



Learning in Place

By Emily Ryan, director at The Commons at the University of Kansas

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Hi, I'm Emily Ryan, director at The Commons at the University of Kansas. The work of The Commons is to bring together specialists and students across expertise and experience; language and perspectives, in an effort to ask different questions that might help us better understand the world we inhabit.

Currently, programming is exploring the concept of Humans in a More-Than-Human World. If the humanities are the study of human history and culture, we're practicing humanities through a non-human lens—looking to non-human lifeforms and ecosystems to ask questions about humans' relationships with both nature and each other, questions like: What can we, humans, learn from nonhuman teachers? What can animals, insects, and plants, rocks, wind and water teach us about how to survive, adapt, and thrive? What can nonhuman species teach us about community? How do nonhuman forms of gathering, socializing, caretaking, and affection present in the world around us, and how can we use those models to shape new kinds of human connections?

And as we step into a strange new winter in Kansas, characterized by an ongoing pandemic and the need for social distancing, we have an opportunity to commune with the land around us. Though winter is a time of hibernation, when plants go dormant and animals take shelter, a time when the winds rise up and the snow falls, it is also a time when we can continue to learn from the natural world, which connects us all.

As Megan Kaminski, poet and associate professor of English at the University of Kansas, writes in her 2014 poem, "Wintering Prairie":

Snow drifts the prairie white
each gathering a prayer a knife a candle
water crystalline seeding warmth
ground expectant bootfall above sod below
the ground between us the ground we share
ground that sprouts green that holds roots deep
soft porous mealy with bug and vole

For Kaminski, here, the natural world becomes part of the human family, a space where human society—as exemplified by "bootfall"—connects with the "crystalline" snow, the green sprouts hidden below, and the "bug and vole" sleeping below that. In this winter of connection, when we can see ourselves as part of the larger prairie ecosystem that surrounds us here in Kansas, we can start to see hints of how to learn from the prairie.

In 2018, Robin Wall Kimmerer spent some time on the Konza Prairie. Dr. Kimmerer is Professor of plant ecology at the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse NY and an enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. Her thoughtful and articulate observations help us, as humans, to consider the vibrancy and power of this place to teach us how to adapt and persevere to a changing world.

She writes:

"Our desperate need is not only for the remembrance of what is lost or hanging by a thread, but an urgent need for its ecological presence at this crucial moment in history when we stand on the cusp of climate catastrophe.

Prairie and prairie soils managed in the way the buffalo people used to do it have been shown to have enormous capacity to sequester carbon dioxide. While engineers look to invent carbon sequestration technologies, the prairies we destroyed know exactly how to do it. Corn fields emit tons of carbon, while prairies store it away. The inhalation by the prairie is a breath that might save us, while the exhalation of corn fields hurries us down the road to disaster. Carbon farming and conservation agriculture hold great promise for modelling our food production after the lessons of the prairie. If we act in time.

Biodiversity is the imagination of the earth. It is the source of innovation and adaptation and evolution that enables the ongoing flourishing of life. Every species lost is the loss of an entire library of knowledge, it is the loss of ones who could teach us about new medicines or carbon capture. Quite aside from their instrumental value in what they provide for us is what they provide for each other - and their inherent right to be."

In present-day Kansas, settled on the lands of Arapaho, Cheyenne, Comanche, Kansa, Kiowa, Osage, Pawnee, and Wichita Peoples, we are lucky to have opportunities to commune with and learn survival skills from the land directly. The Konza Prairie offers hiking trails and hosts visiting researchers; the Tallgrass Prairie in the Flint Hills, a national park, welcomes walkers, observers, listeners. Resources like the Land Institute in Salina, which studies the culture of agriculture, develops cross-bred species of wheat and legumes that can endure harsh winters and root deeper in perennial life.

I encourage you to spend time outdoors this winter, observing the species that surround you, knowing that you might learn something new, from these companions' ways of being in the world.

This transcript of "Learning in Place" is part of the Humanities Kansas Hotline, a series of bite-sized micropresentations about Kansas stories – both serious and light-hearted – that are researched and presented by experts across the state. Humanities Hotline topics change monthly. For more information about Humanities Kansas and the Humanities Hotline, visit humanitieskansas.org or call 1-888-416-2018.