

Towards a Conservation Strategy for the World's Temperate Grasslands



Photo by Chris Harris

A Sense of Urgency

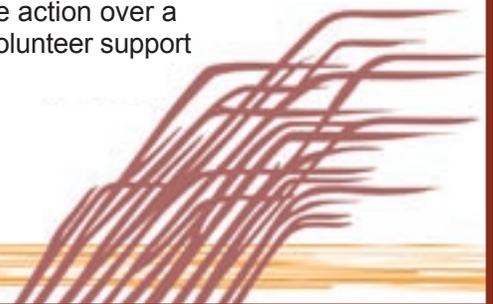
Temperate grasslands, one of the world's great biomes, occur on every continent except Antarctica. These ecosystems lock up vast stores of carbon, and when protected, contribute significantly to the fight against climate change. The temperate grasslands biome occupies 9 million sq.km or ~8% of the earth's terrestrial surface. Of this 8%, however, only 5% is currently protected within the global system of protected areas. After cradling the needs of humans for centuries, temperate grasslands are now considered the most altered and endangered ecosystem on the planet.

For most of the past century, temperate grasslands have not been visible on the global conservation agenda. The grasslands used to be home to some of the greatest assemblages of wildlife the earth has ever witnessed. Potential for protection still remains, especially in the prairies of North America, the pampas of South America, the lowland grasslands of southeast Australia, the steppes of Eastern Europe, and the Daurian steppes of East Asia.

It was with this knowledge of the high rate of conversion and the low level of protection of indigenous temperate grasslands that in 1996 the World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA), of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), created the Grasslands Protected Areas Task Force. In the decade since the creation of the Task Force, there has been a significant rise in the level of interest for the conservation and protection of grasslands. Numerous initiatives toward this end are evident throughout the biome, and the recorded level of protection for temperate grasslands has increased from 0.69% in 1996 to ~5% today.

Despite this impressive progress, nowhere in the world does the protection for temperate indigenous grasslands come close to an acceptable level. Protecting the world's temperate grasslands and managing them sustainably is essential to minimize the threats they are facing. The information in this brochure outlines the urgent task that we are undertaking and how we plan to catalyze action over a 'decade of temperate grassland conservation'. We need your financial and volunteer support and urge you to join us in this global conservation effort.

Bill Henwood
Leader, Grasslands Protected Areas Task Force



A Decade of Action for Temperate Grasslands

The evidence is clear – specific attention needs to be focused on the plight of indigenous temperate grasslands. To this end the Grasslands Protected Areas Task Force, with the generous support of the J.M. Kaplan Fund, launched the Temperate Grasslands Conservation Initiative (TGCI) in Hohhot, China, June 2008. The 35 grassland experts from 14 countries participating in the Hohhot workshop adopted the following mission:

“To reverse the trend of biodiversity loss and degradation of the temperate grasslands biome by promoting both the designation and special management of representative protected areas, and the widespread use of sustainable management practices beyond protected area boundaries, with the goal of at least doubling the current level of protection by 2014.”

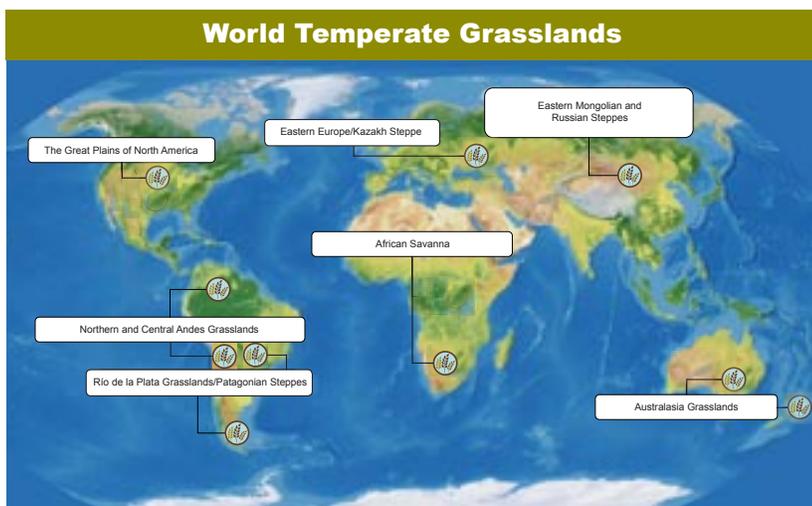
At this meeting participants signed *The Hohhot Declaration* that outlines the value of the world’s temperate grasslands, why they are endangered and how important it is for citizens of the world to work together to protect them.

Another product of the meeting was a compendium or description of the 17 priority temperate grassland regions from around the world. This compendium is the first global effort to provide an initial inventory and status information for these critical and fragile ecosystems.

At the Hohhot meeting, participants agreed to the following goals and action is now underway to implement them:

- To establish a global strategy and two regional specific action plans for increased protection by 2014. South America and the Daurian Steppe of East Asia were confirmed as the priority regions with an emphasis on the benefits of transboundary conservation.
- To develop mechanisms for improving internal communications and cooperation for the continued conservation, protection and management of the world’s temperate grasslands.
- To establish a Steering Committee to guide the TGCI and implement the two goals above.

Life in a Working Landscape: Towards a Conservation Strategy for the World’s Temperate Grasslands is a record of the Hohhot Workshop. This meeting record, the *Compendium of Regional Templates on the Status of Temperate Grasslands Conservation and Protection*, and *The Hohhot Declaration* are each posted at www.iucn.org/wcpa – click ‘Task Forces’ in the left-hand column, then click ‘Grasslands’.



“Temperate grasslands are now considered the most altered and endangered ecosystem on the planet.”

“Failure to conserve and use biological diversity in a sustainable manner would result in degrading environments, new and more rampant illnesses, deepening poverty and a continued pattern of inequitable and untenable growth.”

(Convention on Biological Diversity)



The Hohhot Declaration

XXI International Grasslands Congress/VIII International Rangeland Congress – July 2008
Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, China

Therefore, we the participants of the Hohhot World Temperate Grasslands Conservation Initiative Workshop from five continents and 14 countries, declare that temperate indigenous grasslands are critically endangered and urgent action is required to protect and maintain the services they provide to sustain human life. We call upon all sectors of society to collaborate towards this goal.

Grassroots Action - Transboundary Conservation

A clear pattern of the common threats has emerged. The overarching threat is climate change, which will lead to ecosystem impacts that are largely unknown and unpredictable. Unsustainable grazing and land conversion for forest plantations, crop production and energy/mining development are fundamental threats in every temperate grassland biome. These threats result in habitat loss, fragmentation, loss of diversity, degradation, and in many cases desertification. Building conductivity on these landscapes through sustainable management and restoration facilitates ecosystem health and services for livelihoods, as well as combating climate change.

If large landscapes do not stay intact and healthy, and are not managed sustainably, it will be very difficult to conserve or even restore harmed landscapes. We must think large scale to achieve our goals. It is therefore necessary to strongly promote the value of transboundary conservation networks as an eco-regional approach to managing temperate grasslands – rather than a country by country approach. To this end two priority pilot regions were identified and work is underway:

South America: In November 2008, 42 people from 8 countries gathered to develop an action plan to protect and conserve the 4 distinct temperate grassland eco-regions of South America: páramos, central Andes, pampas and campos, and the Patagonia steppe. Together, these eco-regions represent approximately 13% of the South American continent.

The Daurian Steppe East Asia:

The development of a transboundary conservation strategy involving three countries (Russia, China and Mongolia) is a rare opportunity to address both biodiversity values and the interests of mobile peoples. Immediately after the Hohhot meeting 26 people from 10 countries met to begin developing a preliminary strategy for the Daurian Steppe.

In addition to these two priority areas, there is interest from North American grassland enthusiasts to revitalize conservation initiatives within Canada, United States and Mexico.



Life in a Working Landscape

It is important that grasslands be viewed as both ecosystems and social systems. Protection and conservation values have been researched. However, information that highlights the economic contribution of temperate grassland ecosystems to human health, the economy, food security and water conservation is sorely lacking. A broader understanding of these values is essential for temperate grassland conservation. We are therefore producing a report describing the range of socio-economic values and the importance of temperate grasslands to the life and cultural survival of mobile indigenous people. This report will be complete by Spring 2009 and subsequently posted on our website.

The Future

The most immediate potential for temperate grasslands conservation on a large landscape scale is in Eastern Mongolia along the border of China and Russia, the Kazakh steppe, the Patagonian steppe and the mixed/short grass prairie of North America. If we move quickly, the opportunity exists in these regions to protect, restore or sustainably use large, ecologically viable grasslands. With this habitat protected and appropriately managed, it may be possible to re-establish a semblance of the original web-of-life and predator-prey relationships.

It is essential that large-scale conservation work be undertaken in these regions.

Using the extensive networks of IUCN/WCPA members, partners and Commissions, we are uniquely placed to find conservation solutions. Only through our leadership will the world community convene around the vision of a 'decade of temperate grassland conservation', thus creating the conditions for conservation to take root. The temperate grassland role in climate change adaptation, water conservation and food security at the global and regional level can also be strengthened.

Focused communications with critical sectors, governments, funders and related non-governmental organizations (NGO's) is critical. There needs to be improved mechanisms to share and communicate about this threatened ecosystem. The case is clear – there is an urgent need for the protection and conservation of temperate grasslands.

Specifically we need to raise public global awareness; describe the socio-economic aspect of grasslands as well as the ecosystem value; link with other global initiatives; raise temperate grassland conservation within the global agenda; and deliver on the identified regional priority areas in the East Asian Daurian Steppe and South America.

We Need Your Help

To date ~\$320,000US has been raised. An additional ~\$100,000US has been provided through the in-kind donation of time and scientific expertise. Grasslands are traditionally a challenge for raising money as their conservation profile is low. Conserving grasslands is not yet seen as a critical part of the global conservation agenda.

The TGCI goal is to catalyze financial support for grasslands conservation action among conservation and research institutions, key government agencies, the private sector, and interested donors and foundations.

Additional funding is required for communications, research, on the ground action in key hot spots, and TGCI capacity. Our fundraising target is \$200,000–\$500,000US. These funds will be applied directly to existing goals and will also be used to seed the more substantial funding to make the 'decade of temperate grassland conservation' dream a reality. Please contact us to learn more about how you can lend support. Your financial contribution to the vital work of the Temperate Grasslands Conservation Initiative would be appreciated.

Acknowledgements

The Temperate Grassland Conservation Initiative and the progress that we have made would not be possible without the funding support of the J.M. Kaplan Fund. In addition, thank you to the approximately 30 individuals who have generously donated their time and scientific expertise in support of this initiative.



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