

To celebrate prairie landscapes, research says to take an aesthetic approach

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A Kansas State University researcher and former park ranger is helping people take a new view of the prairie and see it as more than a seemingly empty landscape.

Tyra Olstad, doctoral student in geography, North Tonawanda, N.Y., is studying the rich -- although sometimes hidden -- beauty of Kansas landscapes. It's an abstract, yet important, field of study that may help develop new ways to promote and celebrate Kansas tourism, history and geography.

"I became interested in the pejoratives that people layer on prairie landscapes," Olstad said. "I wanted to study how we psychologically interact with places and what this interaction means for the different places."

Kansas landscapes do not fit the conventional definition of beautiful scenery, Olstad said, making it difficult to persuade people that the prairie is anything but flat and dull. But if Kansans learn to celebrate the beauty and rhythm of prairie landscapes in new ways, they can deepen their own sense of place, engender local pride and promote tourism in [rural communities](#).

It all starts with understanding open spaces. Most research in this area focuses on the aesthetics of mountains, forests or seashores -- destinations that fit the convention of beautiful scenery. Different [government agencies](#) are beginning to integrate this type of aesthetic

research of landscapes into historical and tourism material.

"Researchers have come up with all sorts of ways to measure how important it is to appreciate landscapes as a whole," Olstad said. "We want to understand the [aesthetics](#) side of landscapes and not just how much you can get from the land economically or recreationally. Researchers and agencies are looking at scenery as an asset and a part of a place -- a value in and of itself."

But few researchers have studied the prairie under such aesthetic guidelines. While many researchers have noted that it is hard to evaluate seemingly empty landscapes, Olstad argues that prairies are more of an experience than they are a piece of scenery.

"The prairie is an experience that you can't fit into any rubric because it is just as much temporal as it is spatial," Olstad said. "I developed a strong connection with prairie landscapes, and I am trying to translate that into some kind of wider societal appreciation."

Olstad's research encompasses several different fields of study: scientific analysis, ecology and environmental history. She traveled throughout Kansas and visited landmarks such as the Konza Prairie Biological Station, the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve and Mount Sunflower -- the highest point in Kansas.

Olstad has spent 10 years working for the [National Park](#) Service in places such as Petrified Forest National Park in Arizona, Badlands National Park in South Dakota, Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park in Colorado and Fossil Butte National Monument in Wyoming. For her research, Olstad worked under the direction of Kevin Blake, professor of geography, and Elizabeth Dodd, university distinguished professor of English.

Olstad looked at prairie landscapes according to several traditional styles, but noted that using such standards do not always make prairies appear valuable. For instance, Olstad studied scenic evaluations of the prairie using architectural standards and noted that by these standards, the prairie appears empty. She also took a psychological approach and concluded that psychological standards suggest that prairies often make people feel alienated.

But Olstad saw much more positive results when she took an aesthetic approach to the prairie. She took the same artistic techniques used in photography, literature and visual arts and applied them to the prairie. By doing so, she was able to find new perspectives that represent prairie [landscapes](#) in positive ways.

"People talk about photographs, images and literature and how they should tell stories," Olstad said. "So I started writing down some of my own experiences of the prairie and taking pictures that shared these experiences."

In the process of applying artistic concepts, Olstad looked at aspects that make up the prairie -- the small insects, spider webs, stones and plants -- and then expanded her view to study the horizon, the wide-open sky, the sunrise and the sunset.

"You can't really fit a horizon or a sunrise and sunset in a book or photograph," Olstad said. "All you can really do is celebrate them. The more you talk about them, the more that other people will either be curious enough to visit the prairie, or they will be intrigued enough to start sharing that with others."

That is how appreciation of the prairie can spread, Olstad said, and she hopes that her research inspires people to celebrate the prairie and look at it with new eyes.

"You don't have to go on grand adventures in Siberia or the Congo," Olstad said. "You can just look in your backyard and it's wondrous."

She will present her research at the upcoming Association of American Geographers' annual meeting on Sunday, Feb. 26. Olstad also recently published an essay called "How to Draw the Prairie" in the journal *Precipitate*.

Provided by Kansas State University

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