

The Grass Will Not Lie to You: The Contribution of Ethnography of Communication to Socio-Ecological Modeling of the Nebraska Sandhills

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Since the summer of 2017, we have been investigating the interrelated humanistic, ecological, and theological features of the Nebraska Sandhills, the largest area of stabilized sand dunes in the western hemisphere. Ethnography of communication (EC) is a key component of the research because it gives texture and depth to ecological inquiry. Such studies are critical for understanding mutual influence people exert on the environment and the environment exerts on people.

Preliminary study has been productive for identifying the features of a socio-ecological system in the Sandhills. (see <https://bit.ly/2Rl4VuW>). We are continuing fieldwork to refine description of these features, locate additional features, and develop a robust socio-ecological model.

The present paper will demonstrate the value of EC work regarding two dimensions of the interdisciplinary study. First, we illustrate how cultural meanings are animated in social interaction with and among the primary ecosystem elements of the region: sand, grass, water, and grazers. The combination of topography and soil composition influenced settlement patterns in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, land transition and ownership, ranching practice, and understandings of human and ecological interaction as is evidenced in contemporary discourse. Steep dune tops characterized by thinner vegetation and higher susceptibility to drought and dune movement, and sub-irrigated “wet” meadows characterized by heavy vegetation, pooling water, and lake formation deeply impact management of cattle operations and, in turn, grazing and haying practices influence the ecosystem. This interdependence between land and people is articulated, in part, as a communicative relationship in phrases such as “(the grass) will not lie to you,” “it’s telling you to move on.”

Second, we examine a primary feature of a socio-ecological model for the Sandhills: The pressure to reduce risk in ranching operation, to “sway it the way you want it to go.” This feature is elaborated through a description and interpretation of cultural premises and practices which function to limit the likelihood that ranchers could “lose their places” in the face of unpredictability of economic markets and climate conditions. Description and interpretation of local discourse that lays bare this persistent force that motivates actions, shapes identities, and filters meanings in and of the Sandhills.

We have observed a consistent ability of the Sandhill landscape to elicit strong emotions in both visitors and residents; it seems impossible to not be moved by the Sandhills. A unique feature of this interdisciplinary research is the simultaneous production of documentary shorts, still photography, and a feature-length film, the subject of which seeks to document the deep spiritual connection(s) for not only those who live and work in the Sandhills, but also those who encounter the Sandhills infrequently. This dimension of the project has provided additional intellectual perspective and, more pragmatically, a large body of visual materials with which to examine, record, and report. The presentation will be supplemented with these representations and include brief commentary on the productive capacity of interdisciplinary research for addressing complex ecological concerns.

While environmental interventions are not the subject of the study, we take for granted existing and future challenges wrought by climate change regarding land use, land ownership, water resources, food production, and energy production. The cultural interpretations, ecological descriptions, and theological/visual representation, provide a “deep map” of place that will be a useful resource for adaptation and resilience.

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