



*Summary Report
for
Sand Hills Discovery Experience*

August 6, 2002

*Coordinated by
Sand Hills Discovery & Visitor Center Foundation*

*Chairman
Richard Albrecht*

*Conference Co-Chairs
Kevin & Dottie Arent*



Sand Hills Discovery & Visitor Center Foundation

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Before the cattle ranching, before the westward movement, before the Native Americans, the sands were sifting over the plains of central Nebraska creating the largest concentration of sand dunes in the western hemisphere. According to James B. Swinehart, UNL professor and research geologist, "During numerous severe droughts within the last 15,000 years, the dunes have lost their plant cover and have migrated freely." The Nebraska Sand Hills provide abundant grasslands and wetlands lying atop the Ogallala Aquifer.

The Sand Hills Discovery and Visitors Center Foundation was chartered in January 2001, for the purpose of providing comprehensive information about the Sand Hill area. The committee members span in age from 14 to 74 years and represent a cross-section of occupations and interests combined with a wealth of experience. The committee's primary mission is to develop and sustain a Sand Hills Interpretive Center. The foundation builds on the legacy of several community experts including the family of the late, world-renowned paleontologist, Morris F. Skinner and local resident and noted state expert on grassland, Sid Salzman.

Creation of the Sand Hills Discovery Experience

The foundation would like to determine the feasibility of building an interpretive center. A key component in that study would be local support and a community of interest. The Sand Hills Discovery and Visitors Center Foundation was searching for a way to create awareness of the Sand Hills and meet the foundation's goals. Keevin and Dottie Arent, two foundation directors, first suggested the idea of a one-day, annual event in October of 2001. Their idea was to recruit speakers from areas of interests that had been delineated in the goals of the Sand Hills Discovery and Visitors Center Foundation. Specifically paleontology, ecology, geology, horticulture, forestry and agriculture and how it relates to the Sand Hills area throughout the ages. In November, Keevin and Dottie were named event co-chairs and the concept of the Sand Hills Discovery Experience was born. To enhance the experience, field trips were added to provide participants an opportunity for a genuine encounter with the Sand Hills. Tours were given through the Nature Conservancy north of Johnstown as well as through the Sand Hill ranch country to the south of Ainsworth and Johnstown. To fill in and compliment areas not covered by speakers, vendors and exhibitors were invited to provide additional interest and information.

The Sand Hills Discovery and Visitors Center Foundation employs no staff. As with any organization, volunteers were key to the success of the event. Committees were formed from our adult and student membership and included: Finance, Program, Publicity, Vendors/Tours, Food, and Educational Credit. Each committee set up a list of responsibilities and met as needed. At the monthly foundation meetings, the committees gave reports of progress and ask for feedback from those attending the general meeting. During the event, committee members registered the guests, hosted the speakers and attended the event sessions.

Planning and Implementing the Sand Hills Discovery Experience

The committees presented the needs for the event and resources were identified. For the main program, the committee enlisted our community experts and used their influence to bring noted speakers for the event. The speakers and their respective credentials included:

"Providing comprehensive information of the Sand Hill area"

- o Al Steuter, the Nature Conservancy Director of Science and Stewardship for the Nebraska field office, (BS) Wildlife Science University of Nebraska-Lincoln and University of Idaho, 1976 (MS) 1978 and (Ph.D.) Range Management specializing in Fire Ecology, Texas Tech University, 1982.
- o Jim Swinehart, Professor and Research Geologist from the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, (BA) Geology, University of California-Riverside 1965, (MS) Geology 1979, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, (PH.D. Graduate work) Geology, Pennsylvania State University 1965-1970.
- o Bruce Bailey, Salvage Paleontologist also from the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, (BA) Geology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln 1986, (MS) 2002 University of Nebraska-Lincoln.
- o Jon Wilson, District and Extension West Central Research and Extension Center, North Platte, (BSF) Forest Management, West Virginia University 1971, (MF) Silviculture/Environmental Management, Duke University, 1976 (MS) Range Management/Animal Science, University of Nevada-Reno, 1986.
- o Lloyd Hartman, Weed Superintendent of Dodge County, NE.

Jim Swinehart, Professor and Research Geologist, UNL



These experts were asked to address a variety of issues relating to the Sand Hills.

The finance and publicity committees strived for funding from outside sources. Five grants were written and funded from the Ainsworth Betterment Committee, the Brown County Foundation, Brown County Visitors Committee, the Sandhills Task Force and the Nebraska Division of Travel and Tourism.

Niobrara Valley Wood Products markets products created from native wood.



The committee working with vendors/exhibitors sought out those with interests that paralleled the concept of the event. The vendors and exhibitors brought together a unique assortment of products and displays specific to the geographic area of Ainsworth—baskets made from used lariats, furniture crafted from cedar from the Niobrara Valley, original photos from ranch landscapes, bluebird houses, slides of irrigation projects and Indian artifacts, to name a few.

The food committee and facility committee worked with local providers to accommodate the event's needs. The day's event, including lunch, was

held at the Ainsworth Conference Center with the evening banquet taking place at the Elk's Club located in downtown Ainsworth.

Dick Albrecht, chairman of the Sand Hills Discovery and Visitors Center Foundation is the Director of the Long Pine Continuing Education Center and wrote a proposal to Wayne State College to secure college credit for the event. He then designed an education course and served as an adjunct faculty member of WSC and Students were required to attend the conference and field trip then turn in five lesson plans in which they used the information learned at the event in their classroom.

The foundation set an event goal to bring an awareness of the Sand Hills to at least fifty registrants of the general public. Pre-registrations were requested with 78 individuals enrolling prior to the event. Registrations were also accepted on the event day allowing more than 100 to attend the discussions. At the morning registration, each participant was given a folder containing the day's program, an evaluation sheet, a Sand Hills trivia page (used later for door prize drawings), a proposal for a Legislative Resolution to establish a Sand Hills day of recognition, a Geologic Bedrock Map of Nebraska, contributed by Mrs. Barbara Skinner Lamb including an explanation of the map and why it is important. To introduce even more people to the experience and encourage more attendance for the event in the future, the vendors and exhibits were open to the general public during the afternoon.

Participants enjoy a speaker in the conference room.



The local community graciously worked with the foundation to ensure the success of the event. The North Central Development Center endorsed the event by issuing the information news release and providing the contact office for all correspondence and publicity. The Chamber of Commerce contacted the vendors and exhibitors. Local auto dealerships provided transportation for the tours, beef producers contributed funds for the evening meal and many businesses donated door prizes. Radio stations from Ainsworth, Valentine, O'Neill and Winner, SD, provided airtime for interviews and promotion covering an area of over a 150-mile

radius of Ainsworth. This event brought a number of people to our community for the first time and showed the participants the pride we take in our location and it's unique geology.

Involving of Educators and Students

One goal of the foundation is to bring educators, from throughout the state and region, an awareness of the Sand Hills. A college course was built around the one-day event and was supplemented by field trips. One hour of college credit was offered through Wayne State College.

The foundation also desires to target young people and increase their knowledge and appreciation of the Sand Hills. An incentive was offered to encourage youth to participate. Any student, 18 years or younger, could attend the event at no cost if they accompanied a registered adult. A youth group from the Ainsworth High School, B.E.A.T., entertained during lunch. They create their unique rhythmic sound by strumming, pounding and beating ordinary items found in a farm/ranch environment. Ainsworth High School student, Brandon O'Hare, is exploring the possibility of establishing a day for recognizing the Sand Hills. He drafted a Legislative Resolution asking for feedback from the attendees of the event. Local students were also recruited to assist in setting up and disassembling the Ainsworth Conference Center where the event was held.

Assessment of the Sand Hills Discovery Experience

To assist in planning for future Sand Hills Discovery Experience events, an evaluation was created and presented to attendees. They were allowed to rate the speakers, food, vendors/exhibitors, facility and the experience as a whole. The average rating was 9.2 out of a possible 10 points. One of many similar comments was, "well planned, very educational and interesting; great 1st annual Sand Hills Discovery Experience; you have done a wonderful job today." The event enjoyed very positive publicity with KBRB Radio providing some live broadcasting and interviews. A follow-up news release was submitted to all local newspapers. Regional and state coverage was provided courtesy of the Norfolk Daily News, Lincoln Star-Journal and Omaha World Herald. The event was chronicled through a videotape summary of the day, a copy of which was made available to Nebraska Educational Television, and still photos capture the excitement generated by the event.

Bruce Bailey identifies a camel bone for Beverly & Lee DeGroof



Conclusion

Never has the Sand Hills been the focus of an event that interests local residents, travelers, youth, senior citizens and educators. The community and region overwhelmingly received the concept of this unique, new project. Many organizations contributed funds to ensure the event was successful and the participation showed the magnitude of interest in the Sand Hills. The presenters were of unparalleled quality; able to speak on the most complex issues and yet present them in terms that the layman could appreciate. Adding to the uniqueness of the experience were specialized tours through our local Nature Conservancy (Niobrara Valley Preserve), buffalo tour, and Sand Hill ranch country as seen through the eyes of our local ranch residents. The youth group, B.E.A.T., received an immediate standing ovation from the lunch crowd. The evening dinner event was capped off by a beautiful presentation of photographs, set in the Sand Hills, taken by Bob Rooney of Sandhills Images, Inc.

The success of the 1st Sand Hills Discovery Experience has strengthened confidence within the foundation that there is truly an intense interest in this huge region that covers 19,300 square miles of the state of Nebraska. The Sand Hills Discovery and Visitors Center Foundation continues to strive toward fulfilling the ultimate goal of building an interpretive center and educating the general public on the diverse resources of the largest grass covered dune field in the western hemisphere. Through the continued efforts of the foundation and the participation in future Sand Hills Discovery Experiences, travelers will come to realize what the local population has always known, the Sand Hills are a source of history, abundant grasslands and beauty. As stated by foundation charter member, Barbara Lamb, "They convey a quiet dignity."