

Roth: Nature Conservancy Protects OK Ecosystems

The Nature Conservancy has yet again had a tremendous year of conserving our state's beautiful and diverse landscapes.

The Nature Conservancy is a nonprofit organization founded in 1951 to protect ecosystems for nature and people. With more than 1 million members, it takes a leading role in all 50 states and 33 countries, protecting ecologically important lands and waters.

The Nature Conservancy itself describes its work as addressing threats to conservation that involve climate change, fresh water, oceans, and conservation land by pursuing pragmatic solutions with a non-confrontational, collaborative approach. To date, the organization has protected more than 119 million acres of land and thousands of miles of rivers around the world.

And they are doing good things here in Oklahoma. The Nature Conservancy has a vital and ever-growing presence in Oklahoma. It has worked to preserve unique landscapes in Oklahoma since 1986. The Nature Conservancy uses a program called Conservation by Design to identify landscapes that will have the greatest long-term conservation impact, and then the organization finds ways to preserve these landscapes. The Nature Conservancy maintains 12 preserves in Oklahoma, totaling 77,000 acres.

The organization's Oklahoma preserves include the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve, the largest protected tallgrass prairie on Earth. The Tallgrass Prairie region once spanned all the way from Texas to Minnesota. But conversion to cropland and urban sprawl whittled down this area until only 10 percent of the region remained. The Nature Conservancy entered the scene in

1989 to preserve what remained. The organization has successfully restored a fully functioning portion of the ecosystem by using about 2,500 free-range bison and a patch-burn method of prescribed burn, where about one-third of the rangeland is burned each year.

Fire plays a vital role in ecosystems, but its role has become severely out of balance. The Nature Conservancy's prescribed burning approach is used to help restore balance and improve biodiversity. In 2013, the organization used prescribed burn on 11,490 acres in Oklahoma, the second-largest prescribed burn season since the program was established in 2000.

The J.T. Nickel Family Nature and Wildlife Preserve is another recent Oklahoma success story. The Nature Conservancy took land that had been converted into a cattle pasture and restored it to its original prairie ecosystem by planting native wildflowers. The organization uses prescribed burns to restore the conditions that historically existed.

Perhaps most importantly, the Nature Conservancy is taking a proactive approach to Oklahoma's sensitive water situation. The organization recently launched Oklahoma's Statewide Freshwater Conservation Program to improve the way we manage our precious water supply. The organization has led by example, putting in place aquatic monitoring plans at its five main preserves in Oklahoma.

The Nature Conservancy's recent move to Midtown in Oklahoma City should give it a central platform to engage the public on important conservation issues facing our state. The Nature Conservancy continues to be a vital leader at conserving Oklahoma's beautiful landscapes, ensuring that this land remains for you and me for years to come.