

Whispering Signs:

Grassroots Weed Awareness Initiatives in Northwest Calgary, Alberta

INVASIVE ALIEN SPECIES, prairie conservation, and environmental stewardship are but a few of the natural and cultural history concepts and issues touched upon by a recent grassroots public environmental education initiative in northwest Calgary, Alberta.

A curriculum-connected, site-specific ecological pedagogy was used in the creation of a unique set of interpretive signage panels in a suburban grassland and aspen parkland setting in a residential area near the southwest corner of Nose Hill Park. Students, teachers, parents, and community members worked together over several years to pro-

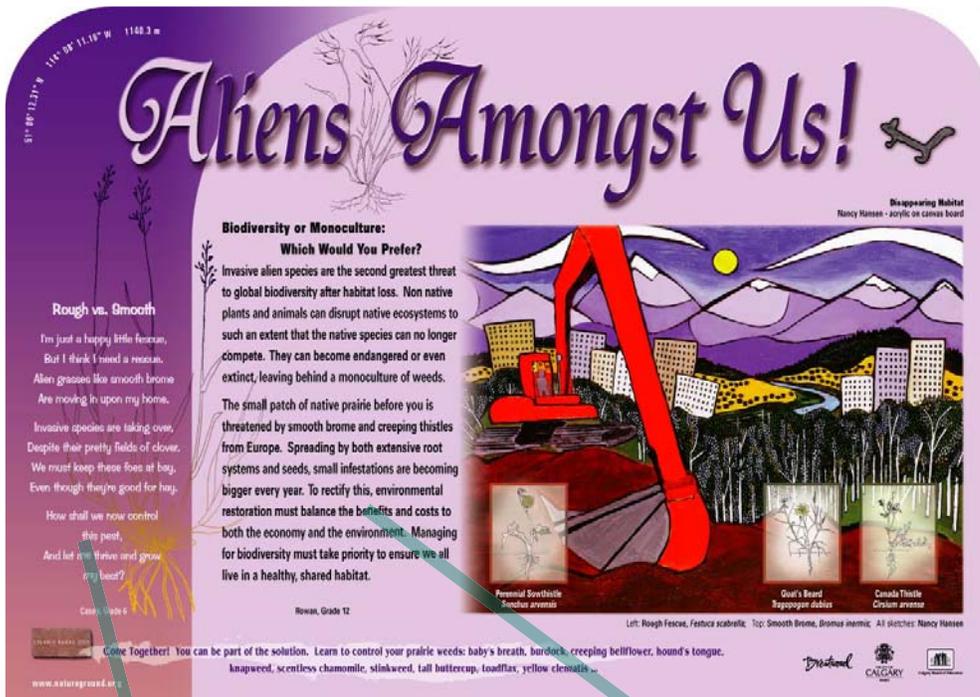
duce the original art, poetry, and text for 34 amazingly beautiful and provocative signs for both school-based and public education.

In particular, two of the major panels speak directly to the threat of IAS to local grassland parks: *'Aliens Amongst Us!'* and *'Owls and Oxeyes.'* Local artist Pat Oezeffe painted the Oxeye daisies, though to 'lovingly' depict something she truly dislikes was a challenge for someone whose livelihood is growing native seeds and plants! You may also know her through her business, ALCLA Native Plants, www.alclanativeplants.com, which Pat and her husband, Al Fedkenheuer, run from their home in Brentwood, near where all the signs are located.

Nancy Hansen, another local resident, painted and sketched the main art works on the *Aliens Amongst Us!* sign. Nancy also illustrated *Exploring Nose Hill*, which includes sections on invasive species. This popular field guide has just been reprinted and is available from local authors Jill Kirker and Diana Kary, by calling Grassroots NW Environmental Awareness Society at (403) 284-1316.

Also featured on the AAU sign is work by local youth, Rowan Cockett, based on his Grade 12 (2006) IAS science fair website: www.virtualsciencefair.org/2006/cock6r2/, as well as a poem by his sister, Audrey Lane Cockett, entitled *Rough vs. Smooth*, which also speaks to the threat of alien brome grass in our native fescue grasslands.

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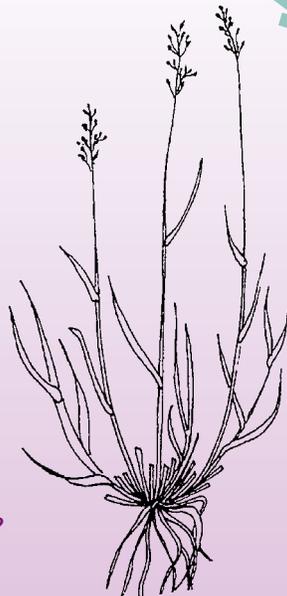
Rough vs. Smooth

I'm just a happy little fescue,
But I think I need a rescue.
Alien grasses like smooth brome
Are moving in upon my home.

Invasive species are taking over,
Despite their pretty fields of clover.
We must keep these foes at bay,
Even though they're good for hay.

How shall we now control this pest,
And let me thrive and grow my best?

Audrey Lane Cockett, Grade 6, 2004



Biodiversity or Monoculture: Which would you prefer?

Invasive alien species are the second greatest threat to global biodiversity after habitat loss. Non native plants and animals can disrupt native ecosystems to such an extent that the native species can no longer compete. They can become endangered or even extinct, leaving behind a monoculture of weeds.

The small patch of native prairie before you is threatened by smooth brome and creeping thistles from Europe. Spreading by both extensive root systems and seeds, small infestations are becoming bigger every year. To rectify this, environmental restoration must balance the benefits and costs to both the economy and the environment. Managing for biodiversity must take priority to ensure we all live in a healthy, shared habitat.

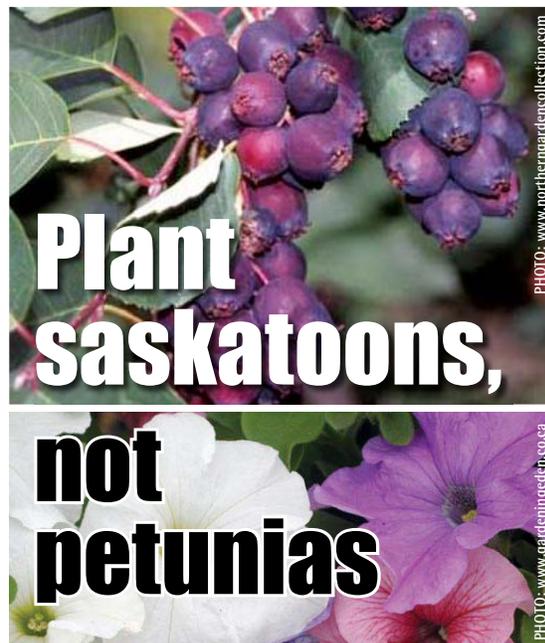
Rowan Cockett, Grade 12, 2006

Close collaboration with The City of Calgary Natural Area Parks department and Dr. E.W. Coffin School, and an open inquiry process informed the development of the panels. Detailed GPS data situates each sign, and a future website, www.natureground.org (to be launched in May), will support this generative project. As a set, the resulting signs speak closely to the complexities of our ecological context and our place in the web of existence, especially at the precious and precarious intersections of our natural and built environments where weeds abound.

The Grand Opening of our Whispering Signs project is set for Wednesday afternoon, June 4th, at 1:00 p.m. at Dr. E.W. Coffin School, 5615 Barrett Drive NW. RSVP 777-6190 or sacalver@cbe.ab.ca. Or visit the signs anytime after Earth Day, perhaps starting your explorations at: 51° 06' 12.67" N, 114° 08' 04.38" W, 1143.1 m.



Environmentally Yours,
Polly L. Knowlton Cockett,
Whispering Signs Project Manager
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Plant
saskatoons,
not
petunias

Reprinted, with thanks, from *Boomtown*, the blog of Edmonton Journal city hall writer Susan Ruttan

Owls and Oxeyes

When the city grows still and the sky turns dark western winds blow through the whispering bridge a harp singing songs for sleeping things nestled on Nose Hill Park.

Angie Tobin

Leucanthemum Lament
Oh, Marguerite, I know thy smile,
With ox-eyed stare you would beguile.
Thy prolific seed and prostrate root
Spreads far and wide from single shoot.
Love thy beauty? Love thee nowt.
Oh, daisy, we must bear thee out!

Do is for ...
... offset ears on our great homed provincial birds living in Many Owls Valley just north of here in Nose Hill Park.
... Old Man's furry 'Ears of the Earth.' This favourite harbinger of spring, the familiar prairie crocus or Anemone patens, also heralds Anemos, the wind.
... ornamental escapees and other obnoxious invasive alien plants which push out native plants, and thus wildlife. Native biodiversity now depends on our management of these aliens.
... our overpass, a gracefully arching and arcing vector, bridging communities both natural and cultural. While sketching, local students chose its name because "it sounds peaceful, and the grasses seem to be whispering to each other."

Dial in Spring
Heather Einar - pencil on wood board

Whispering Grasses Walkway
May 2008

Please explore farther west on this regional pathway to the Dr. E.W. Coffin schoolground and Whispering Signs to discover more Whispering Signs featuring works by local artists, writers, storytellers.

Leucanthemum Lament

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With ox-eyed stare you would beguile.
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by Polly Knowlton Cockett & Robin Cockett

NOTE: *Leucanthemum vulgare Lam.* is the botanical name for Oxeye Daisy, sometimes called Marguerite, or Love-me, Love-me-not....



CHARLES RICHMOND of the Sierra Club showed up on Tuesday for a council committee discussion about multi-use trails. There are plans for a multi-use trail through Edmonton's Hazeldean neighbourhood, and the community wants to plant 400 trees along the trail. The question arose, "How will city staff get to the trees to water them?"

Richmond accused the city parks department of being obsessed with creating "horticultural parks"; parks with special trees, flowers and so on that require fertilizing and watering.

"If the city would plant things natural to the Edmonton area," he said, "they wouldn't need water or fertilizer." So, Richmond was asked, "What's natural to Edmonton?"

"In many cases," he said, "it's what we would dismiss as 'bush'; plants beautiful in their way, but not as flashy as a bed of petunias. "It's going to take a cultural change among city parks people to get them thinking of natural plants for our parks," said Richmond.

Perhaps, but Edmontonians at large must also learn to appreciate plants that belong in our local ecosystem, and not expect our parks to be replicas of what exists in Vancouver or Toronto.

Maybe Hazeldeaneans could plant Saskatoon bushes along the trail and children could go berrypicking in the summer, and their moms could make pie.

That beats petunias any day.

(AIPC Note: Petunias are not invasive plants. However, AIPC advocates the use of native plants over introduced plants in gardening and landscaping in order to prevent unintentional introduction and spread of invasive plants.)