Falcon, *Falco peregrinus*; Loggerhead Shrike, *Lanius ludovicianus* Piping Plover, *Charadrius melodus*; Mountain Plover, *Charadrius montanus*; Burrowing Owl, *Athene cunicularia*; Northern Spotted Owl, *Strix occidentalis caurina*; Mexican Spotted Owl, *Strix occidentalis lucida*; Golden-cheeked Warbler, *Dendroica chrysoparia*; Whooping Crane, *Grus americana*; California Condor, *Gymnogyps californianus*; Black-tailed Prairie Dog, *Cynomys ludovicianus*; Sonoran Pronghorn, *Antilocapra Americana sonoriensis*; Lesser long-nosed bat, *Leptonycteris curasoae yerbabuena*; (Greater) Mexican long-nosed bat, *Leptonycteris nivalis*; Black Bear, *Ursus americanus*; Gray Wolf, *Canis lupus*. The complete report can be obtained at http://www.cec.org/files/PDF/BIODIVERSITY/SCCC-Web-e_EN.PDF

watersheds, Indian reservations, demographic changes, etc. Through the integration of this information a map will play a key role as a common communication vehicle. It is also expected that this map could become a vehicle for convergence for the information produced by other conservation initiatives, including NABCI. Background information includes CEC ecoregions map for North America http://www.cec.org/files/PDF/BIODIVERSITY/eco-eng_EN.pdf, and available level III maps for the grasslands.

Process: Building upon CEC's previous ecoregion mapping efforts, to the extent possible the mapping update will be based upon existing information. It is envisioned to count on the input of EPA, the Canadian Plains Research Center, INEGI, INE-SEMARNAT and others (e.g. TNC, WWF). The goal is to have a map that will be available to the public-at-large, ideally in a Geographical Information System format

Activities

- Update existing maps of North American grasslands, both in the prairies and outside
- Explore possible complementarity between the maps generated under the CEC approach and others such as the one produced by WWF, currently used by CONABIO
- Assess land use changes for the last 50 years. This information may provide an essential template to assess changes of distribution of wildlife and population trends (an example is the map prepared on grassland changes by National Geographic October 1993, 184 (4):100).
- Identify grasslands of high conservation value

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b. Mexico's assessment of grasslands.

Context: Grasslands cover 10% of Mexico's surface. Despite their national and North American significance, however, at a national scale their importance for conservation seems to be underestimated. This could be a result of lack of information and lack of an assessment of their relevance at a national and continental scale.

Process: Assist Mexico government officials, NGOs and general public in assessing the importance of grasslands at a national scale and highlight their role at a continental scale. The CEC already convened a meeting with key specialists (Durango, October 2001). Report pending. As part of this effort a map will be produced which compares grassland changes taking place between the 70's and 2000, and will incorporate the main conservation planning units for the Mexican desert grasslands.

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c. Towards a draft strategy for grassland SCCC for North America

Context: Several government and NGO led strategies have been developed in the last 20 years, primarily in Canada and the US. These past experiences, together with ongoing initiatives, offer valuable lessons and guidelines to facilitate a trilateral undertaking.

Process: Taking into consideration the main outcomes from the Chihuahua trilateral grasslands meeting (report available upon request), and building upon current and past conservation efforts and strategies oriented towards grassland conservation in North America, the consultants will produce a draft trilateral strategy.

Specifically, this project will:

- Assess the status, needs and opportunities for grassland conservation in each country and produce and develop a draft strategy for conservation of grasslands in North America based upon existing strategies
- Review of present and past national and binational grassland conservation efforts, including initiatives involving first nations and farmers. All sectors related to the subject will be addressed.
- Assess accomplishments and limitations of grassland strategies
- Take into consideration ecoregional maps
- Determine the role of a trilateral strategy, highlighting the opportunities for international cooperation with regards to the conservation of grassland habitat and wildlife, including the SCCC.

Lead and Contact persons

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d. Grassland Conservation workshops: strategy and action

Context: With the main directions and key priorities resulting from the grassland status map (point a. above); from Mexico's position on grasslands conservation (point b. above); and the draft North American Strategy (point c. above); the goal of this phase is to implement the trilateral strategy. The resulting action plan will focus on specific projects that highlight the importance of trilateral cooperation regarding the conservation of grassland spaces and species.

Process: participants to the workshop will help the CEC to identify partners willing to implement actions, for the short middle and long term. The meeting will be aimed at

establishing partnerships among people and organizations dealing with grassland species and areas of conservation importance.

Schedule (tentative): summer/fall 2002

e. Symposium “North American Grasslands: Building a Triantional Conservation Strategy. The Wildlife Society 2002 Annual Conference. Bismarck North Dakota, September 2002.

Context: In fall 2002 The Wildlife Society (TWS) will organize its 9th Annual Conference. This venue is ideal to present the aforementioned main results together with the overview of the draft strategy. TWS is an international non-profit scientific and educational association dedicated to excellence in wildlife stewardship through science and education. Last year’s conference received 1700 registrations.

Process. The organizers of TWS’ 2002 Annual Conference have been approached and already granted the CEC and partners (please see below) a full day to organize a Symposium on grasslands. The presentation at the Symposium will reflect accumulated experience through out North America’s grasslands, assessments of current common needs and will highlight opportunities for effective cooperation for grassland conservation at a trintional scale. Speakers will be invited by the organizers, based upon a mutually agreed upon agenda. Please see <http://www.wildlife.org/conference/2002/index.htm>

Contact persons and organizers

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f. Additional items and Opportunities

- ◆ NABCI and SCCC. The grasslands initiative can assist in NABCI’s process for identifying pilot projects in an ecosystem.
- ◆ Protected areas. CEC’s support could be instrumental in raising support for establishing a grassland-protected area in Mexico, especially in Janos, Chihuahua, associated to the largest remaining prairie dog colony of North America.