

WOODLANDS & PRAIRIES

MAGAZINE

with Mrs. Woods

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"Dear Friends."
Letters from the land

SPECIAL ISSUE
Written by Readers



**Special reprint
featuring a letter
from Mongolia by
Kayla Koether**



About Caring for Your Piece of this Good Earth

EDITOR & PUBLISHER

Rollie Henkes

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Dan Bohlin
Alice D'Alessio
Jennifer L. Hopwood
Jack Knight
Carl Kurtz
Inger Lamb

DESIGN

Brenda Boddicker

CIRCULATION

Mrs. Woods

A sweet lady, but don't push her too far!

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CORRESPONDENCE TO:

Woodlands & Prairies
P.O. Box 713,
Monona, IA 52159

Phone: 563-539-4144

Email:
mrswoods@mrswoodsmagazine.com

Visit us at:
www.mrswoodsmagazine.com

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**There can be no
purpose more inspiring
than to begin the age of
restoration, reweaving
the wondrous diversity
of life that still surrounds
us. ~ E. O. Wilson**

Letters from the land then and now

Dear Friends,

Welcome to this special issue written by readers. It's our third such issue written in first person, and once again readers outdid themselves with letters about stewardship.

Do you have a story to tell? We'd love to hear from you. Important stories are springing from the grassroots about what some call a quiet revolution in land management. A mission of this magazine is to give wings to those stories.

Pioneers who preceded you on the land touched off an earlier revolution. In less than 100 years they converted the prairie into America's breadbasket. And they told stories about it, often heroic. Their letters and diaries fill shoeboxes in attics and line shelves in the archival sections of libraries. The stories tell of hope and despair, and success and failure as the pioneers put down roots and made their way in what was for them a new land.

The new pioneers

Stories in this issue are of another revolution fostered by a new wave of pioneers on the land. If you've reforested a slope, cleared cedars to revive a prairie, created a wildlife sanctuary in your yard with native plants or engaged in other such restoration, it's fair to say you're one of the new pioneers.



It would be too simplistic to say that you're repairing the damage done by the first wave. Repairing the land began in earnest in the '30s with the birth of the soil and water conservation movement. One of the letter writers this issue, **Stan Meyer**, recalls the work by the Civilian Conservation Corps to repair a gulley on the farm where he grew up (page 12). Back then, as now, this approach to conservation centered on fixing the land to conserve soil and water for the production of food and fiber, as well as preventing pollution from runoff. Today as a new pioneer Stan is practicing another kind of conservation on his 440-acre ranch in Montana. He's restoring ecosystems, among them a marsh that was filled with muck and cattails. Its waters once again run pure and the wildlife has returned.

Cindy Hildebrand and **Roger Maddux** are other new pioneers. In central Iowa in the heart of the Corn Belt they're restoring parcels back into the tallgrass prairie ecosystem that made the Corn Belt possible (page 4).



Restoration history

Restoration defines the new pioneers. We humans have practiced restoration in one form or another for thousands of years as we tinkered with the land. Then the practice matured into a science. It happened during the last century or more, built on the findings and conclusions of several generations of botanists, biologists, naturalists, ecologists, and other thinkers. They formed the Ecology Society of America in 1915. A separate field of ecology---restoration ecology---didn't emerge as a science until the 1980s. Native plant societies, The Nature Conservancy, and other environmental groups came into being along the way. When restoration ecology is put into practice on the land ---which is the stuff you might be doing---it's known as ecological restoration. The Society for Ecological Restoration was formed in 1987.

Now a movement

Like its cousin, soil and water conservation, ecological restoration has become a movement. The movement isn't about restoring ecosystems such as the tallgrass prairie to all of their former glory. But it is about landowners, land managers, and volunteers enduring blazing sun and biting insects to save priceless examples of prairie and other ecosystems as part of our natural heritage. It's also about the environmental services these ecosystems provide in the way of enriching soil, purifying water, sequestering carbon, and providing habitat for wildlife. And then it's simply about doing the right thing. As



expressed in the land ethic advanced by Aldo Leopold, ecological restoration is about saving all parts of these ecosystems---from the largest trees, plants, and animals to the tiniest insects and microorganisms. They have an intrinsic value as members of the natural world that we share. Then there's the spiritual value. **Bill Witt** writes about that in his letter on page 19.

High stakes

When applied to the planet's life-support systems writ large, the stakes of ecological restoration have never been higher. The health of biomes such as the South American rain forests and the Florida Everglades remain a concern. Grasslands are under threat. Grinnell College student **Kayla Koether** spent five months living with nomadic herders on the steppe of Mongolia. In her letter beginning on page 28 she writes about forces threatening this vast grassland. Meanwhile, global warming is affecting the stability of three major biomes that come together in north-central Minnesota. That's according to **Peter P. Bundy**, who urges reforestation to offset the warming effect of greenhouse gases. His letter begins on page 14.



Such issues underscore why ecological restoration should be a top national priority.

The beauty is, we can do it at the grassroots. The principles of ecological restoration apply to managing nearly any piece of land, whether it's our back yard, a neglected cut-over woodland in the back 40 or a natural area in need of volunteers to remove buckthorn.

Inclusive

The movement applies to the buffer strips that Iowa farmer **Rex Gogerty** installed to protect a stream from runoff from his crop fields. We can debate whether the CRP practice meets the strict definition of ecological restoration. However, the mix of native species in the buffer reflects a change in government thinking on cost-share programs over the years. Time was when Eurasian species were all farmers could get under such programs. But ecology informs more and more USDA policy these days.



Rex farms the land settled by his great grandfather, making him a direct descendant of the first wave of pioneers. But in his letter on page 38 he writes about the wildlife in the buffer strips, and of the grace and beauty that the grasses and prairie flowers add to his crop rotation. It makes you think he was always a new pioneer.

From longhand to online

The first pioneers wrote their letters and journals in longhand. The letters we received were e-mailed. How times have changed.

Some of you are posting your letters online. The Internet

is a popular outlet for bloggers who are showing how native plants can breathe new life into the turfgrass wastelands of residential areas. Two contributors in this issue write about native plants in their yards, and they also maintain blogs: **Linda Gurgone**, Woodstock, Ill., (page 8), and **Betty Hall**, Lexington, Ky., (page 34).



New knowledge

Some of the first pioneers were astute observers of the land and kept detailed notes; the new pioneers even more so. We've reported on several, including Sibylla and Bill Brown, the southern Iowa landowners who are leaders in oak savanna restoration. Meanwhile, Marcie and Mike O'Connor are taking an old farm in Wisconsin back to its pre-settlement roots. The Browns and the O'Connors number among the citizen scientists who are adding to the knowledge base of ecological restoration. You can follow the Browns and the O'Connors on their blogs at: www.timberhilloaksavanna.com and www.aprairiehaven.com. We are posting links to other blogs of note by the new pioneers on our own Website: www.woodlandsandprairies.com

Meanwhile, let this magazine be another outlet for letters from the land for bloggers and non-bloggers alike. There's so much to write about: the joy, the frustrations, the lessons learned, the hope, the magic moments. As with the first pioneers, these are letters written from the heart by people who love the land. And you can hold this magazine, and the stories, in your hands.



A hundred years from now, someone might find copies of this magazine under a pile of old papers and read your stories. I hope the person won't say, "Too bad we didn't listen to them."
~ Rollie Henkes



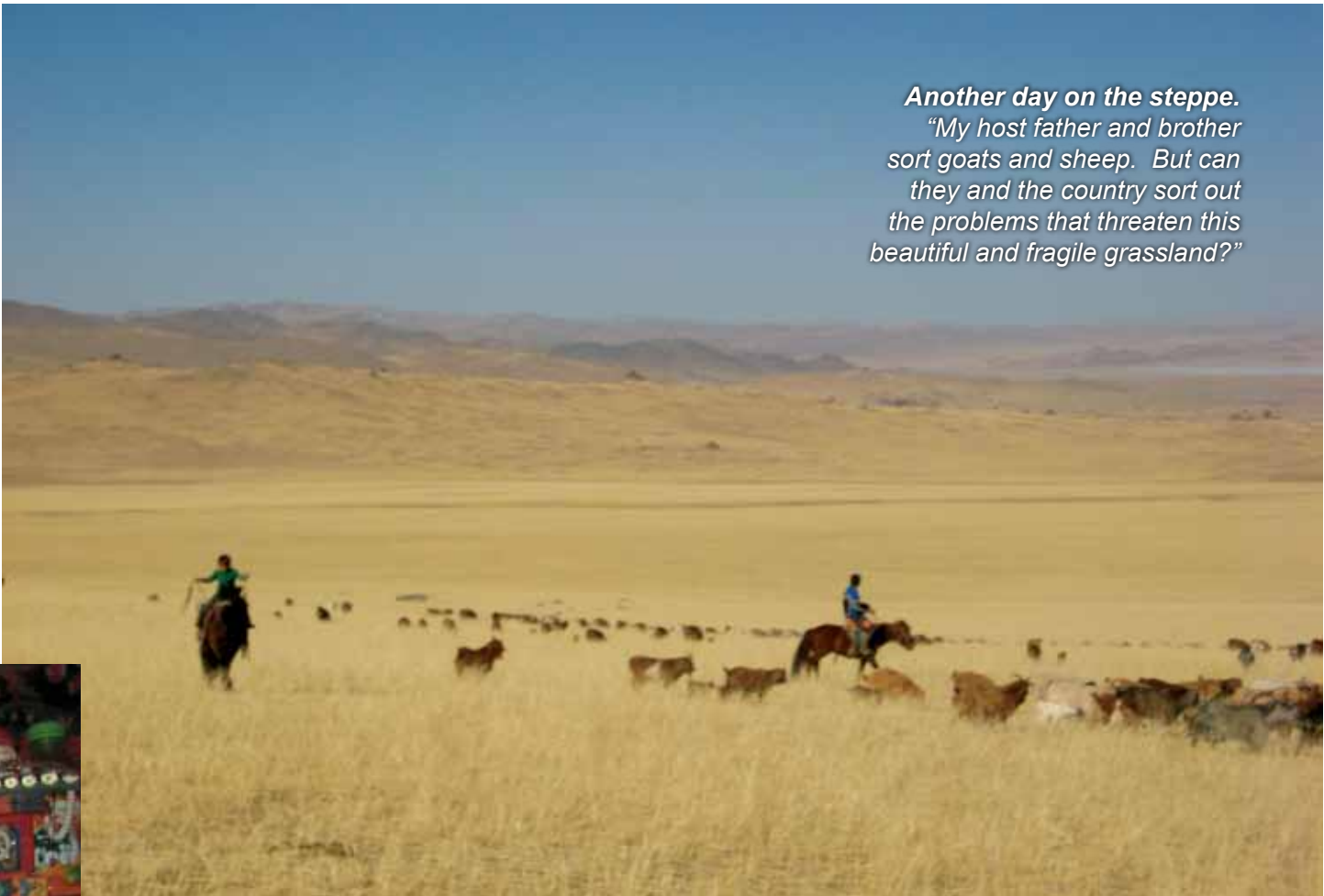
"We just love what you've done with our habitat."

I left my heart with the people and the land of the Mongolian steppe

Dear Friends,

As lovers of prairies, woodlands, and other native ecosystems, I thought you might be interested in reading about another grassland. Like our own prairie of 150 years ago, it is undergoing massive change. The changes haven't come in the form of plows, fences, corn, and soybeans, but rather through overgrazing, mining, and climate change.

The grassland is the Mongolian steppe. In 2011 I spent five months here, experiencing breathtaking landscapes, harsh climatic extremes, and the hospitality of kind



*Another day on the steppe.
“My host father and brother
sort goats and sheep. But can
they and the country sort out
the problems that threaten this
beautiful and fragile grassland?”*



*Togetherness. “Me with host
brother Altangerel and host
father Ganzorig. We ate, slept,
and watched TV in one room.”*

Mongolian families. (Not to mention the unforgiving nature of the wooden Mongolian saddle.)

I also saw firsthand the environmental consequences of land-use changes following political and economic tumult.

For these and other unforgettable experiences I owe

the School for International Training Study Abroad program, and Grinnell College, where I'm currently finishing my senior year.

I grew up helping my parents raise grassfed beef and lamb on a rotational-grazing farm in northeastern Iowa. They often spoke with awe and respect of the Mongolian graziers who have eked out a living for centuries on the inhospitable steppe. But we heard that their lifestyle and the steppe itself were in danger. I wondered if this be the last chance to see how the nomadic herders applied their centuries of knowledge before it vanished.

I knew it would take more than five months and mediocre Mongolian language skills to answer all of my questions. Yet I learned a great deal about the steppe and its peoples in the short time I was there.

One room, one light bulb

Maybe you've heard of the yurt, a portable round dwelling used by nomads in the steppe of Central Asia. The Mongolian version is called the ger. The gers in which I lived with my host families had one room and were heated by a stove that burned dung in the treeless parts of the steppe and wood in the forest-steppe. Layers of wool felt covered the framing of the

PROFILE:

HIGHER EDUCATION. In 2011 a grassland known as the Mongolian steppe served as the classroom for 22-year-old Kayla Koether, a student at Grinnell College in Grinnell, Ia. Kayla spent part of the year living with families that herd cattle, sheep, goats, horses, and camels on this land that once felt the hoof beats of Mongol armies led by Genghis Khan. Her studies were under the auspices of the School for International Studies Abroad. Kayla studied veterinary practices used by the herdsman. But she learned much more than that, sharing daily life with the descendants of families that have lived on this land for centuries.

Kayla was born and raised on a farm in northeastern Iowa near McGregor, where her father, Greg Koether, raises organically certified grass-fed beef and sheep. Her mother, Kathy, is the elementary school principal in the MFL MarMac Community School District.



Appropriate technology.
"A solar panel allows my host families to enjoy a few modern conveniences while continuing to leave a small carbon footprint. But their one-room house, or ger, holds true to centuries of tradition."

Lasting impression.
I came away with great love and respect for the people and the land."

walls. A small solar panel powered the light bulb that lit our cozy room in the evenings. It also charged a car battery that allowed us to watch television. We even charged our cell phones that way.

In the summer we gathered water from nearby streams and lakes, but in early spring we camped farther away and relied on snow. Munkhbat, one of my host mothers, washed my hair with the snow she had melted on the stove, and then used the same precious water to wash the clothes and the floor. Though I didn't have many of the creature comforts of home, like a hot shower or privacy, I felt comfortable with my Mongolian hosts, and was continually amazed by their self-reliance. I respected their independence, their intimate sense of place, and their fierce pride in their land and lifestyle.

1 Simple moments in our daily lives were thrilling. **(Pin 1 on map)** I remember going out with Munkhbat on horseback to pick up baby goats that were being born out in the grass and racing back to the ger with them in our arms. If we didn't get them, she told me, they would be killed by the eagles. Yes, the steppe is home to several species, including the golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), but not the bald eagle. Wolves are another danger to baby domestic animals.



Spring rains fill the low boggy areas. **(Pin 2 on map)** Chojo, my host grandfather, and I watched demoiselle cranes (*Anthropoides virgo*) gracefully duck through the grass, ignoring the bleats of sheep and goats as well as the presence of their human herdsman. But the marmots, once common here, are disappearing, as are other species indigenous to the steppe. And that speaks to the problems the region faces.

This incredibly beautiful, biologically diverse region is of great ecological importance. Nestled between China and Rus-



Mongolia: Land of rich resources and traditions. Pins show where Kayla stayed with nomadic herders.

sia, Outer Mongolia hosts a variety of grassland habitats and a myriad of species. The Gobi desert covers the southern part of the country, but precipitation increases from south to north as the desert gives way to desert steppe, steppe, forest steppe, and finally the taiga, or boreal forest. These diverse ecoregions host an equally impressive range of species, including the Gobi bear, Bactrian camel, Mongolian gazelle, snow leopard, saiga antelope, and the taimen, or Siberian salmon. Mongolia's territory includes two of the three most important flyways in the Asia-Pacific region, thus provides habitat for many birds, including six species of crane.

Shades of the shortgrass prairie

I lived with nomadic herding families in the steppe and forest-steppe regions. These regions would be the most similar to the shortgrass prairie steppe of the U.S. Great Plains. Dominant species include several species of feathergrass (*Stipa*), sheep's fescue (*Poaceae festuca ovina*) as well as Aneurolepidium chinense, Filifolium sibiricum, and Cleistogenes squarrosa. Siberian larch (*Larix sibirica*) and Siberian pine (*Pinus sibirica*) grow in the forest-steppe along with willows and birch trees. Herders told me they used flowering plants like foursplit rhodiola (*Rhodiola quadrifida*), garden burnet (*Sanguisorba officinalis* L.), and alpine gentian (*Gentiana algida* Pall) to treat various livestock diseases.

Nomadic graziers have been herding cattle, yaks, horses, camels, sheep, and goats here for centuries, well before Geng-

his Kahn united the warring tribes in 1206 and created the first Mongolian state.

Political and economic upheavals

From the 13th to the century, a feudal system provided authority over land, livestock, and people. Subjects herded the nobility's livestock, filled quotas for meat and milk, and had access to the best grazing lands. They often moved almost 200 miles in planned seasonal migrations.

Then in 1921, Mongolia became the first Communist satellite. For a brief period, herders were left without meat quotas and management from above, and the Mongolian herd grew from approximately 10 million to over 25 million animals. But by the 1950s, the Communist government had collectivized the livestock, and livestock management was once again communal. My host parents Dechinjvermid and Lhagvajav **(Pin 3 on map)** told me that they were employed by the state during this period. He was a herder and she was a

On Spaceship Earth there are no passengers; everybody is a member of the crew. We have moved into an age in which everybody's activities affect everybody else.
 ~ Marshall McLuhan

Tall in the saddle.

"My host brother's name is Altangerel. All of 5 years old, he grew up on horseback."



milker. They were paid based on the quota system, with reductions in pay if they failed to meet quotas. They got bonuses if they surpassed them. The USSR built factories and business enterprises in more-populated areas, and provided social services like healthcare and education, as well as maternity leave for women herders.

After the USSR collapsed in the late 1980's, so too did its subsidies, and Mongolia became a capitalist democracy open to the world market. This change has had dramatic consequences for both the nomadic graziers and the grasslands. As my host families explained: First, the collectivized livestock were privatized and allocated based on the number of people in a family. Meanwhile, urbanized Mongolians turned to herding as jobs evaporated in the rest of the economy. The number of herders increased dramatically. Today, about one-third of Mongolia's 2.8 million people are herders.

Mongolia lost its meat market with the USSR, but as markets opened with China, cashmere from goats became the

main source of income. It means fewer animals being removed from the herd for meat, and more goats being retained for their annual cashmere production. Thus, the Mongolian herd spiked from around 25 million animals in 1990 to over 45 million in 2010. And the proportion of goats, a more intensive grazer, has risen sharply, while the proportion of yaks and camels, gentler grazers, has declined.

Overtaxed grassland

About 30 percent of Mongolians now live below the poverty line, dependent as they are on unpredictable global prices, with few of the Communist-era safety nets. Herders no longer have quotas to meet. They must make money to survive. As Dechinjvermid told me: In the Communist era, few goods were available, but they were cheap; now herders can get anything, but at a high price. Herders also cannot afford to make the long moves of the past to graze their livestock. Thus, shorter moves along with more herders, more animals, a greater proportion of goats, and the absence of collective management have all

put enormous pressure on the grassland, resulting in environmental degradation from overgrazing.

Mongolian land-tenure laws only complicate the situation. Under Mongolia's laws, all land is public. Herders have no ownership rights, although customary social arrangements prevent them from overusing the land traditionally grazed by others. Individual herd size is not limited by land holdings, however. Furthermore, herders have little incentive to rest pastures or reserve stands of grasses, since they might be grazed by others. But the often unpredictable climate is why many graziers are against land privatization, including my host father Ganzorig (*Pin 1 on map*). They say it would restrict their mobility, crucial when herders move 4 to 20 times a year depending on the weather.

Some, like the Mongolian Society for Rangeland Management, suggest that land should be privatized to groups of herders, so that they have local control and

incentive to collectively maintain their natural resources.

Meanwhile, the booming Mongolian mining industry is posing another threat to grasslands and other natural resources. Companies from Canada to Australia have invested in Mongolia's mineral resources, including coal, gold, copper, and rare metals, and in the process polluting, diverting, and destroying many streams and rivers. Because they have no ownership rights, herders can do little to prevent mining in their traditional grazing lands, or to receive compensation for the resulting environmental degradation. Herders' groups such as the Onggi River Movement have protested the government's failure to enforce the murky laws which restrict and regulate mining.

Finally, herders are feeling the impact of climate change, like those in other northern latitudes. Already, fierce weather events like droughts and blizzards are becoming more frequent and more intense. Given the herders' tiny carbon footprints, and their already stretched resources, this is both ironic and alarming.

I came away with great respect for the natural abilities of the nomadic herders and how they live close to the land. Given equitable rights and effective institutions, I'm sure they could restore their beloved steppe by returning grazing to sustainable levels. Mongolia must include herders in its plan for sustainable development to preserve the rich cultural and natural heritage of the steppe.

Given the mistakes made in the management of America's tallgrass prairie and steppe, I'm sure that your hearts, like mine, are with the herders of Mongolia. You know how difficult it is to restore this natural heritage once lost.

Keep up the good work!

Kayla Anne Koether

koetherk@Grinnell.EDU
26046 Giard Rd.,
McGregor, IA 52157



Threatened fixture. *"As native graziers, the iconic Bactrian camels speak to the historic biological diversity of the steppe, but their numbers are declining, unlike numbers of goats, which are harder on the land."*

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in town or the country...

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