



Agassiz Environmental Learning Center

~ Spring 2018 Newsletter ~

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A lot has been happening at the Agassiz Environmental Learning Center of late. The primary activity relates to seeking designation of the Fertile Sand Hills Recreation Area as a “Park of Regional Significance,” which would qualify the City of Fertile to seek funding for site improvements including trail work, signage, expanded Nature Center and more. Read more about this process and the need for public input on improvements needed for the area to be an asset to the community, region, and state.



With our late winter this year, the early blooming pasque flowers were an especially welcome sign of spring. Early May showers also helped bring the Sand Hill River up to an excellent level for kayaking in the Fertile area. And spring is always a busy time for site visits by schools to the unique Fertile Sand Hills learning environment. More on these topics in this spring newsletter.

Fertile Sand Hills Recreation Area Receives High Ranking

“On behalf of the Greater Minnesota Regional Parks and Trails Commission, we are pleased to inform you that your designation application for Sand Hills Recreation Area has been ranked “High” by the Commission. This facility was identified as having a high-quality application and potential for designation as a regional park.”

The above good news was received by the City of Fertile in a May 2, 2018 letter from Greater Minnesota Regional Parks and Trails Commission Executive Director, Renee Mattson. The letter also included group comments from the GMRPTC evaluation team noting, ***“Unique area, diverse ecosystems, priority on protecting the natural landscapes and habitat.”***

It was made clear that projects that receive a “High” ranking have strong potential to become a part of the Regional Park system, provided the information in the Master Plan compares well to the criteria in the GMRPTC Strategic Plan. The next step now is development of this Master Recreation Plan for the Fertile Sand Hills Recreation Area.

Fertile residents and visitors, outdoor and river recreation enthusiasts, educators and students (K-12, postsecondary, and community) are all encouraged to be a part of this planning effort by participating in several information sessions and cook-outs starting on May 30th. See more details in separate article. Benefits include individual health from outdoor activities, economic benefits to the community from recreation and tourism expenditures, and environmental benefits to the local natural resources from sustainable development.

Fertile Sand Hills Nature Center Information Sessions and Cookouts

Over the next month, the Sand Hills Recreation Area planning team will be hosting a series of cookouts at the Fertile Sand Hills Nature Center to hear from local and regional community members and users about their ideas for improving the Fertile Sand Hills Recreation Area. These sessions will help guide the design of the Fertile Sand Hills Recreation Area Master Plan to best serve the entire Fertile community and surrounding region.

The cookouts will take place on May 30th, June 6th, and June 13th from 5:00-8:00pm. We will be grilling out at the Nature Center, walking and exploring the Sand Hills, and gathering information and ideas through a set interactive design activities with participants. All are invited. We hope that those who enjoy the unique Fertile Sand Hills - or are just interested in learning more - will come out to one or more of the sessions. The following themes have been established for the sessions to focus our conversations:

May 30th – *Trails & Recreation*

June 6th – *Education*

June 13th – *Health and Wellness*

Extensive community engagement in development of the plan involving local, regional, and state partners is imperative to ensure broad consensus and buy-in to the plan and its eventual implementation and success. Following these cookouts, another public



meeting will be held to share findings and design ideas that emerge from this master planning process.

Grant funds from the Northwest Regional Sustainable Development Partnership, MN CURA CAP, and Northwest Minnesota Foundation have been obtained to engage personnel from the University of Minnesota College of Design to work with the Fertile community and partners to develop the ideas and visions for the comprehensive Master Plan.

The final plan will identify project priorities and partners based on community input. Final designs, drawings, site plans and budget estimates will be prepared for use by the City of Fertile, AELC, and partners to assist in efficient plan implementation.

We look forward to seeing you at the Fertile Sand Hills Nature Center and hearing your ideas!

On-line Survey...to get started thinking about recreation and program activities at the Fertile Sand Hills, please go to this site, <https://tinyurl.com/SandHillsSurvey>, to respond to a short survey about your current and desired use of the Fertile Sand Hills.

Documentation of trails and site features is being done with use of drone technology. A series of videos and photos are being edited and will be made available on a FertileFocus blog site that will provide information on project updates and input opportunities. <http://cityoffertilemn.blogspot.com/>.

Pasque Flower Earth Day Program

A pasque flower presentation was featured as part of April 22nd Earth Day activities hosted by the Agassiz Environmental Learning Center at the Fertile Sand Hills Nature Center. Information was also shared about ecosystem restoration activities underway before the group went for a leisurely hike in the Fertile Sand Hills to see these phenomena.



Wayne Goeken led hikers to the prime pasque flower viewing area in Death Valley 1 where many pasque flowers were in bloom. The pasque flower is one of the first prairie flowers to bloom in spring, often blooming while snow is still present.

Agassiz ELC board member Wendell Johnson, pointed out fringe areas of the open dunes where several rare plants and insect species that are rare and threatened in Minnesota have been found and why current management efforts are underway to



provide suitable habitat for these species.

On the return, hikers went through Death Valley 2 (*right*) to see site management activities underway to create additional open sand areas that have historically been part of the unique ecological niche of the Fertile Sand Hills. The rare plants include annual skeletonweed and Indian ricegrass. Regarding insects, the rare sandy tiger beetle has only been found in the state of Minnesota at the Fertile Sand Hills with recent searches not finding the species, but further surveys will be done to try to determine if it is still present at the site.



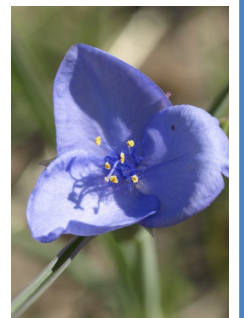
Upcoming Blooms in the Fertile Sand Hills

There is an ongoing progression of blooming prairie and woodland plants throughout spring, summer, and fall at the Fertile Sand Hills and along the Sand Hill River corridor.



One of the next showy blooms in the Sand Hills will be the large-flowered Penstemon, also called beard-tongue (*left*). This plant is up to 3 feet tall and has large showy 2-inch pale purple flowers with up to 12 blossoms per plant. Pale or slender beardtongue are also present in the Sand Hills.

Another showy purple or blue flower that will bloom soon is spiderwort (*right*). The flower can be more than 1 inch across and often is only open during the morning, shriveling to a fluid jelly which accounts for some of its common names including Job's tears, widow tears, and cow slobber.



Students Enjoy Hands-on Outdoor Education at Fertile Sand Hills

It's been a busy spring at the Fertile Sand Hills with school groups using the site nearly every school day in May for on-site programs. Agassiz ELC Environmental Education Program Director Danielle Spiten welcomes busloads of elementary and middle school students from around the region at the Fertile Sand Hills site and leads them in memorable outdoor experiences.

On one recent day over 200 students were involved in programs at the Fertile Sand Hills site with 160 students from Thief River Falls Franklin Middle School engaged in service learning projects to assist the Agassiz ELC with site management needs while learning about prairie ecosystems and pollinators.



Another 46 elementary students from East Grand Forks were also on site the same day hiking to other popular areas of the Fertile Sand Hills.

Tight school budgets have forced some school groups to cancel on-site trips to the Fertile Sand Hills. In some instances local donors have stepped

up to cover transportation costs for school visits. We will be trying to help match schools with more local donors to ensure all students have opportunity to get outdoors and experience nature.



To keep Agassiz ELC members and the public informed on a more timely basis of programs, activities, and involvement opportunities, we would ask that you please provide your email to Lisa Liden, Fertile City Clerk, at Lisa@cityoffertile.org. You can also follow us on Facebook at [Agassiz Environmental Learning Center](#), as well as keeping up to latest Sand Hill River paddling news at the [Sand Hill River Kayaking](#) Facebook page. Thank you for your interest and support.