



Prairie Pod Transcript

Season 4, Episode 32: Prairie's importance as a mental health refuge

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Guest: Verónica Jaralambides (DNR), Dr. Ann Vogel

Podcast audio can be found online at mndnr.gov/prairiepod

Transcript:

((sounds of birds chirping and wind blowing))

Megan: Hey everybody. Welcome back to the Prairie Pod. Happy prairie Tuesday, everybody. Hi Mike.

Mike: Welcome back, everybody. Hey Megan. It's a beautiful sunshiny day out there today, right?

Megan: It is a sunshiny day and it's always a beautiful day when we're going to talk prairie.

Mike: It's a perfect day for this subject, the therapy that nature provides, right?

Megan: That's what we're talking about today, prairie's importance as a mental health refuge. It's both a refuge for animals and for your soul, right?

Mike: Yeah. Well put, yeah. I can go for that, yes.

Megan: Okay, good. So like many of you know, last year was tough. It was a tough year, right? It threw a lot at us.

Mike: Understatement of the decade. Right there?

Megan: Yeah, possibly. Global pandemics and all definitely lead to lots of difficulties in our real everyday life, and one thing that I noticed even in myself is that I turned time and again to the natural world to just help me have a moment of sanity, and so I became very, very grateful for our public lands that are all around us, congratulations listeners, you're a public landowner, so it was very great because we were so blessed in Minnesota to have all of these opportunities and access pretty close to where we live

geographically, so it gave us lots of good opportunities to just take a moment to breathe, and lo and behold, when I did a little bit of reading about this, I found out that our brains are deeply connected to nature, so that sense of peace - -

Mike: Shocker.

Megan: - - and wellness that I feel, what did you say, Mike?

Mike: I said shocker.

Megan: Shocker.

Mike: That was sarcasm.

Megan: Shocker. Our brains are deeply connected to nature. I know. Like our brains haven't really changed that much through time, and so we actually need nature for our wellness, and so we have invited two fantastic guests with us here today to talk through this. We've got a medical doctor, we've got an outreach and marketing specialist, we've got the right people to talk about mental health and how prairies are helping you out on the daily.

Mike: On the daily.

Megan: Mike, I like when you nod in response to me because our listeners can totally hear you nodding.

Mike: They can hear that in my voice on the daily.

Megan: On the daily. It's - -

Mike: I'm going to incorporate that into my daily dialogue.

Megan: In your daily dialogue, wow. Well let's incorporate some of what we're going to learn today into our daily habits, a daily dose of nature, if you will, so let's jump right in and have our guests introduce themselves. Verónica, let's start with you.

Verónica: Well hello everyone. My name is Verónica Jaralambides and you probably hear a slight accent, which gives me away as not being originally from Bemidji. I was born and raised in Buenos Aires, Argentina and finished growing up in this amazing Midwestern state, and this is where I am from now really. I moved here in my early 20s for what I thought would be two or three years, but I ended up falling in love with the access to all the natural spaces and resources in Minnesota, so do you want more now or do I leave space for Dr. Ann next?

Megan: We'll leave a little space for Dr. Ann next.

Verónica: Add to the story man, that's what I'm here for, right?

Megan: Yeah, absolutely. Dr. Ann, go ahead and introduce yourself.

Ann: I'm very glad that I was invited because this is something that's very close and near dear to my heart and has been since I think I was a little kid. In fact, I know that's true. I'm a lifelong person from New Ulm, fourth generation, and I love not only farms but meadows and prairies and woodlands and rivers and lakes, you name it. In fact, I

am an aunt of six little great nieces and nephews and my niece and nephew, I have four of those, I always sign my name as Ann from prairie, prairie land. So they call me the prairie aunt.

Megan: I love it.

Ann: And I can tell you when I go to medical meetings in the Twin Cities, as I get closer and closer back to my Heimatland , which is New Ulm, and we are prairie people for sure. [German for homeland]

Mike: How, how is that Dr. Ann?

Ann: Prairie people?

Mike: What did you say? No, something land.

Megan: Heimatland, perfect.

Ann: My Heimatland, that's my homeland, Heimatland.

Mike: Oh boy. Okay.

Megan: Heimatland.

Ann: I'm - -

Megan: And for those of you, because you can't see Dr. Ann, she's actually wearing a Nome pin today to stake your pie.

Ann: I am - - you're, you're going to hear about the Heinzelmännchen [legendary elves who love to help], who's the Obermeister [leader of a guild] of the Minnesota River Valley.

Megan: I love this so much, so we're bringing - -

Ann: Nobody else; yeah.

Megan: - - you two very different cultural perspectives today on how nature and wellness is so important and how it impacts all of us, and so we hope that you enjoy this conversation because it's going to be great.

Mike: I want to say that an emphasis for me and I think for all of us today is that these natural areas, I mean, we talk about heroes a lot during the pandemic and there have been many. When it comes to nonhuman heroes, I think natural areas fit that bill. They have pulled through for us in amazing ways and I think we need to highlight that today. Should I just jump right into the first question, Megan, is that okay?

Megan: Yeah, go for it.

Mike: I mean, a key example of these heroic natural areas are our state parks. They're not our only natural areas certainly, right? There's lots that we talk about all the time on this show. State parks I think are kind of a special place in Minnesota, given my, I've been here now for five and a half years, but I can tell that they are kind of a go-to for a lot of Minnesotans and so they fill a very important need during the pandemic. So yeah,

if it's okay, let's just jump right into state parks with Verónica. Verónica, can you tell us more about the use of the state parks and how that changed over the pandemic? And my understanding is the use of state parks went up significantly. Can you talk about that?

Verónica: Yes, absolutely. So in my introduction, I wasn't able to share why you're asking me that question. I have a dream job, I get to market Minnesota state parks and trails and the marketing consultant. I found this amazing job about three years or a little over three years ago. It's a job where I can combine my passion for outdoor recreation and my skills in marketing and also outreach to diverse communities, so that's why Mike's asking me this question, not just because I'm this random person from Argentina. So in 2020, there was a 25% increase in visitation to Minnesota state parks and recreation areas. It's estimated that more than 12.3 million people visited state parks and recreation areas last year. Previous average annual visitation was around 9.8 million people. There was some decline in overnight visits because mainly because of temporary closures and capacity restrictions for camping, lodging, and group accommodations obviously because, you know, Covid. And yeah, we were closed between mid-March and Memorial Day and slowly started opening all the locations and providing those opportunities but, you know, we had to be mindful and do that safely so we wouldn't have super spreader events at our camping locations.

Megan: Absolutely.

Verónica: And so you were asking me about how visitation increased, right?

Mike: Yes.

Megan: Right. You did a great job with that. Man, so that increased by millions did you say?

Verónica: Yes, to 25%, by 25% I'm sorry, so from 9.8 million to 12.3 million people. Oh, and I know what else I should mention, I'm part of the Division of Minnesota State Parks and Trails, so I should also mention state trails and state forest recreation areas. We manage the camping at state forest recreation areas and that's disperse camping, so less amenities but you're more spread out, so state trail use increased by about 50%.

Megan: 50? 5-0?

Verónica: 5-0, yes.

Megan: Oh, my gosh.

Verónica: Paved state trails serve about 2 million visitors in a typical year and with increasing usage, we estimated about 3 million visitors used state trails in 2020, 3 million, so it's fantastic - -

Megan: These are expanding - -

Verónica: - - for people like us who understand the importance of outdoor recreation and the impact on health. State forest recreation area camping increased by 33%, so that's - -

Megan: Oh my gosh.

Verónica: - - also pretty big number. And the other thing I wanted to mention too was among the usage, I mean, it's really varied all over the place, going back to parks, I mentioned the 25% increase, then that is the average for the whole state, right? That's a lot of different locations and different types of parks, so some of the numbers that I think are very interesting is that there was a major increase in Twin Cities Metro Area parks, where most of our population is, so for example, Afton State Park had an 85, 8-5, 85% visitation increase and Banning State Park 82%, and then some of the more rustic parks also saw a large increase in visitation because people were seeking parks that they assume would be less visited, not as, there wouldn't be as many people so easier for social distancing, and I should explain to what a rustic park is, those are the parks where that are a little quieter, they have, they can have more of a natural experience with fewer services and amenities than some of the more developed parks, right. So some examples are Beaver Creek Valley State Park.

Mike: Been there.

Verónica: Yes. 70%. You too. Nice park, right? 78% visitation increase. And Camden State Park, so 48% visitation increase, and then of course there's the parks that provide certain attractions like Forestville/Mystery Cave, that's down in your areas as well, where we had a visitation decrease because obviously the tours were not happening, and then historic Forestville was closed. I actually got to camp there in October and it was perfect regardless of those attractions being closed, but just to give you some more background of why it's only 25%. You know, it's been all over the place for different reasons.

Megan: It shouldn't be that surprising to me because every time that I try to visit a state park last year, it was phenomenal. There were cars, you'd come early, and you'd be there with like 20 people and you're like all right, we can spread out, this is fine, and you come off the trail and there are lines of cars all the way down the road, parked out on the highway, and you're thinking to yourself well gee, that's a lot of people, I've never seen this many people at this state park before, and just my family members and relatives were telling me things like yeah, we're trying to find the hidden state parks that nobody knows about, so we want to go to those.

Mike: The rustic state parks.

Verónica: The rustic parks, you got it, Mike, you're on top of it, exactly. Actually, they brought us some of the boring bureaucrats to help some of the busier state parks like Afton, so I got a chance to see that in person and interact with some of our visitors, and it was a great experience, but yeah, you're exactly right with your description. Cars lined up out the park gate waiting to get in. We had to close the gate a couple of times to space out visitors and make sure there was enough parking for everyone, right? But it was also fantastic to see. Everyone was in such good spirits as we were talking at the beginning, right? Like it's such a great experience to be outdoors and have such a positive impact on mood.

Megan: Talk to us a little bit about why you think we're seeing some of this. Mike had some really neat examples in the outline for it. Is it the exercise? Are there M&Ms at the end of trails that you guys hiding out there and people are like you walked down that trail, there's a pile of M&Ms at the end. Is it - -

Mike: Again, associating desserts with everything, Megan.

Megan: Snacks are for everyone, Michael.

Mike: Okay.

Megan: When she says Michael.

Verónica: You know you're in trouble.

Mike: Exactly.

Megan: Well tell us a little bit about it. What is it? Is it the wildlife viewing? Is it just the sheer I need to, my brain is telling me I need to be in this natural space? What do you think it is?

Verónica: Yes, all of the above, in my opinion, but I have some amazing coworkers and friends who help me gather all the true data, so shoutout to my boss, and then my friends Jamie and Darren, who are the experts on this, you know, teamwork makes the dream work, and so there's some good research out there on this. You'd be surprised to hear as I was that there has been a steady increase in outdoor recreation and the importance of outdoor recreation as part of the life for most Minnesotans, even prior to the pandemic. So in 2004, 57% of Minnesotans viewed outdoor activities as very important versus 70% of Minnesotans, yeah, yeah, we got nice in the importance of outdoor recreation in 2017, - -

Mike: Hmm okay.

Verónica: - - so I think that trend was already somewhere, and that, you know, I hate to admit it, but that was prior to me getting this job, so I guess I want to say that that - -

Mike: That's what I'll do to you then. Okay.

Megan: Okay. It takes a village.

Verónica: It takes a village, man. So and then the other study, or report my coworkers share it with me is from the KOA and they did a special report this past fall about the camping trends in North America, and this is the number. So 46% of leisure travelers have spent more time outdoors, and the top reasons we're having more free time and that was cited by 58% of the people surveyed. There was a desire to get outside after being forced to stay inside, 47% of the people said that, and I'm going to sign up to that one, because really I can't spend any more time inside. I'm working here all the time, I sleep here, I eat here, so it's great to go outside and then, obviously, I don't want to go inside because there's a risk for contagion, and then 41% cited exercise as a reason to spend more time outdoors. As far as camping, 60% of campers say that the ability to work from home during the pandemic is allowing them to camp more often and work simultaneously. I mean, that's genius, right? A lot of our state parks too have Wi-Fi, so

we've talked about that a few times, you know, getting a cabin, one of the camper cabins and working from there because why not. What difference does it make, right?

Mike: Right.

Verónica: Yeah, well keep the same Zoom background anyway. We saw two big peaks in visitation, both surrounding tightening restrictions as I stated with COVID-19, and I'm back to Minnesota, by the way. So the first peak in visitation was around, like I said, the first time, the first stay at home order, and it was mainly concentrated in the Twin Cities, and the second was in the fall when there was a second virus peak. Both cases other activities were limited and there was public emphasis in the media about how outdoor recreation was a valued opportunity if you can maintain distance. Even the governor I remember encouraged it, outdoor recreation from the very beginning, some of his first press conferences he was saying, you know, go outside, take advantage of these amazing natural resources, those heroes like Mike was saying earlier, right? And then the first peak also spurred increased visitation for the whole of 2020 and people started looking for more opportunities with building social distancing, like state parks or those rustic parks that we were mentioning earlier because they're considered to be quieter. That's, you know the, where we see those increases at the rustic state parks.

Megan: That's great. I just, every time you say the word heroes, I'm picturing like our state park signs with tiny capes on them, maybe that's something we should be investing in next, like a little bedazzled cape on the old Flandrau State Park sign, that would be something.

Verónica: How about a new uniform for all our staff that includes a cape.

Megan: With a hero badge, yeah, I love it.

Verónica: Yeah, they're working extra hard and doing amazing work to keep us all healthy at those parks as far as a - -

Megan: And safe. Yeah, absolutely. Thank you for shouting to them because we should really be thanking all of our public servants during this, you know, just shoutout to all of you. You're doing an amazing job. Our doctors, our nurses, but certainly our park staff, our wildlife managers, our ecologists, our nongame biologists, I'm going to miss somebody, our hydrologists, you know, all of these folks have really been doing a lot, a lot of work during the pandemic to make sure that we stay safe and that we have access to these public lands that we so love, so that's just a, that was a brief aside, a brief shoutout, and a thank you message that I think is important. So okay, so this is exciting. So we've had these huge increases in park users, we can explain, you know, some of the why because people, because of some of the changes of the pandemic stay at home orders, also working from home has allowed folks to have more free time are some of the things you said, and then certainly that stress relief and promotion of hey, this is an activity you can do safely getting outside, and then the exercise. So we know all of that. What do you think this means for the future of state parks? Have we created the next generation of state park lovers and we think that this is going to be a sustainable trend? And also, what are we doing to make sure that our state parks are as they should be for everyone so that they're as inclusive as they possibly can be?

Verónica: What a great question. I don't have the crystal ball but I do think it's a good moment, a good time to plug in all the work a lot of people in the Department of Natural Resources have been doing around diversity, equity and, inclusion. And that is just the key in my opinion to the future of our natural spaces. We need to engage more new populations in outdoor recreation because that's how they're going to be the conservationists of the future. Tomorrow if I want those state parks and trails to exist for my own kids in 20 years, other kids, other people need to be engaged again and loving them. You can't just see it on your computer screen, on Instagram, you need to be immersed in that nature, in those places and those very, very special places to know and care, to know what they are about, to care for them, and there's also data that shows that those groups that we now call minorities are going to be the majority of our population. Demographics are shifting, not just in the State of Minnesota but in all of the US, so we need those people, we need all those groups that have traditionally been underserved to be engaged, and that sounds like a selfish thing to say, right, because we love those places, we want to engage them. Obviously, I also believe it is the right thing to do. These are everybody's. All Minnesotans, these are public places for black, indigenous, people of color, everyone is welcome, and that's actually some of the work that our leadership has encouraged and that makes me the most proud that specific messaging to populations and groups that have traditionally been underserved.

Megan: Right, absolutely. And I want to share a little story. I was listening to a podcast that was put together by the youth who work at Urban Roots, and we're going to hear from them a little bit later in the season. We're going to hear from a representative from Urban Roots, not the youth of Urban Roots, and so they recorded this podcast as one of their 2020 projects called River Stories, and in it they're just interviewing different volunteers or family members and they're talking about the importance of natural resources, and they were interviewing one lady who was Hmong and she was talking about how she was up on the North Shore and she was visiting state parks, and she happened to turn around and see a sign that was in Hmong, and she was like I just felt like this is for me, I'm allowed to be here because here is my language right here speaking to me, and so this tells me that this place is for me, and she said it, you know, she bought a state park permit, it made her feel included and part of that park system, and that's what we want, right? Like we, I, I just, we forget sometimes how privileged we are and I say we, but I mean me, privileged I am that I can go to a park and it's a given, right, that there's going to be English signs that I can read, and so it is just simple things like that, that we can really do that make our messaging so much more inclusive so that when you're going, you're actually able to enjoy the interpretive aspect of the park because it's written for you.

Verónica: Right, so true, and then the other thing that we do is have images and have, so everyone can see themselves in our marketing pieces, and every time we've done that, newsletters, ads, I receive comments and from people from users saying wow, I see myself on that picture, I see myself belonging in state parks and state trails.

Megan: And these are just like the basics, right? This is the basics of what we should be doing, so that everybody can see themselves in it. This is one Minnesota, one state park system for all Minnesotans. I feel like I should have like a Three Musketeers, I don't know, one for all and all for one, okay, all right.

Verónica: Yes, yes, it's - -

Megan: All right.

Mike: Hey, I wanna - -

Verónica: - - yeah they are for everyone. You know, the famous Paul Wellstone quote, we all do better when we all do better, and it's so true. - -

Mike: That's a good one, yeah.

Verónica: I try to live by that, yeah, that's a, sorry Megan, but I think I upstaged you with the quote.

Megan: Paul Wellstone versus Three Musketeers.

[Laughter]

Megan: Hey, there's finally somebody on this podcast who can upstage me. Sorry Mike, not sorry.

Mike: I know. Thank gosh.

Verónica: So, yeah, so, and then the other part of the marketing that we're doing is reaching out directly to these communities, finding them where they are, which is key to DEI [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion] marketing, you know, meet them where they are, so very again specific marketing ads on their publications that they run and obviously, there's so much more to do, but it just make a difference and it just make a difference for them to feel included, even on a newsletter, we included the word miigwech, thank you, in Ojibwe, and someone was so grateful for it that they made a point to post it on social media and say, you know, hey, they're including us. Same thing when we greeted Hmong population to say Happy New Year, and that's what we were doing, happy New Year from Minnesota State Parks and Trails and yeah, that made a difference, and it's just those little things and you can tell I'm very passionate about it. I could talk about it all day. And I think there was - -

Megan: For the right person in the right job at the right time, and we are grateful for you.

Verónica: Because I mean there is so many of us doing this. Oh, and I know the last very important point I wanted to make and thank you Megan for the kind comments. And again, I'm one of many in the Department doing this, but I just make one more tiny point and then I won't put you to sleep anymore. Yeah, the research has found that it's lack of information that has been a deterrent for a lot of people to come and visit Minnesota State Parks and Trails, so that's also part of the work that we're doing, getting out there and making sure different people get the information and know about these places, know about their recreation opportunities, and know that they're invited and included.

Mike: Should we switch gears and talk with Dr. Ann? If that sounds okay with you, Dr. Ann.

Ann: Sure.

Mike: We'll, yeah, you know, one thing that has come from all of this I think is a greater awareness of the benefits for health and especially in this kind of context, I think mental health, with a lot of things. There's also clearly benefits for physical health that we shouldn't ignore we can bring into this conversation, but I know you're very passionate about natural resources and the outdoors and I know you also have a long history of working with many patients, so can you tell us a little bit about your personal experience with either for yourself or for your patients or both as far as what time in nature has done to help people with their mental health?

Ann: Right, well I've always loved the outdoors and then I ended up in a profession where I'm indoors after I went ahead and finished all my training and then came back home to practice in my hometown, I thought well, I've really kind of locked myself out of my passion. This is not good. So I heard about the Wilderness Society and I heard about the American Touring Association, and I noticed that they needed a physician on some of their trips, and they would give me the trip if I provided my transportation, and that saved me. Since the 1970s, I've been up the Yukon River, I've been to Yugoslavia on Tara River, I've been down to the Grand Canyon on the Colorado River, I've been down to the Okefenokee Swamp, I finally said I've got to get up to the Boundary Waters, and I was a trip physician on all of this, and I went to the Rocky Mountains both way up in Montana and then I got, yeah, so those are the kinds of trips I took. All I had to do was get on a plane and provide all the medical help they needed when they had a catastrophe. And it was wonderful. I went out into the wilderness. If I had a plug nickel, you couldn't use it for anything, and I loved to cook, so often I would end up helping some of the guides cook, and it was amazing. I said that's just is the time they were starting to get, you know, with a lot of drug misuse, and I said if you want to go on an all-time high, go outside, go and hike, do all of this stuff. I said it's a natural high. It has no side effects and it kicks up your oxytocin and all your endorphins and, you know, it doesn't cost you anything to go to parks and for me, it just costs me my transportation, I was very fortunate to be in that situation, and I have promoted that ever since. I said get in a canoe and go up to Itasca Park, they got oodles of lakes up there, I actually went to Itasca for some of my graduate work because I got a degree in Zoology before I went to medical school, and it was in my DNA, and I just tell people you have got to get out and do this, and kids know they're all plugged in to all this stuff, and many people are multitasking and they're all attached to gadgets and they're indoors, and I said I gave something to one of the local schools here, elementary school, and said leave no kid indoors period.

Megan: I love that, Dr. Ann. Well you are a doctor who clearly takes your own medicine and your own advice, and you're not just telling people to get out in nature. You're also taking that medicine and getting out in nature yourself, so describe for us a little bit like what are some of these, you mentioned this high a couple times and I'm assuming that this is a physiological response or a psychological response. Describe that a little bit for us. What's happening in our brains as we're getting connected with nature?

Ann: It definitely is and there's some science actually and it's a book that I'm going to recommend to you, it's called Shinrin Yoku, and it's Japanese and I'm not sure I've got the spelling correct but Shin is S-h-i-n-r like in red i-n, the second word is Yoku I think Y-o-k-u, and the translation is shinrin is forest and yoku is bathe, so they call it forest

bathing, and the Japanese in the 1980s, there's actually references in the book I'm going to recommend, to show that it will lower your blood pressure, which can be a killer, hypertension, it can lower your pulse rate, it can decrease anxiety attacks, it can put you into a state of calm where you can kind of recollect your thoughts and, you know, when you sleep, if you sleep well, your brain is constantly getting rid of all this extra trash that you've been having in your head that you have no use for, and we do need to have that kind of separation from all this busyness and craziness, some of the stuff, which makes no sense, and just be by yourself, you know, and then the other thing in parks and outside, the seasons change and you have to use all your senses. If you listen and you hear and you touch and even sometimes you taste, if you're in a coniferous forest, you know that the aroma of the pine needles is something that really is very refreshing and rejuvenating, so you take kids out there. I had this my little nieces and nephews when they were small, I took them up to Flandrau and we did all kinds of stuff like that, and we got them hooked in about what the benefits were of being out in the forest and then their imaginations go absolutely bananas, which I love. I live in a land of Imagineering, that's my other subspecialty that nobody knows about, but boy, I can turn that thing on and, you know, it can go full tilt.

Mike: So we're talking about all these benefits that you clearly have experience and are passionate about when it comes to spending time in the outdoors, and I know there's quite a bit of resource out there now.

Ann: There is.

Mike: Showing the benefit showing the benefits that people get mental and physical spending time in wild areas basically. What is your sense of what this means for the field of medicine? Is there a growing awareness? Is there kind of a paradigm shift? Are doctors now including yourself sometimes prescribing time in nature?

Ann: Yeah absolutely, and I can tell you some of the park and rec departments now and some of the insurance companies are giving the people who are insured benefits by going to a rec center to exercise or do the bike trail or go to Flandrau, and I often tell people, you know, if you're kind of wondering what to give a family for Christmas, give them a park sticker and get them in the park and it's the best investment they possibly could have. Plus you can rent cabins out there.

Megan: And we should mention too while state parks certainly have an annual fee and the reason for that is because of the amenities that we're offering state parks because of the naturalist programs, because of all of the things that are there, there's also public lands that are completely free to you. You can go to wildlife management area, a scientific and natural area, aquatic management area, The Nature Conservancy has preserves that you can visit, US Fish and Wildlife Service has areas, it doesn't matter what the name is on the brown routed sign, it's for you, you're a public landowner and those are absolutely free for you to go visit, and there are many of them. You can check them out on the DNR's recreation compass if you want to find where Ann's going to wander next.

Ann: Hanska Lake, Clear Lake, those are two that you can, you know, definitely take in. So yeah, yeah. - -

Megan: This is wonderful - -

Ann: - - But some kids can just take their bikes and go down to Flandrau.

Megan: Absolutely. Oh, yeah. You can just get - -

Ann: It's good for them. - -

Megan: It is good for them.

Ann: Go down to swim, they go down there to sled, they go down there to do snow angels, they, whatever, just get into it big time.

Megan: Get into it big time. Advice from Dr. Ann that everyone should be taking.

Ann: It works.

Megan: Get into it big time. I love it.

Ann: If your kids get to you, take them outside and peter them out, bring them home, that's what you do.

Mike: That's a good strategy.

Megan: Definitely ascribe to that medicine. There would be many times growing up in our house that she'd just say go outside, there was no preamble. There was no, there were no other instructions, there were many little kid voices then peppering her with but where is my coat, but where are my boots, so she'd say figure it out, you got five minutes to get outside.

Ann: That's right.

Megan: We were sent out to go play and so obviously that shaped me as a person and gosh, what a surprise that now I'm in this field as an ecologist, after being tossed out.

Mike: Great shocker.

Megan: My mother did not neglect me, just so everybody listening is aware of that. We just sat outside for the good of the house.

Mike: Hey, can we move this conversation to prairie specifically?

Megan: Yeah, yeah.

Mike: We're talking broadly about natural areas and the benefits, so this includes all of our natural areas, the ones up north that are forested and the aquatic natural areas and so forth. What about prairie specifically? And more to the point, what does this mean for prairie conservation, since that's what this show is all about largely. And any of you three I guess, including Megan, what do we think about what this, what these, this nature connectedness benefit to mental health, what it means for prairie conservation?

Ann: Well it's directly related.

Verónica: At the risk of sounding like a broken record, as more people figure out the importance and feel it in their body of outdoor recreation for health and being connected

to nature, they're going to be your advocates for the future for these places. They're going to be your conservationists of the future. I truly believe that. Even, you know, I see it in my own children. They haven't read all their research and papers but they tell me how being outdoors helps them calm down and helps them feel better, and I - -

Mike: The kids have that awareness?

Verónica: Say what?

Megan: Oh yeah.

Mike: Kids have that awareness, that's impressive.

Verónica: Yeah, oh yeah, absolutely. I mean, but I, yes and no, right? Because it's just something that you feel, it's so strong. Dr. Ann did a much better job describing that feeling but I fully agree and remember I come from a big city, so to me, and going to make assumptions here from talking to friends, other people who grew up in Minnesota, you might take these places for granted but when, you know, you have someone who grew up biking on surrounded by cement and the tree was basically in a small circle or square of grass on a sidewalk and that was it, and you're basically fighting the bosses. I always say that I used to be a much faster bike rider because I had to survive, right? So I had big bus and trucks and cars behind me and then, you know, coming here and having dedicated spaces for this recreation, it's just such an eye opener. Before it was, you know, vacation once or twice a year and that was it, that was my connection to nature, and even paddling, you know, paddling in the delta area of Buenos Aires and surrounded by motorboats again, and then you go to places like the Boundary Waters like Dr. Ann was saying and you can feel the difference and just there's so much appreciation that you can only get from experiencing these places.

Ann: Yeah, and you can't listen to a multiple diverse bird population unless you sit down and be quiet and just listen, and once you allow yourself to get sensitized to that, their eyes, whether you're older or what I call a seasoned adult or you're little kids that are just beginning to, you know, realize there's a new world around them, they start becoming very quiet and their eyes just shine with, you know, amazement and discovery. And then if they see little things like, you know, worms wiggling around or caterpillars or they see a caterpillar that's feeding on a milkweed, and then later on they find out that the things that fly around that look orange and go down to Mexico, those are the adults. I mean, it's a real revelation, it's a discovery for preschoolers as well as the ones that are in school. Yeah, it's immeasurable. It's a connection they need to have.

Mike: I was going to say one of the things you mentioned earlier about watching the chipmunk in the log at the state park and sitting there and it made me think, it actually made me think about Chris Helzer and his emphasis on the square meter of prairie and all the diversity that can be found in a square meter, and it made me think like this is one thing that is perhaps at least a little bit unique about prairies, the diversity that you can find in a small area and the mental benefits that can come from exploring that diversity and getting engaged with it, with barely having to move, and.

Megan: That appeals to you, does it, Mike. You barely have to move to discover a prairie. Is that your nature model? I want to go out in nature, I'm Mike Worland and I want to sit in the spot and I want to see all the things without really having to move.

Mike: Some days that is the case.

Ann: Mike, Mike, I'm going to come to your defense.

Mike: Thank you Dr. Ann.

Ann: - - Unless you sit in the spot, you will move, you will lose sight of a lot of stuff because the stuff is going to be in front of you and come to you. Even little bit of pools of water, you know, blue/green algae. If you go in the road ditch and, you know, get a jarful of water and get a phase contrast microscope and get a kit that's able to actually visualize something, their eyes just pop up. You know, Volvox when this piece of crystalline, you know, living being starts to tumble around and you have this light that's illuminating and it's like that's magic. It is.

Megan: It's magic, but I love that nature, everything we're talking about is that and we say this a lot on the podcast, that prairie is still a frontier of discovery. We talk about space as a society being this frontier to explore where there's so many things we don't know, prairie is just as cool and you don't need a rocket suit. Like you could just go out there and wear your socks over your jeans like a professional so you don't get ticks and it's magnificent, and most prairies, we really don't see too many ticks in them as long as there's not that woody brushy edge, that's really where the ticks like to hang out. So it's just nature is all about discovery, the prairie's about discovery, Mike, you asked what we all like about it. I like the openness, that for me is freedom, I just like that you can go out, those waves of grasses and flowers, that's where it's at for me.

Ann: Do you know that, I don't know which of the Brandenburg's it is, he's a photojournalist, he's down at Blue Mounds State Park.

Megan: Jim.

Ann: Yeah. He is better known in Italy evidently for his expertise than his here, but he said he has taken photographs up and down the state of Minnesota and he far, far prefers taking pictures of the prairie because you have the landscape, you have the sunrises, the sunsets, you have the blooming flowers, you have the wind that's making the flowers sway, and he said you can see so much more for such larger distances, have better vistas than you can actually when you get up further north in the woods.

Megan: I want to give a shout-out to Dr. Ann before we move to our next section here. You probably have singlehandedly removed more tons of buckthorn out of Flandrau State Park than many of volunteers, so there is a way for everybody, yes, these spaces are important for us to visit and be connected to for our wellness, but we can also give back and that feels like maybe triple as good because you got to be out in nature and then you also got to provide a valuable service to the nature that's benefitting you, and so I always like that giving back.

Ann: I'm going to interject that one of my colleagues is the one that we call the Buckthorn Queen in New Ulm. I always call her small, but mighty. I bet you she's

cleared on her own several acres in Flandrau, and she's now working with a Park & Rec department and I even got here a little tiny crown that I had her put on her head, I call her the Buckthorn Queen.

Megan: Love it so much.

Verónica: Is it made out of buckthorn?

Ann: Yeah. She's taken out more buckthorn than anybody I know of, plus great big stumps, you know, they throw those away, there's somebody, what do they call them? Wood turners. They make beautiful bowls out of those, but you don't plant buckthorn for that purpose. It's just recycle.

Megan: Did you get Verónica's question? Did you make the crown out of buckthorn so it came full circle?

Ann: No, no, no, no.

Megan: All right, we've have got to jump into our next section here. I mean, you can tell that we picked the right passionate people to talk about this subject because I feel like my own mental health has improved just listening to you guys talk about how connected you are to the natural world and how important it is.

(Music)

LET'S SCIENCE, TO THE LITERATURE!

Science!

Megan: All right, so this is the part of the podcast where we recommend a book, a blog, or a paper, and so Verónica, let's start with you and why don't you go over your picks.

Verónica: That was such a hard question. It took me forever to come to my final pick, and I'm going to be the rule-breaker and give you two.

Mike: Do it.

Verónica: A magazine that our friends and colleagues at the DNR make The Minnesota Conservation Volunteer, where someone from a big city who doesn't know a lot of the science of the outdoor recreation she loves can learn about anything and everything. I'm working on a newsletter issue about caving, actually caves and karst, which is by the way 2021 is the international year of caves and karst, if you can believe that, so yeah, there's a pro tip for you. I have to bring something useful to your podcast and new, so MCV, you know, Minnesota Conservation Volunteer, type in caving, boom, and lots of kids and lots of explanation of karst and the driftless area. And Ms. Benage has written for them too, so I'm almost tempted to talk about her amazing articles in the magazine but I have to say my favorite was about bear research. Look it up, it's from 2020 I believe, so just subscribe. It's an awesome magazine. And then my other pick is the Mountain and Prairie Podcast out of Colorado and they have been doing some great episodes on diversity and inclusion, look up for the episode with Gabe Vasquez and you'll be hooked. He has a, he agrees with me. Everything related to, you know, engaging diverse populations and traditionally underserved communities and it's just

he's a lot more eloquent than I am, so you can listen to that. Mountain and Prairie and MCV.

Megan: Well I think you're very eloquent and I did look up Gabe Vasquez and its advocate for equity in the outdoors, and it is a fabulous podcast episode, so I could duplicate your recommendation. Dr. Ann, how about you? What's your pick?

Ann: Well I don't have a podcast that I'm going to recommend but I am going to recommend the book called The Healing Power of Being in the Woods, and it's been written by Gretchen Koehler K-o-e-h-l-e-r and the book is just a small little 12-pager and it's all about the healing power of being in the woods. And she actually took some courses at the Landscape Arboretum, she is a retired PhD physical ed instructor and on wellness and health from Gustavus Adolfo. She lives in St. Peter, she also works at co-op there, so she's very much into, you know, all kinds of natural things. And that book is absolutely wonderful. I think people, I give it at gifts and you can get it at the Grand Center for Arts and Culture down in New Ulm because Ann Makepeace, who is the former CEO there lives in St. Peter now and Gretchen the author Koehler is not too far from there. So she can have more but people can pick it up or you can go I'm sure on Amazon is another way, but if people wanted hands on right now, that's what I'd suggest. It's absolutely fantastic. Then there was another book that actually was written by I think 50-some articles from the Minnesota Volunteer, that Conservation Magazine, and it's called Our Neck of the Woods. Oh, my goodness, it's poetic. And it was written in 2009 and its subtitle, Exploring Minnesota's Wild Places, and it's got things on, one of the things was on bogs. I remember being in Itasca, that's another fascinating place, but prairie is first, bog is probably second.

Mike: Thanks for those picks, Dr. Ann. Those are great.

Ann: Yeah.

Mike: Hey Megan.

Megan: Yeah, Mike.

Mike: Let's go for a hike and soothe our trouble minds, shall we?

Megan: It's going to need to be a long hike, buddy. Going to need to be a long hike.

Mike: I agree.

Megan: (Laughter.) As we always do, this is the part of the podcast and we've been talking about this in this whole episode, but we are going to recommend your public lands, congratulations, you're a public landowner. Woo hoo? And so we are going to steer you towards some of our guest favorite picks. All right, Verónica, start us out. Where are we hiking today?

Verónica: So remember earlier in 2021, it was we had the coolest weekend of the year, guess where I was? At Glendalough State Park, stayed at a camper cabin, so I sort of cheated, but it was actually--

Mike: Very admirable, Verónica.

Megan: Yeah, very admirable.

Verónica: So we had a nice trip with my 8-year-old and hiked around, discovered new places, and just to gain the peace of the amazing prairie at Glendalough. There were some small hills but - and the vistas were amazing just for the same reasons that were described earlier. You know, it's just a vast expanse of land and you just can see as far basically as your eye can see.

Mike: What part of the state is that in? I'm not familiar with that part.

Verónica: Glendalough is west and a little bit north of the Twin Cities, close to past Alexandria, - -

Mike: Okay.

Verónica: - - just beautiful park with a historic lodge, big lake that's protected actual, so you cannot do anything. You even have to use hand auger if you're ice fishing and you can't have any motorboats, so I'll be moving back there for kayaking this summer.

Megan: And for those of you, perfect, and for those of you who are wondering how do I find these parks, just like Mike, there is a handy tool called the Park Finder. You can just type in MNDNR Park Finder into your old Google machine and you will get a whole list of where you're going to be headed to your next state park adventure. Dr. Ann, where are we hiking?

Ann: Well two places. One for sure has got to be Flandrau. And if people feel they don't, aren't too athletic, I said take the Bluebird Loop, there's two of them past the rustic camp area, and you will see all kinds of things, just pop your eyes when it comes to prairie. There's oodles and oodles of milkweed and lots of monarch caterpillars there, and there's little streams and there are nesting birds, and then there's a little wooded area just I guess that would be kind of west of that trail, and you can hear a bunch of woodpeckers that are, you know, the nature's woodcarvers, and there's lots of cattails, and then if you go up in kind of the marshy part of that trail, you'll find jack-in-the-pulpits, I mean, zillions of things. And they're all so unique. When kids see the jack-in-the-pulpit, they just, you know, oh, my gosh, just like when you're up northern Minnesota and you see a pitcher plant, you said oh, you know, they're just wonders, they really are.

Megan: They are. Where's the second place you're hiking with us today?

Ann: Would be, and I don't get there very often, when I was working at Open Door Health Center in Mankato, is the Kasota Nature Reserve, that scientific reserve, that has, that is so unique. I guess it's 70-feet-tall, the ridge in some places, has got beaver dams, there are red fox, there are reptiles, I just found a lot of things that I found in no other park in South Central Minnesota. It is so unique that I would definitely recommend that people go there. Not for a lot of really little children but, you know, when you get into the elementary, fifth, sixth grade, and for sure throw the teenagers out there, they'll run around and find things, yes.

Megan: Absolutely. And because we're trying to make this easy for you, there is also a find a natural area map on our website, where you can just type in S&A Minnesota DNR, find a natural area, and it'll take you to that map. And if you want to see all of

these incredible public lands all in one place, we've got that too. You can go to our DNR recreation compass, and that will show you all of your public lands. This has been great. We can talk to y'all all day long. I also want to find, Dr. Ann, you've inspired me to use the word oodles more in my daily language conversations.

Mike: Thanks for that, Dr. Ann.

Megan: You might hear this on the podcast throughout the season. Oodles and oodles of fun we're having, aren't we? I love it so much. You're both two incredible women, incredible, inspiring people in general, and we are lucky to know you and so grateful - -

Mike: A real pleasure.

Megan: - - that you are here as our guests today, absolutely.

Mike: Thanks you two.

Ann: Thank you for this opportunity - -

Megan: Thanks for the flowers.

Ann: - - to spread the joy.

Megan: They love it. So next week, catch us next week on Prairie Tuesday. We are going to be continuing this mental health theme and so we are just for you having an invasive species support group where we are going to round robin with some of our managers and we are going to talk about two prairie nemeses, Kentucky bluegrass and smooth brome, and so we're going to chat with them about some successes or challenges they've had in trying to deal with these two species that we know with climate change and nitrogen deposition are just going to continue to be an extreme problem for our prairies' health and fitness. And so while today's episode was certainly focused on our mental health as it's connected to these prairie systems, we also want to make sure that these prairie systems are healthy so that they persist through time forever and ever and ever and ever, okay.

Ann: Megan, I just want to tell you I hope everybody goes out and gets their prairie fix.

Megan: Yes.

Ann: Something to get addicted to.

Megan: Yes, that is something to get addicted to, a prairie fix.

Ann: Fix.

Megan: As always, you can catch all of our resources that we talked about today on our website at mndnr.gov/prairiepod. This episode was produced by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources Southern Region under the Minnesota Prairie Conservation Partnership. It was edited by the magnificent Dan Ruiter and engineered by the fabulous Jed Becher. What should we say? Should we sign off and say go get your prairie fix?

Ann: Yes.

Megan: We just say bye to everybody too. That works.

Mike: Goodbye.

Megan: Bye, all.

Ann: Thank you, thank you, thank you.

((sounds of birds chirping and wind blowing))