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Grasslands of the World

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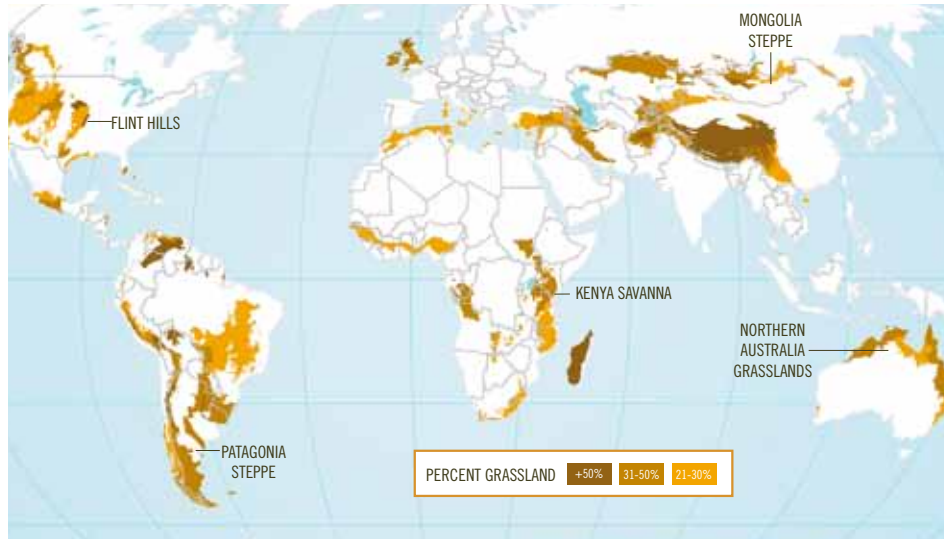
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GRASSLANDS OF THE WORLD MAP
 © Tim Boucher
 for The Nature Conservancy

GRASSLANDS OF THE WORLD

The Masai [sic] are also a nomadic people whose principal interest and sole wealth are in cattle and goats. Cattle, like wild animals, have a preference for the tender green grass which shoots up immediately after a fire has passed, and natives feel that this is license enough for burning up the place. Even if trees are destroyed and the air is filled with soot and dust for weeks, and even if their homes are wrecked - the homes can soon be built again by the wives and children... The Government is making every effort to bring all this disorder of 'nature' under control, and I am glad to see their determination and their accomplishments... Without question, this is the largest and most fascinating natural zoo in all the world and there is now every assurance that the colorful beasts which have made Africa the mecca of all sportsmen and naturalists will be preserved for posterity. It remains only for the Government to provide proper roads and facilities so that all who wish to come and see with their own eyes the wonders which Martin and I have been trying for twenty years to capture in film for children back home and all motion picture travelers. Osa Johnson, New York Times Magazine, 1937

Martin and Osa Johnson were pioneers in exposing general audiences to African cultures and wildlife through books, articles, and film. These self-described “Motion Picture Explorers” were the first pilots to fly over Mount Kilimanjaro and Mount Kenya. In the 1920s and 1930s, as they documented places that their western audiences perceived as “untamed,” they developed a passion for preserving the unique wildlife and habitat of the savannas, and they shared this passion through countless lectures and articles.

But like many western explorers and adventure writers before them - from Jules Verne to Teddy Roosevelt - the Johnsons lacked a holistic understanding of the landscape they loved and the rich cultural interactions necessary for the habitat to thrive. In a 1937 account in the *New York Times Magazine*, Osa Johnson praised government efforts to hamper the Maasai Tribe’s “disorderly” practice of deliberate burning as the best way to “preserve for posterity” the savannas as “mecca of all sportsmen and naturalists.” Like many of her time, Osa saw the savanna as a pristine place untouched by humans, and the Maasai were interfering with the natural order. She failed to recognize the enduring role the Maasai had played in preserving the rare beauty of this grassland.

Osa’s views on prescribed burning may have been different had she possessed a clearer understanding of a similar landscape in her own back yard. Both Osa and Martin Johnson grew up fewer than 100 miles from the heart of the Kansas Flint Hills, where ranchers had adopted the native practice of prescribed burning decades before the Johnsons’ first trip to the African savanna. Even those familiar with the practice of prescribed burning in America’s grasslands may not have seen the connection between the tallgrass prairie and other grasslands throughout the world.

Grasslands, prairies, plains, pampas, llanos, cerrados, steppes, veldt, savannas. These many terms are used to describe the grasslands that cover one quarter of



BUFFALO GRASSLANDS
Jim Richardson

the Earth's surface where conditions are too dry for forests and too wet for deserts. Found on all of the earth's continents except Antarctica, they provide a vital source of fresh water and grasses for large mammals and are prized for their expansive beauty. There are two types of grasslands: tropical, like Africa's savannas and South America's pampas, where rich grasses are fueled by heavy seasonal rains; and temperate, like the tallgrass prairie and Mongolian steppes, where grasses

lie dormant during a cold season.

For centuries, explorers and naturalists pointed out differences between the far-off places they visited and the homes of their "civilized" audiences. But a complete understanding of the American grasslands is only possible through an appreciation for grassland ecosystems worldwide. In this Field Journal, we explore what we find interesting about grasslands and the similarities among grassland cultures and landscapes.

Because the preservation of the world's

grasslands requires human interaction through burning and grazing practices, people in these places have strong ties to the landscape. Because grasslands cannot thrive in heavily populated areas and most traditional occupants were nomads who did not establish large permanent settlements, the remaining landscapes are sparsely populated. Even today, the importance of the interaction of a few people on these vast landscapes is little understood; this lack of understanding makes them susceptible to threats

including mining, industry, agriculture, and restrictions on burning. Grasslands face an uncertain future. Only where occupants have maintained or reinvigorated their traditional practices from grazing methods to prescribed burning can grasslands survive.

Here, we explore the Grasslands of the World, among the least understood and most threatened landscapes on the planet.

—2015 Field Journal *Editors*