

SUSTAINABILITY OF NATURAL RESOURCES IN SMALL NATIONAL PARKS OF THE GREAT PLAINS

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Abstract: Much of the biodiversity of the National Park System resides in small, widely scattered parks. In the Great Plains, the average size of protected grassland in 32 parks is 3,454 ha but the median size is only 130 ha. Although small, these parks often provide critical habitat for endemic grassland species, such as prairie dogs, and rest stops for migrating species. However, most of these parks are isolated by surrounding agricultural land and less than half have experimented with or are currently using prescribed fire as a stewardship tool. None are large enough to support free-ranging herds of bison or elk. Conservation biologists question whether such small preserves can be effective in securing biodiversity considering human activity is isolating and impacting these areas and internal management is often missing or ineffective. Recent studies in these small parks document the loss of species and ecosystem processes, the difficulty in managing natural resources in fragmented landscapes, and raise doubts about the long-term persistence of natural resources.