

**Shell Conservation Internship Program**

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**FINAL REPORT**

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My experience as a Shell Conservation Intern at the Saskatchewan Region of the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) has been rewarding and fulfilling, as well as an invaluable learning experience. Working for a non-profit organization such as NCC has taught me that being ready to adapt and willing to learn can be the most important trait a person can have to achieve success in any endeavour. The diverse tasks presented to the Shell Conservation Interns in Saskatchewan definitely challenged this adaptability. My summer consisted of ranch labour, organizing and participating in workshops, landowner relations, public speaking, baseline inventory data collection, property monitoring activities and related office duties. Every day brought something new and exciting related to NCC's role in the community and the province as a whole. This paper will focus on the role of conservation easements in meeting NCC's goal of protecting Saskatchewan's most threatened natural habitats and the stewardship activities that we performed related to this important land securement tool.

Conservation easements are voluntary legal agreements between landowners and government or qualified conservation agencies such as NCC, which restricts the amount of development that can occur on the land in an effort to protect its natural and cultural features. Although there are restrictions placed on that particular parcel of land, the landowner receives many benefits from the donation or sale of the conservation easement. An easement is worth a percentage of the land's value and may be paid to the landowner if it is a purchased easement. If the easement is donated, tax breaks and credits are accrued for the value of the easement. In either case, the landowner retains ownership, use of the land and its earning capacity, while NCC is achieving its goal of protecting significant ecological areas.

Each easement agreement follows a basic format and set of standards, but may be adjusted in accordance to a landowner's individual needs or desires for the land, and the cultural or natural features it is designed to protect. Therefore, properties with conservation easements may differ in the type of restrictions placed on the property due to landowner individuality, ecosystem health or the amount of land that is being protected. Conservation easements may apply to only certain tracts of land within a larger parcel either because of a landowner's request or some areas may not meet NCC's protocols or objectives for protecting the land base. Although each easement may differ slightly, they are all designed to protect the natural and cultural features of the land in perpetuity and are legally binding. Conservation easements are not the only form of land securement used in Saskatchewan, as purchases or fee simple donations occur when the opportunity arises, but they are integral in NCC's role in the province.

After all the restrictions, valuations, signed contracts, and other procedures required for a conservation easement is in place, concern for that parcel of land is then placed in the hands of the stewardship team. This is where my fellow Shell Conservation Intern, Digit Ash, and I were put to work this summer. It is important to have a complete baseline inventory of the property as a benchmark against which to compare the future health of the area. Baseline data collection includes the completion of a flora and fauna inventory, noting where all structures and disturbances exist, as well as using a GPS to record the



*Figure 1. Working in the field, determining species composition within a quadrat. The composition is integral in performing range condition calculations, collecting baseline flora inventories and completing range health assessments.*

locations of pictures taken, property boundaries and any other points of interest encountered during sampling. This inventory is key to the annual monitoring activities that will take place in the years to come. The inventory will be added to over time as rare vegetative species that may have been overlooked initially are found, although sampling coverage of the area is designed to be quite comprehensive. Also, fauna species may frequent the area at varying times of the year and may be encountered during some visits to the property and not others.

Digit and I, along with the Saskatchewan Stewardship Manager, Cheri Sykes, and the Stewardship/Land Securement Representative, Kylie McRae (a former Shell Intern), completed 27 baselines this summer on properties recently protected by the Nature Conservancy of Canada in the province. The four of us made up the stewardship team for the Saskatchewan Region during my time as a Shell Intern. Digit, Cheri and Kylie were all a wealth of information for me in learning the vegetative characteristics of prairie grasses throughout the entire summer, as well as many other skills that I have learned this season.

After the baseline inventory is complete, the data must be organized and presented in a formal report to the landowner so he/she can confirm and agree to our assessment of the parcel of land. This is one of the requirements of NCC in the Conservation Easement Agreement. This baseline report is also the basis in which the property will be monitored in the future. As mentioned earlier, there are restrictions placed on the property regarding development that may alter the natural processes of the protected area. In order to determine whether or not these restrictions have been adhered to, a thorough documentation of the property must be completed to know what is there at the time of signing the easement.

Monitoring of these properties occurs annually after the baseline has been completed. The stewardship team monitored 88 properties this summer, in addition to the 27 baselines completed. Monitoring of properties is much less intense compared to the baseline inventories. During monitoring, we examine the property with the baseline condition in mind. We performed health assessments on each distinct area of the property, whether it was native grassland, tame forage, a forested area or a riparian area. These assessments are then compared to either the baseline report or last year's monitoring assessments to ensure responsible management is taking place.

Through all of these activities, it is imperative that the staff at the Saskatchewan Region of the Nature Conservancy of Canada interact with landowners in a professional and courteous manner. The landowners are integral to the areas that we are protecting and constant communication with them is important in meeting our goals. After all, the landowners are on the land every day, and the protection of their land is not only beneficial to the ecological integrity of the area, but to their way of life and economic stability as well. A couple of examples of this communication and appreciation for cooperation are The Landowner Connection Newsletter sent to all the landowners affiliated with the Saskatchewan Region of NCC, and the landowner appreciation barbecue that was held in Moose Jaw. Digit and I helped to complete and ensure each was a success. In addition to the appreciation barbecue, a workshop was held to educate landowners on exotic species control, with Leafy Spurge being the species that received the most attention. We learned how to control this noxious weed with a combination of grazing, herbicide application and bio-control with the use of species-specific beetles.



*Figure 2. Riparian area on the Centennial Property dedicated during the National Board tour in Saskatchewan this spring. This property is located in the Missouri Coteau, where rolling hills create a high density of wetlands important for migratory bird populations that frequent the province. This fact makes this area of particular importance to NCC Saskatchewan Region.*

Good relations with landowners also enables future projects or land securement to occur in areas that are focused upon by NCC Saskatchewan. Oftentimes, the best advertising about our program is achieved through word of mouth. It is through this method that several landowners of a family, or neighbours of our landowners, also decide that conservation easements make sense for them. This aids in protecting larger tracts of land and reducing the fragmentation of the landscape that is occurring across the prairies.

The summer came to a close with the Shell Conservation Interns wrap-up event that began at Shell Canada's corporate office in Calgary on August 23<sup>rd</sup>. All the Shell Interns from across the country gathered to share their experiences from the summer and discuss conservation issues that are unique to their regions, as well as issues we all face every day. On August 24<sup>th</sup> we toured Shell Canada sites in Kananaskis Country and examined how they are striving to reduce their ecological footprint in their resource extraction activities. We also looked at an NCC property adjacent to Canmore, Alberta, and discussed how urban pressures are affecting natural spaces in the Rockies and all the specific management concerns that go along with the encroachment of humans on natural areas.

I am thankful for getting the opportunity to work for the Nature Conservancy of Canada through the visionary funding provided by Shell Canada Limited. I see this funding as a lasting endowment to the conservation of natural places in Canada as it provides young people in the conservation sciences field the ability to gain knowledge that will be used throughout the span of each Shell Conservation Intern's career. I am positive that my experiences working as a Shell Intern will benefit me in my future career aspirations, as I wish to continue working in the conservation sciences field in my home province. Learning opportunities this summer in areas including field work, office protocol and landowner relations, will provide me with a solid base of knowledge for my future goals. Duties encountered by the Shell Conservation Interns in Saskatchewan this summer included a myriad of tasks, but all of them had one thing in common; doing what is required to save Canada's natural masterpieces and ensuring the Nature Conservancy of Canada's campaign for conservation is a success.