

May 10, 2003
For Immediate Release

Contact
Karen Foerstel, 703-841-3932, kfoerstel@tnc.org

The Nature Conservancy Urges Americans to Rediscover the Country's Natural Heritage During Bicentennial of Corps of Discovery

*200 Years After Lewis and Clark Expedition, The Nature Conservancy is
Working to Protect the Nation's Last Great Places*

ARLINGTON, Va. — In the 200 years since Meriwether Lewis and William Clark first set out with the Corps of Discovery to document America's vast biodiversity, much has happened to the nation's landscape and natural heritage.

The Tallgrass Prairie, which once spanned 142 million acres across 14 states, today is one-tenth its original size.

The great Missouri River, along which Lewis and Clark launched their journey, would not be recognized by the Corps of Discovery today. Six dams and countless levies have transformed the river, making it 127 miles shorter and one-third as wide as it was when Lewis and Clark first set out on their journey in 1804.

These shrinking and fragmented habitats have caused many of the species encountered by Lewis and Clark – including grizzly bears, white sturgeon, and bison – to face severe threats.

Despite these threats, there still is much natural beauty and biodiversity that remains today. The Nature Conservancy is working in every state to ensure that the habitats and species that existed when Lewis and Clark explored the country remain for another 200 years and beyond.

“Lewis and Clark helped establish America's awe and concern for its natural heritage,” said Steve McCormick, president of the Conservancy. “Today, 200 years later, we must make sure this country's natural heritage will remain in tact for generations to come. The bicentennial of the Corps of Discovery should prompt us all to rediscover our nation's biodiversity and work to protect it.”

The Conservancy is working along the Lewis and Clark trail – and elsewhere across the country – to protect the country's vital habitats.

To improve the health of U.S. rivers, the Conservancy has formed an innovative partnership with one of the nation's largest dam builders and operators, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Through the "[Sustainable Rivers Project](#)," the Conservancy and the Corps are working to change the way dams are managed so that water flows mimic a river's natural patterns.

The project will target 14 dams on 10 rivers across 13 states. In the future, other dams also may become candidates for this project.

In the central plains of the United States, the Conservancy is working to conserve grasslands where bison once roamed by the tens of millions. In the late 1800s, the bison were almost entirely eliminated, with less than 1,000 left at the lowest point. Today their numbers are about 1 percent of their original numbers, enough to keep bison out of danger of extinction.

About 15,000 bison reside on public lands in the United States. The rest are private herds, such as those maintained by the Conservancy. The Conservancy has reintroduced bison at the [Tallgrass Prairie Preserve](#) in Oklahoma as a critical part of the prairie restoration.

In Nebraska, the Conservancy has been using bison grazing habits to help manage 20,000 acres of grasslands at the [Niobrara Valley Preserve](#). This program is one of the largest efforts in the country to use bison to foster the biological diversity of Great Plains grasslands.

The Conservancy is partnering with ranchers and Indian communities in Montana in an effort to preserve one of the last areas in the country where grizzly bears still can be seen in their native plain habitats, just as Lewis and Clark first encountered them.

While grizzlies still are found in Montana, their migration routes rapidly are being cut by fences, roads and other development that threaten to overtake the lands along the [Rocky Mountain Front](#).

Ranchers generally have tolerated bears on their rangelands. But if those ranches are sold and vacation homes sprout in their place, the big territories needed by bears will be further divided.

In these private lands, the Conservancy is working to protect prime bear habitat. The Conservancy has facilitated conservation easements on working ranches, a mutually beneficial arrangement that conserves habitat and gives tax breaks to cash-strapped ranchers.

On the [Blackfeet Reservation](#) in Montana, the Conservancy assisted in the creation of one of the first tribal land trusts in the nation.

Established in 1999, the land trust encompasses more than 1,100 acres called the So-keeps-kim Ranch. The ranch, in the shadow of Glacier National Park, protects habitat for bears, elk, beaver and other wildlife, while allowing the Blackfeet to teach their children and to be stewards of the land. The Conservancy is working with the Blackfeet to bring more land under the land trust.

Across the West, the Conservancy is working with the people who rely on the land to preserve it for generations to come.

Often, keeping ranchers on the land as conscientious stewards of their natural resources can be the best way to conserve habitat and wildlife. Partnerships between ranchers and conservationists can prevent subdivision, keeping grasslands healthy and giving wildlife the habitat they need.

Because ranches contain much of the precious open space that connects and buffers conservation areas, keeping local ranches in business and free of subdivision is a primary goal of the Conservancy. In Wyoming, the Conservancy worked with the local community to launch the Heart Mountain Grassbank, which gives ranchers a shared source of livestock forage while they rest and restore the grass of their own rangeland.

To discover and explore America's vast biodiversity, visit a Conservancy preserve in your state. You also can go to www.nature.org to find out where your closest preserves are and to learn more about Lewis and Clark and the nation's natural heritage.

###

The Nature Conservancy is a leading international, nonprofit organization that preserves plants, animals and natural communities representing the diversity of life on Earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive. To date, the Conservancy and its more than one million members have been responsible for the protection of more than 14 million acres in the United States and have helped preserve more than 102 million acres in Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia and the Pacific. Visit us on the Web at nature.org.