



Building Community and Conservation
ON THE PRAIRIE

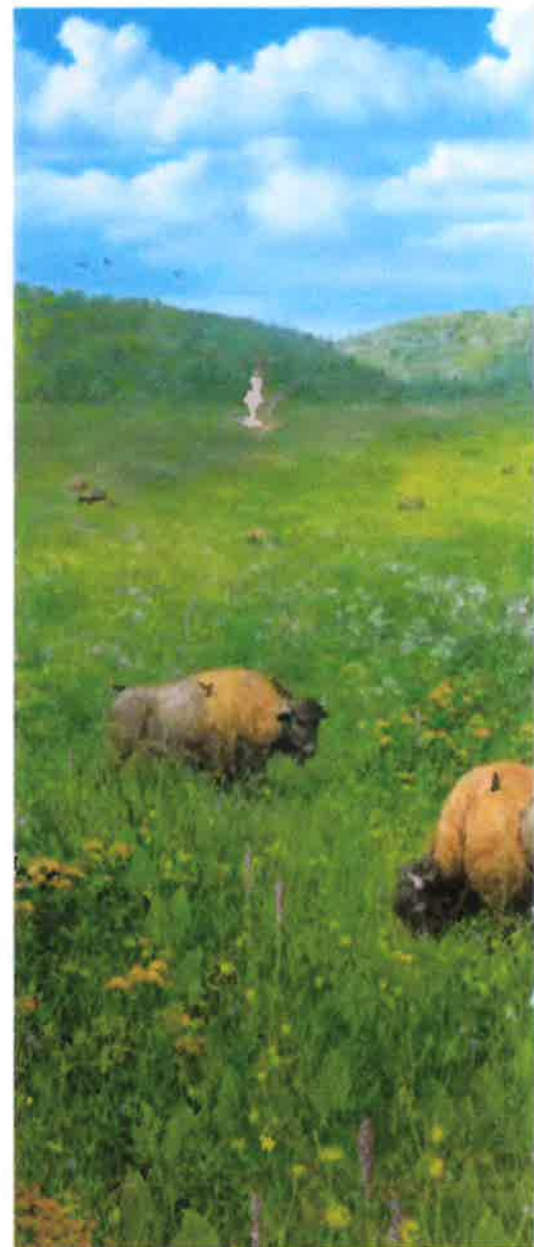
Curt Meine, Research Associate and Active CCSP Member

Just a few miles south of ICF, in the rolling countryside of southern Wisconsin, a 7,350-acre industrial facility rests anomalously upon the rural landscape. This is the Badger Army Ammunition Plant, one of many arms production facilities that were quickly built in the days following the United States' entry into World War II. The plant was constructed on lands once occupied by the Sauk Prairie, a large expanse of tallgrass prairie and oak savanna. Prior to European settlement, native Sauk, Fox, and Ho-Chunk people lived on and near the prairie. Beginning in the 1830s, farmers arrived to work its rich soils. Now only tiny isolated remnants of the prairie vegetation remain.

Following the opening of the Badger Plant in 1942, the facility remained active or on stand-by status, prepared to respond to the nation's defense needs. Recently, however, the U.S. Army determined that the plant was no longer required. ICF is now one of many organizations in the area seeking to develop a shared vision for these lands, based on their outstanding conservation value. As members of the Community Conservation Coalition for the Sauk Prairie, these organizations are working to involve local citizens in the decision-making process and, ultimately, in ecological restoration and other conservation activities on the land.

Situated amid some of Wisconsin's most critical natural areas, and harboring important populations of rare and declining plant and animal species, the Badger lands provide a one-time-only opportunity for innovative conservation partnerships. By combining large-scale prairie and savanna restoration, research, education, sustainable agriculture, and recreation, the coalition's vision seeks to integrate many components of land-use in the same place at the same time. In so doing, we can honor the site's rich natural and cultural history in the process.

To achieve that vision, the coalition has worked over the last two years to help shape a community consensus for conservation. Members of the coalition have undertaken scientific surveys of the lands to provide a stronger foundation of knowledge about the site. We have helped to build bridges of understanding between different interests and potential partners. We have provided information on the challenges of prairie restoration and conservation planning. We have sponsored public forums designed to bring information to citizens and decision-makers, and to stimulate



discussion of options for the future. We have undertaken a broad range of public education activities, including the commissioning and displaying of Victor Bakhtin's remarkable painting "Sauk Prairie Remembered: A Vision for the Future." We have involved an ever-broadening circle of citizens in a decision that will help determine the quality of life for themselves and for future generations.

The future of the Badger lands has yet to be determined. The coalition's vision for the site is not the only one being put forward. Competing interests recognize other values in the property and hope to redevelop the site based on those values. Are these future scenarios compatible? Are there ways to work through differences in the long-term public interest? Can creative solutions help to build new bonds between people, as well as between people and the land?

There are, of course, no easy answers to these questions. In this respect, the challenge of conservation on Wisconsin's Sauk Prairie is not so different from the challenge in other parts of the world where ICF works. Effective conservation in any setting requires the involvement of local communities. Now, close to home, we are working with our own neighbors to bring back some of the beauty, wildness, and diversity of Wisconsin's native landscape. 🐾

Previous page (L-R): Prairie Smoke evokes prairie fires that help maintain a healthy ecosystem. Restoration at ICF includes returning both species and ecological processes that ecosystems require. Photo by Barb Barzen. / "What a thousand acres of Silphiums looked like when they tickled the bellies of the Buffalo is a question never again to be answered, and perhaps not even asked." Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*. After almost 20 years of restoration efforts, ICF's prairie landscape now inspires visitors to consider this question. Come see for yourself this summer. Photo by Charles C. Bradley. / Autumn-blooming Downy Gentians require the entire growing season to flower and seed. The diversity of plants at ICF occurs over both time and space. Photo by Scott Weber.

Below: *Sauk Prairie Remembered*, by Victor Bakhtin, represents a vision of Sauk Prairie that can unite us in a process that reflects upon our past and guides our future. This painting was made possible through the generous contributions of Virginia Metcalf and Mary Yeakel.

