

PERCEPTIONS OF PRAIRIE: HISTORY AS SPRINGBOARD FOR LAND USE DISCUSSIONS AMONG OLDER RURAL AUDIENCES

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Abstract. Historical accounts of the prairie landscape lurk in short passages of fur traders' journals, explorers' logs, pioneer letters, promotional materials, and 19th century periodicals. Together with historical images and maps, these materials are often used in displays and kiosks. However, such materials can also provide an engaging springboard for dialogue about land use among older rural adults. Older rural citizens are a little-targeted audience for environmental education, yet their opinions strongly influence local land use. Carefully sequenced, locally focused historical accounts enable participants to see the connection between attitude, action, and the natural legacy that is passed to future generations. Some methods of delivery and venues achieve this desired outcome better than others. I have used materials collected for an anthology of historical descriptions of Minnesota prairie in non-credit college classes, special programs at parks and historical societies, tours that retrace explorers' routes, professional symposia, and local venues like church groups and study clubs. I compare case examples of materials, modes of presentation, and apparent audience engagement. Experiments with delivery suggest that audiences are more engaged in meetings of small, regularly scheduled civic organizations than specially scheduled events and programs. The ideal arrangement juxtaposes participatory reading and discussion circles with field experiences.