Prairie Pod Transcript

Season 4, Episode 38: Seeds of Wisdom from the Prairie: How listening to stories from a diversity of cultures perfects our prairie understanding

Hosts: Megan Benage, Regional Ecologist and Mike Worland, Nongame Wildlife Biologist

Guest(s): Rowzat Shipchandler DNR, May Vang (Urban Roots)

Human diversity (how we need to listen to stories of other cultures' use of prairie or appreciation of prairie to fully understand this ecosystem

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

Transcript:

((sounds of birds chirping and wind blowing))

Megan: Hey, welcome back to the Prairie Pod. It's Season 4 all season long and oh, my gosh, Mike, it's our last episode. Can you believe it?

Mike: Megan, I'm going to miss you. It's going to be another year before we get to see each other. It, it, it's, it hurts my heart, you know.

Megan: I don't think that's, I don't think this is accurate, Mike. I think we're going to get to see each other on the prairie.

Mike: Yeah, probably.

Megan: You're not going to get out of camping with me. If this was like some kind of recorded attempt to get out of our camping trip, you're failing. It's not going to work. We're going. We're going to the prairie together.

Mike: And our guest, it'd be you and me and our partners, right. Yes. Just to be clear.

Megan: Yes, of course. Mike and I have obviously a very much brother/sister relationship, but we like to frolic outside together. We like to visit the prairie, okay, I already started singing. I, we got to jump right in here because we have been, I have been waiting for this episode - -

Mike: Me too.

Megan: - - all season long, and I cannot wait to talk to our two guests, who have so much good information to share with us. So this is not surprising to our listeners. We talk about diversity all the time on this podcast. It is probably the most said word on this podcast. But usually when we're talking about it.

Mike: So Megan, let me be clear, you're, you, you promote diversity?

Megan: Absolutely.

Mike: Just to be clear.

Megan: Absolutely. Mike, have you been listening to any of these episodes?

Mike: I'm being sarcastic, yeah, yeah.

Megan: Absolutely, but when we talk about diversity, usually we are talking about it in the context of the prairie and how all of the different kinds of wildflowers and sedges and grasses and all of the wildlife that's there, and then all of the soil microbial activity, so all of that life.

Mike: Thank you for throwing in the wildlife, Megan.

Megan: You're welcome. Any time. Just for you, Mike. All of that life above ground and below ground makes the prairie strong, it makes it healthy, it makes it resilient, it makes it function, and it makes it so that it can give us all the things that we need to survive. Hey, clean air, hey, clean water, hey, healthy soils, thanks, prairie, thanks, prairie, thank you to a prairie is what we need to say because of all those great things that it's giving to us.

Mike: You're talking to these things like they're, like they're people, Megan, just to be clear.

Megan: They are to me, Mike. They are to me. I, the prairie, I am connected to it deeply, if you haven't figured that out yet, I don't know. You're going to have to go back and listen to like 32 episodes, so you can catch up. So the point is, is that when we talk about diversity in that context, we rarely talk about it in the context of people who visit the prairie and people who are a part of the prairie. So today we are going to talk about some of our diverse connects and how just like diversity is a guiding principal for the prairie that makes it strong and healthy and resilient, it's also a guiding principal for our work as conservationists where we should definitely be making sure that we have representation, inclusion, and equity in all of the things that we're doing because all of these public prairie spaces that we so love can't really, really be as valuable and important as they are until everyone has access to them. And so we are so excited to talk with two very special guests today and we're just going to jump right in and have them introduce themselves. Rowzat, we're going to start with you. Tell us a little bit about who you are and what you do.

Rowzat: Yeah, so my name is Rowzat Shipchandler and I will give you a spelling test next time I connect with all of you. I am the Minnesota DNR's diversity coordinator, and I have been at the DNR for two years. So to tell you a little bit about me, I guess

personally and professionally, so I am the daughter of immigrants from India, I have lived all over the Midwest and ended up in Minnesota for graduate school, where my father also went to graduate school like 25 years ago. And then the other thing is, is I had a strong desire to change the world since I was pretty young, and so I've been really fortunate professionally to be able to, to be able to do that. I've worked on a number of issues over my career from affordable housing to youth development, and a number of that, you know, a decent portion of that has been focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion. I managed a racial equity program for a local foundation for a decade. I had the honor of serving as deputy commissioner of our state civil rights agency, the Minnesota Department of Human Rights, and now I'm working with the DNR to embed diversity, equity, and inclusion into our work.

Mike: We're happy to have you, Rowzat.

Megan: Fabulous.

Mike: May, tell us a little bit about yourself, please.

May: Yeah. Hi, so thanks for having me today. I'm really excited to be here. My name is May Vang and I am the conservation program manager at Urban Roots, and just a little bit about myself is that I am also a daughter of immigrants, and so my parents came here to the U.S. in the 1980s, and I was born and raised here in St. Paul, and I have four siblings, which, and we're all in the science field in different areas of the science field, but I am in the field that I am now today and I'm at Urban Roots because, you know, growing up, I did spend a lot of time outdoors and I'm excited to be here to talk about it just because of like that talk, about like just talking about, you know, representation outdoors and what that really means because, you know, like there's kind of like a norm for what it means to like what you do when you're outdoors, so growing up, my family didn't go, we didn't go camping, we didn't go like exploring the state parks or anything like that, but you know, I did spend a lot of time outdoors and it's in the sense of, you know, I played outside all the time with family and friends, I fished a lot with my dad and my brother at like local parks, so we stayed pretty local but then also every summer a big part of my summer was also spent at a garden because my parents, you know, they, every summer they garden, so it was like every day was outside time. And you know, eventually, they also grow, grew their own produce and they were sold at the farmer's market for a really long time, so every summer was outdoor time. But it wasn't until I went to high school that I actually learned about like environmental science and environmental education and conservation, and I, that's kind of the reason why like I think Urban Roots is so important and why I'm like working at Urban Roots and why I'm here today is because I feel like there just needs to be like that exposure and, you know, again, I didn't get that until I was in high school, and I didn't even know that that existed, that you can do environmental education outside in, in the field, so I thought that was really neat. But I have been at the, at Urban Roots for seven years now, and before then, I also taught, environmental education for about nine years, and I served in the Conservation Corp for two years, two terms, and I actually was there the first year that they piloted youth outdoors, and so it really inspired me to be a great mentor for youth that look like me.

Megan: I love that, May, and thank you both for being here. We're really excited to tap into your knowledge and just your personal perspectives. I think it's going to be a really good conversation. And May, you just reminded me I have never made this connection for myself, but my parents also made me be out in a garden or I should say gave me the opportunity to be out in the garden every day, and that was something that I always didn't really enjoy so much when I was a kid, you know, trying to weed the garden. There was always a set amount of time that we had to help them work in the garden, yeah, that's what they said. They tried to give us pennies for how many, you know, loads of wood we would carry into the house, but it was like you got one penny for like six loads of wood. Even as a 7-year-old, I was doing that math.

Mike: At least you got pennies.

Megan: Yeah, that's true, at least we got the pennies. But so I never realized I should actually be calling my mom and thanking her because she definitely started me off young in just inspiring me with a love of the outdoors and how we also need to take care of the outdoor spaces that we're in. So, Mike, you got a quote for us, buddy.

Mike: Yeah, this is a quote if I say the name correctly, Kwame, Kwame Christian. And so this is some of the resources that Rowzat passed along to DNR staff and I don't know much about Kwame except for what the, the, the resource said about him. He's a, he's an, a negotiation expert, lots of things that he does. But one of the quotes that he, that he put, that is very simple and I think also something that we need to bear in mind when we're talking about these issues, he said the best things in life are on the other side of a difficult conversation. And I thought that, that is very apt and, and, and leads us right into what I would like to talk about first if we're ready to jump into questions here. The, you know, this talking about race, talking about diversity in general, it's difficult to do, it's challenging. You know, we haven't done enough of it, right? And so Rowzat, if you could tell us, if you could give us some tips on, on how to approach conversations about race and about diversity in general.

Rowzat: Okay.

Mike: And, and just guidance on the right questions to ask.

Rowzat: You know, so you know what I'm going to do is I'm going to start out by talking about what diversity, equity, and inclusion means to the Minnesota DNR, and how we look at that, and then race is such a big organizing principle in our society. I'd like to actually talk a little bit separately about race because there are a lot of misconceptions about how it came to be, and if you don't address those, it's kind of hard to understand when people bring up racial equity itself. So just in terms of diversity, so let me just say diversity, equity, and inclusion are values of the Minnesota DNR. And as we look at diversity and how it relates to people, diversity is about similarity and about difference. And it can include a whole host of things. It can include race, it can include gender, it can include socioeconomic status, it can include our life experiences, you know, our, our ability, so you know, in that category of diversity, there is a whole lot of things that, that make us different and, and similar to people around us. Inclusion, so inclusion is about an intentional act. So you could have diversity in an organization or, well, or in a group of people, but that doesn't necessarily lead to an environment that embraces that

difference and welcomes it, and so, you know, and inclusion, we're trying to make or replace and the environments and the services and the facilities we provide to Minnesotans inclusive place where those differences are celebrated. And then equity realizes that historically, you know, we have power differentials in our society. Right? And our laws and government services have contributed to that, and so, you know, as we move forward, it's thinking about how we design our systems and, you know, I'm not talking about an ecosystem here, I'm talking about sort of how, you know, government might do its regulations or provide its services, and we need to think about how those are made and how they work together and what kind of outcomes they produce, and make sure that they are giving people, you know, fair access. So that's diversity, equity, and inclusion. I want talk a little bit specifically about race and I, I might want to talk about it. I think I want to talk about it in the context of science, because, you know, conservation is a science-driven field and I think we actually have to understand a couple of things about science and race. And so from my perspective, I just want to say I think science really provides us some very valuable tools for looking at the world, but sometimes we think of science being neutral and, and it really isn't. I mean, it is something that humans have created. It is a useful way of looking at the world, but it's also done some harmful things when it comes to looking at people. And so for race, I think it's important to know that race is not something that has always existed. It has a history. It kind of started really taking form in Europe during the Enlightenment, and I'm using Enlightenment in quotes when it comes to race, and so scientists started putting people in categories based on physical difference at that time, and by the 1700s, you see these taxonomies about race coming up. There were definite values and hierarchies put on people based on these physical differences. And so, you know, this was embedded in the, in the thinking that was around, you know, the formation of the United States, you know, the 1700's is when you start to see these taxonomies really kind of taking hold in science and that's when our country was founded. And so it's been an organizing principle, you know, for the time. Now if we fast forward to today, our, our more recent science would tell us that like race is not a particularly useful category in a biological sense. I mean, you know, as we look at genetics, you know, genetic differences, there are differences but they don't fall into the categories we've traditionally thought about race. And also things like skin color, eye color, you know, hair texture, those things don't translate into things like morality, intelligence, or even athletic ability. So we have this paradox where we have organized the society based on this concept of race, but and so it is important, it is a social construct, and so it's of limited biological use, but we have to understand that it's shaped our history and our experiences here in the United States and even when we get to like relationships with the land, there are things where race has really determined, you know, whose land it is, for example. And so I just want to talk about it being sort of a social construct, you know, something that science perpetuated, that it's like walking away from, but I think it's really important like racial conversations are really, really polarizing but we don't talk about how it started very much and I do think that that, having people understand a little bit about that history is sort of important to understanding, you know, why we still need to address it today.

Mike: Definitely.

Megan: Thank you. That, it's just so good to have that grounding and that background and the foundation because I do think it really helps us understand. And also part of the beauty of science is that we can adapt and we can change and we can get better, and so my hope just like you said, we're moving away from some of these things that happened in early science that were really set up to divide one another. We can address that now and work to correct it, and so that's some of what I, I like about science is that there's that opportunity to adapt and change within that.

Rowzat: I was going to say, you know, if any of you are sort of interested in, if you're interested in looking at the science behind some of this, the Science Museum of Minnesota has an exhibit on race. It's probably about a decade old, my picture is in it. And it has traveled around Minnesota and around the country and there is, there are web resources, so there are some, if you want to learn a little bit more about that, there is a good resource for that.

Megan: Wonderful. And you also gave us an activity, I love that. When there's activity like hands-on learning, I love it. May, we're going to start with you for this next question about why should we increase diversity, equity, inclusion in conservation, and before, before I have you answer, I just want to offer one thing 'cause I was listening to this great podcast that was recommended to us earlier in the season by Veronica Jaralambides, and she said we should really listen to the Mountain and Prairie Podcast, particular the episode with Gabe Vasquez, where he talks about equity in the outdoors. And one of the things he was talking about in that is that they were trying to pass some legislation basically that would put equity in the outdoors in the forefront of people's minds, and he said that some of the conversation around that was just this lack of understanding of how we, each of us live our lives outside of our own cultural experiences and our own perspectives, right? And so one of the things he said is that some people are like I don't get it, why do we need equity in the outdoors when you can just go out in your backyard? And so he said well, that's a privilege to be able to have a backyard and to go out in it and explore, and he's like some of, some of the folks that we're trying to engage outside, you know, they live in a three-story apartment with, you know, 10 to 12 family members, they can't just go outside. That's not a space that they have that is connected to them. And he's like and certainly getting in a car and driving to a natural area that's 30 miles away so that you can really be immersed in nature and connect, that also takes some money and some resources and so he was really talking about how we, we forget that it's not as simple as just walking outside or opening your screen door, as he said, and listening to some birds. So I just wanted to kind of frame it that way just from some resources that I've been listening to 'cause I thought that was a really important point he made that we, we forget that not everybody has a car or can access these spaces in the same way. So tell us from your perspective why, why is this important?

May: Yeah, Megan. I'm so glad that you said that because I have been thinking about that a lot as well too, and just really thinking about like public spaces and access and like who's accessing it and who like, you know, like, like what is the audience and who the public spaces are for, and even like just thinking, you know, yeah, like everybody uses their space differently, and so it's really like who are we concerning for, you know, that's kind of the big question is, you know, because everybody use space so differently

and maybe like their outdoor experience is like just the little lawn right outside, you know, and so that's a really different perspective from like going, you know, the 30 miles away to, you know, like pristine prairie somewhere where you can actually explore like a whole, a whole entire prairie that looks very, very different. And again, you know, I from a conservation like just program point of view is like, you know, it just really makes me think that, you know, we do have to be mindful of like how they are accessing it and, you know, kind of what resources they have to help them like understand and not even understand but like connect like what are, what are people's connection to these spaces. And if we don't connect to them the same way, then obviously like the conservation message is very different for everyone. And, you know, even like those spaces if people don't see themselves in those spaces, they're not going to have that same kind of connection, but then also because like our youth program, you know, they, you know, everybody says that but it's, it's very true, like the youth is kind of the future of, you know, the future generation and so if they can't see themselves in those spaces, you know, how are they going to like if they're not represented or they can't themselves in those spaces, how are they going to connect to it if they can't connect to it, then why, like why, why preserve it, why conserve it. You know, so it really has to be like I think that's kind of the big gap is trying to communicate that but also just reframing, reframing, reframing like and really like gathering those stories and those different perspectives I think is really important.

Megan: I agree 100% because it's easy to forget, right? Like it's easy to, it's, it's harder to do the work to become educated about people's different experiences than your own. Like that takes conversations and it takes time, but it's easy to just think in the context of, of my worldview and how, you know, what my experiences have been because it's right here, I'm living it every single day, but it's much harder to, I love how you said connect. It's much harder to connect and make sure that we are really understanding what representation should look like and how we get there, and what the different experiences are to get to that representative point. Rowzat, do you have anything you would like to add?

Rowzat: Yeah, so let me, I'm going to get back to a little bit to your diversity conversation that was happening earlier. So, so you know, there's quite a bit of research that looks at organizations and they show that diverse groups make better decisions and they show that inclusive practices actually benefit everybody, you know, and benefit the organization as a whole, even if you're again, focused on making something gender inclusive or, you know, making things accessible for people with disabilities. And, you know, I think when it comes, you know I'm relatively new to the natural resources field but I have been spending a lot of time looking at how cultural differences, I mean, you know, how cultures look at nature differently, for example, and how, you know, things like identity like racism or, or sexism, how those kind of play into people's relationships with nature. And I would say first, you know, in terms of those different ways of perceiving nature, you know, I think when we don't look at those different, those different lenses, that we are losing something as a society, and so, you know, one example, you know, of things that I found really interesting is, is, you know, indigenous groups in, in the United States have had different land management practices than we often use, you know, the people who came here later. And, you know,

when we think about like fire suppression, you know, reading about what some groups in the west are doing around some tribes in the west and how they're managing their lands around fire, I think actually provides some real knowledge that if we don't take into account those different perspective, we're actually losing something, you know, and there's some real wisdom there, and so that's what I would say is, you know, there is wisdom from bringing those diverse perspectives, even when it comes, you know, to the environment, you know, and into the land. And I would say, you know, I think access is one thing, another part is that there I think are some really fundamental differing views on relationships between, you know, people and nature and what that should look like, and I do again think that there's wisdom. And I think the other point I will say is, you know, this is, you know, talking about these things, we've talked about it already, it's a really polarizing conversation, you know, because I think sometimes when we're talking about the rights of somebody else like in the back of our heads, we're thinking like what about me, like, you know, I have challenges too and what I, I often say about diversity is, you know, these, these efforts are free. So if you think about a curb cut on a sidewalk, like that, you know, we have a lot of those people because the Americans with Disabilities Act told governments they had to put them in, but it is designed specifically for one group but really there's a much wider group of people who enjoy benefits from that, so it might have been made for, you know, people who might use a wheelchair or, or might be blind, but like kids riding bikes, you know, the DNR when we're going out to an outreach event back in the days we could do that, I mean, rolling a cart, you know, taking a suitcase somewhere, and so these are things that like benefit a really wide group of people but they - -

Mike: When my, when my tricky knee is giving me trouble.

Rowzat: Yeah, when your tricky knee is giving you, but they actually benefit everybody. Curb cuts aren't free, they take effort, they take resources, but the benefits are there whether you fall into that group or not.

Mike: Yeah.

Megan: I like, I like how you're describing it, Rowzat, because it's not a pie, right? It's not, Mike's not going to get less of a piece of a pie if we do these things. He's going to benefit like everybody's going to be sharing that pie together, it's not about making the pie smaller.

Rowzat: Yeah. We're all going to put some collective effort into making the pie.

Mike: There you go. Just, just while we're talking about the, the benefits of diversity, equity, and inclusion and why we should do it, what really jumped out at it, it obviously is the right thing for all sorts of reasons, right? But, but of course, I have this bird bias. Megan, Megan is fully aware of this. I like birds, I quite often see the natural world through the lens of looking at birds. And but we had this recent resource finding where, where 30% of our birds have disappeared in the last 50 years and actually half of the grassland birds have disappeared in the last 50 years. To say it's alarming is an, is an understatement, and it's important to emphasize that we've been doing conservation, it has changed, but we've been doing conservation during that entire time. The bottom line is business as usual is not going to fix that problem. Obviously, it's an enormous,

it's an enormous problems, all these complex factors at work, and so business as usual is not going to fix that, so what can? Something like diversity, equity, inclusion increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion in conservation in the use of our wild areas to me, it has the ring of something that has a big enough movement that it could effect change. This kind of change we need to protect prairie and birds and nature in general. So I wanted to throw that out there and, and something that was a real impetus for me to start thinking more about diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Rowzat: Yeah, so you know, one thing, you know, I think about is sort of what impact we can have as individuals and, you know, I think sometimes we separate, you know, nature something, as something that's kind of like far away from us, and I do think when it even comes to prairie, you know, like if we thought about diversity, when we think about who could be involved in those conservation efforts differently, and so, you know, I've like, for example, I live in St. Paul and I live on a small city lot, and I haven't necessarily been a target of some of these like prairie restoration efforts, but I actually do have a native garden on my boulevard, which I, you know, have intentionally planted there, and while it is not a large ecosystem, it's, you know, a 5 by 20 foot piece of space, I as a nonscientist can actually tell that the insect and bird activity in that little space is different than the rest of my yard. And so, you know, there are ways that I think if we think about who is a stakeholder in conservation differently, you know, you know, I, I heard somebody from the Fish and Wildlife Service talking about what if we all just planted one native plant, you know, how that affect the bird populations where we're talking about, and so I think even thinking about our stakeholders and thinking diversity, equity, and inclusion can uncover, you know, opportunities like, you know, I've done it on my own but, you know, I got a whole city block of people who you might be able to talk to and, you know, collectively it, you know, may make a difference to our pollinators, to our, to our insects, and to our, you know, birds.

Megan: Absolutely. We're certainly in a state in our landscape where every patch of prairie matters. We don't, we, we are not allowed to picky and choosy about it. Every patch of habitat matters and just as much as we need those native expanses connected to large restorations, we also need those small, smaller plantings too that might be in more urban environments because not only are you seeing lots of good wildlife diversity in there, but you probably have the cleanest air on the block. You probably have the cleanest water on the block because those deep - -

Mike: Can you imagine if every household in the metro planted, planted the, a garden that Rowzat is talking about in their backyard? Even, even one house per block in the metro did that.

Megan: Oh, my gosh. Think of how beautiful, even do a whole garden walk in along all of the boulevards and think about just like the ability to be able to breathe and not have traffic and all of this asphalt and concrete we had Dr. Ann talk to us in our earlier episode about mental health and how just spending that time in nature allows our brain to connect and, and recharge and gosh, just think if all you had to do was walk outside along your boulevard and you can get that, that would be amazing. So we're going to pivot a little bit here.

Rowzat: I'm still figuring out how to get a bison to, to graze down that plot.

Megan: Mike's going to work on sending you a miniature bison for your boulevard. Little mini bison.

Rowzat: Como zoo, Como Zoo-- there's a couple there.

Megan: That, that's, that's a way that you don't alarm people, sure. You just send a little bison down the sidewalk that's something ya see every day, definitely makes you feel tall when you see that. Susan, did you just see a, a bison out the window, like okay, we're going to pivot.

May: Although it might be a good way to spark, it might be a good way to spark interest and curiosity though.

Megan: It's very true, it definitely sparked a lot of phone calls, we can tell you that. Good point. So May, we want to talk to you a little bit these next, these next series of questions are about, you know, what does it really mean to implement diversity, equity, and inclusion when we think about our conservation work and what are some of the, some of the things that we've seen, the benefits that we've seen by doing that. And Urban Roots, I just want to give you guys a round of applause. You can't see me doing it but I'm giving a literal round of applause right now on video here, and you guys are, you guys are doing a great job, like an excellent job at Urban Roots of just making this all happen and connecting lots of people with very diverse cultural backgrounds and identities to the outdoors, and I love your River Stories Podcast that the Youth at Urban Roots put together. What a fantastic job. I was telling Mike and actually telling, telling you earlier too. Sometimes the scientists, there's a lot of details and there's a lot of stuff that we need to figure out, but I love that when you talk to youth, they just make everything so simple.

Mike: Overthink things maybe, yeah.

Megan: Yeah, they just make it so simple. Why should we protect the river? Because it's the water the wildlife need and the water we drink. Like they just make it so simple and yes, nature is complex and it's a whole bunch of connections interwoven together, but I just love everything you're doing there and how the youth were talking about it on that podcast. So share with us a little bit about what's working and how you're making it happen.

May: Yeah, so I just want to start off by giving a shoutout to the youth because the youth are like we have all these, these great programs but they're really the superstars of the program, and so without them, like none of this would really be happening and our program wouldn't be our program, but we are a nonprofit, so Urban Roots is a nonprofit on the Eastside of St. Paul, and we really take pride in, you know, really reaching out to community and serving our community on the Eastside of St. Paul, and we've been around for about 52 years, so we started in 1969, so it's been around for a little while, but our mission is to cultivate and empower youth to become just to connect with, you know, through and build like leadership skills and become a leader through, you know, connecting with nature but, you know, healthy eating, and also through community, and we work with a lot of youth. Mainly our youth come from the Eastside of St. Paul, but they are youth ages 14 to 18 and then youth that have graduated high

school, we do hire a couple of alumni youth to become staff as well, and also to take on these leadership and these supportive roles to kind of help mentor our younger youth, and there are three really neat programs that they can participate in and we have a really neat progressive model that we, you know, have in place for each of the programs, so all that means is that every year that youth come back, they get more hours and they also get an opportunity to have a different experience each time they come back. And so and it's kind of fun to see the youth really enjoy that part of it and grow because they, their goal is to come back every year and to, you know, become like what we call a Harvest Star, so that's like a youth that has been there for, you know, three-plus years, and they really take pride in that position when they have reached that, so it's really amazing to see them grow in that kind of way. But the three programs that we have are the conservation program, which I am a part of, and then we have the market garden, and then we also have the cook fresh program, and so we're all intertwined but most of our program takes place in the summer, so that's our summer, our summertime is where we're really super busy just go all the time, and then we do have school year programming as well and, and the school year, they do get a chance to kind of mix in, you know, kind of dab in all three of the programs, but there, gosh, there's so much to say about each program. But the conservation program is really neat because we focus a lot on restoring and maintaining like green spaces and parts on the Eastside of St. Paul, so we work a lot in Bruce Vento Nature Sanctuary, we also spent a lot of time down at the Willowbrook Reserve down by the Central DNR office down there, and then we also spend a lot of time at like Trout Brook Nature Sanctuary, and, you know, the projects all involved lots of things but anything from removing invasive species to, you know, installing and putting in native plants, you know, installing rain gardens and pollinator gardens, and then also just doing outreach and, you know, connecting with the community and teaching the community about conservation, so whether that's like, you know, pollination or whether that's like water quality and just like how can the community help with water quality right in their neighborhoods. And then of course, you know, like kind of just you guys mentioned it but the River Stories, that's kind of a really special project that they created because they were able to really connect with the community and really, you know, capture some really beautiful stories from the community and their like relationship to nature and what that really means. And that's something that we also really want to focus on is, you know, like how, you know, these spaces are right in the middle of the city, so it's not like, it's like sometimes like right in their backyards, you know, and, you know, it's really like how do they connect with these spaces. And you know, why, why does it matter, what kind of things that they can do to like make a big effect on it, like conservation-wise. And just like really building that connection and then our market garden program also does a really great job with all of this as well too. So the youth that participate in the market garden, they really get the whole, the whole experience, so from sea to table but also sea to sale, so they really get to plan out and prep the beds, and we do have six garden, garden sites on the east side of St. Paul, and we, they will plant, they will maintain it, they get to harvest the produce, and then they also get entrepreneurship skills as well running through like our CSA program, so we have like about a 40-member CSA share that we have, and that's really amazing, and then they also practice conservation as well, so you know, like pollinator friendly, like just pollinator friendly like pathways and things like that, so like a crop

cover, but also making sure that, you know, soil like nitrogen fixing for the soil that they're working in, making sure there's like good drainage, you know, less erosion, and then they gather like they get information from like, you know, like local experts, so they've invited, you know, community members in from, you know, diverse backgrounds, backgrounds to really talk about like hey, you know, these are different ways where you can garden, this is something that you can harvest, don't throw this part away, you can actually eat that part, so like really involving like other different cultures from that aspect of it. And then the cook fresh program is also amazing. The cook fresh program, the, the youth really get a chance to work in the gardens and really learn about the food that we actually grow at our garden sites, but then also learning how to prepare it fresh from the gardens, and then they get to work with local chefs, and the local chefs, you know talk to them and they do actually like actual cooking demos with the chefs and pre-COVID, we, they actually prep a whole meal each week for all 60-70 youth that we have, so we can enjoy it together as like a community but they also get a chance to share, you know, recipes and the food that they eat at in their own homes as well, so it's really, really like highlighting the community that our youth group is from, but also like, you know, teaching about it and really like building community off of that, so it's a wonderful, wonderful organization.

Mike: Nice.

Megan: I love this connection that you've made between food production and conservation, and how the two, I mean, the same things you need to grow that garden are the same things that you need to have a healthy prairie. Like you have to have your healthy soils, right? Like you have to have the right amount of nutrients in the soil and the native plants how you're weaving them in there so that there's that connection with the pollinators that are pollinating the native plants and they're pollinating the garden, just wonderful. I love it.

Rowzat: Can I make a plug for Urban Roots?

Megan: Yes.

Rowzat: Yeah, so in terms of diversity, equity, inclusion. So this is, I've, I've had a chance to work with Urban Roots actually several times over the last decade in multiple jobs, and I have to say that they do such a wonderful job with the young people. I have been so impressed in every conversation I have been in with participants of Urban Roots, and so I think for conservation, you know, we do need to think about our stakeholders more broadly, and understand that, you know, we need to look in different communities for these advocates for conservation and Urban Roots definitely has been working to, you know, to help young people do that, and so, you know, if you get a chance to go there, I mean, they're, every person I've seen has just been super impressive.

Megan: I'm trying to figure out when the dinner is and that's when I want to schedule my visit. That's what I'm trying to figure out.

May: We do have lots of, yeah, keep an eye out on our website because we do have some events. Like we just did a Valentine's one where it's called, and so we, I've been

trying to, I'm trying to think now the name that is slipping my mind, but we actually had like a Valentine's event where we, there was like a local chef that baked something, but it was using honey in the, our honey that we harvested as like in the recipe. So there, there are lots of really neat things, and then like we have had like pizza nights as well, where there's like a pizza kit and, you know, you just get the box of pizza ingredients and then someone's helping you like a cook fresh person in our, you know, local chef is helping you bake your own pizza at home. So there's really neat opportunities coming up.

Megan: I love that. I also love that you talked about food as a catalyst and I want to add to that, that I also think of food as a community the same way that I think of a prairie as a community, because just think about when you sit down and you have a meal with people, you know, with family, like the food is there and it's basically buoying the conversation and the connection just like the prairie flowers and the sedges and the grasses are providing food to all the wildlife and it's buoying that community. So that's kind of how I, I don't know, for me at least when I think of food, I always think of time together and just like really good conversations. So I love that you're making these bridges. It's wonderful.

May: I was just going to say that, I really like that we're community as well too because like and that relates to so many different things, like, you know, like the work that we do at Urban Roots is, you know, community is one of our big thing in connecting through food, connecting through, you know, conservation, connecting through gardening, all of that, but then also, you know like you said, like community like in a prairie as well, and then even like the diversity and equity and inclusion is like it's really building that like that community, you know, and we talk about like biodiversity and diversity and like if we can just build that community, I really think that's like the big, that's the kind of the big key.

Megan: Absolutely, I agree 1000%. Rowzat, did you have anything else you wanted to add on, you know, how, how do other, so Urban Roots is doing a great job and how do other groups emulate that and learn from the work that they're doing to incorporate that into, into our work to make sure that we're being representative and inclusive as much as we possibly can be?

Rowzat: Yeah, so I think one thing, there are couple things that when I do my, teach my courses at the DNR that I really advocate people to do, and one is to sort of be aware of our own cultural approaches to things, and that's because we tend to put our cultural views on others, and so that's not necessarily about power differences. It's just that we're all, you know, we all have some amount of bias from being situated in our own experiences. And again, like, you know, I think in the beginning we're talking a little bit about when we're working in organizations where people are culturally similar, we may not understand that that's a lens and that's just not, just not the way the world works or something. So that's one thing I think is attentive, you know, to be attentive to and so, you know, be attentive that people approach nature for different ways. You know, some people hunt and this is culturally, you know, group based. Some people may hunt for recreation, some people may hunt for food, and so just understanding that there are different ways to relate. The other thing that I would say is, you know, for better or

worse, our society has constructed these categories that people are sort of assigned to, whether it be race or, or gender, and, you know, it's, I think it's really incumbent on people to understand that our experiences do differ, government has done a better or worse job of surveying some groups than others, and so just being open to the fact that, that people have been treated differently based on, on these and they do make a difference, and so and, you know, it might not make a difference to you, so I don't have a physical disability, so I can navigate, you know, if there wasn't a curb cut, I might find it slightly annoying but it's not going to be a major impediment to me, but to be understand that a sidewalk designed without that can be a really big barrier to somebody else. So try think being open to those two things, and I think, you know, you know, in that, you know, it's really important that the conservation organizations diversify, but I think in order to successfully have a workplace or, or even if it's a volunteer organization where people feel welcome, you're going to be, have to be attentive to the cultural difference and you're going to have to be attentive to how society's categories of identity have, have impacted all of us. And so, you know, once you do that, you will be a place that, you know, I think more people will want to work, you know, I'm going to say for conservation, you know, and like I said, women, you know, black indigenous people of color, like if you start to be attentive to that, you will be that workplace that people want to come to.

Megan: I love that. I could talk to you all day long, especially when May is talking about food and all the dinners and pizza I could just be here, just chatting about food all day long and connections and community and all the things, but we have got to move on to our next section.

LET'S SCIENCE: TO THE LITERATURE!

SCIENCE!

Megan: This is the part of the podcast where we recommend a book, a blog, or a paper, and like always, we have asked our fabulous guests to kick us off with some, some resources that they recommend. And I thought it was particularly interesting that you guys had the same pick and you didn't even talk about it ahead of time, so you both chose Braiding Sweetgrass. So when we get to that one, we'll have you each talk about why you chose it, so I thought that was kind of fun.

Mike: Great minds.

Megan: Yeah, great minds for sure. May, let's start with you.

May: Okay, so I chose for the podcast, I chose The Wandering Naturalist, and I really like that one just because I'm like a, a naturalist at heart and kind of, I just like to nerd out on all of the information that they share, and now that I listened to a couple of your podcasts, that's my next one as well too. But there's just lots of really neat things you can learn from the podcast, and then for the book, I did choose Braiding Sweetgrass and I just thought it was really beautifully written and it really just makes me wonder like, you know, if we all like she talks about, you know, the indigenous people and like their relationship to plant, you know, and I just really, it just really makes me wonder like if we all had that kind of relationship with plants, would conservation look different. That is

something that I've just been thinking about. And, you know, it just goes back to like having like a diverse perspective in the conservation field and why that's like so important. We just have so many different perspectives. And it's also, you know, there's a lot of different perspectives but it's also she does a really great job of like weaving like scientific thinking with like a cultural perspective, and I really appreciated that.

Mike: Rowzat, tell us about your pick, please.

Rowzat: Yeah, so I, okay, so it's kind of embarrassing 'cause I'm on a podcast and I don't actually read, listen to a lot of podcast, so I don't have a recommendation there, but I also picked Braiding Sweetgrass as one of my book recommendations, and so it was everything that May said it was but I'll just maybe pick a little bit different aspect. She does do a lot of storytelling and, and the author is Robin Wall Kimmerer. And I think that probably also comes from an indigenous cultural perspective. And so there are a lot of great stories about sort of nature and how it came to be, and I read some of the stories, there's a really interesting one about maple syrup and why it, you know, takes a long time to boil it down, and so, you know, these are stories that I actually read to my kid because, you know, they, they contain some really important life lessons. So the other book that I chose was Black Faces, White Spaces. It is written by Carolyn Finney and it, and it explores the African-American experience in the outdoors, and so, you know, again, I think of if an organization is thinking about inclusion, we have to think about how things like the system of racism affect people's relationship with nature, and you know, what society's messages are about who belongs, and so I recommend that book quite a bit.

Megan: I love that.

Mike: Hey Megan.

Megan: Yeah Mike.

Mike: Please let's take a hike in a very diverse prairie, shall we?

Megan: With maybe some diverse people, and so that we can gain some different cultural perspectives while we're hiking. I think it'll be great. I'm really excited. So we talked about this at the beginning of the podcast but we always ask our guests to recommend some public spaces that we can hike in, that you can access, just so that you can have some time in nature, it's good for your brain, it's good for your body, it's good for your soul, and so I think some of the best times that I have had in nature are actually when I'm with someone else and we're walking together and we're exploring and we're navigating but I'm also learning something about who they are and why they're excited to be in that space, and they see different things than I see. I know if I'm going with Mike, he's always going to point out a bird that I'm not even paying attention to because I'm counting how many interesting plants are on the ground, and I, I'm looking down, he's looking up. And so I think it's really nice when we are out hiking to make sure that we take somebody who has a different perspective so that we can see different things when we're out there and learn something all across the board. So May, start us out. Where are we hiking today?

May: I am going to pick there's many beautiful prairies but I'm going to pick Bruce Vento Nature Sanctuary just because it would almost be kind of betrayal if I didn't pick that one. So we've been working there for, you know, I had like work with the youth there for so many years but, you know, it really is a beautiful, you know, area and prairie just because and it's all times of the year. So, you know, in the fall, there's like the really pretty golden colors, you know, the goldenrod is there, there is like, you know, even like the all the little bluestem when all, they're all flowering, it's just really, really pretty. And then like in the spring in the summer, there's really like a diverse, you know, array of colors and plants that are there, and you can literally stand in one spot and watch like all the different pollinators just kind of like moving around, and then I do really like that because you see, you know, like just the downtown skyline in the background and you forget for a moment that you're like in a prairie and you forget for a moment that you're like right in the heart of St. Paul, and so just having that skyline in the background is a really nice reminder that hey, you know, you're right, this, this kind of beauty is like right in the middle of the city, so.

Megan: Love it.

May: And winter is really beautiful. There's lots of cool tracks and tunnels.

Megan: Love it.

Mike: Rowzat, please tell us about your pick.

Rowzat: Okay, I'm going to walk outside my front door for my prairie and talk about the boulevard garden that I talked about earlier. So it is, if you're, if you're walking or driving down Hamline Avenue in St. Paul, you may come across my prairie garden. So I've got, you know, I've got probably more flowers than grasses, so I don't know if it's a true prairie, but you know, asters and goldenrod and swamp milkweed, and knot butterfly weed and got little and blue, bluestem as well. So, you know, it's, it's interesting because, you know, as people walk by and if I'm in the yard, people often talk to me about the boulevard garden, and so you know, they, they ask me questions about the plants or they just say oh, that's really pretty, or I've actually given away some plants, you know, to, to neighbors, and I'm like I can dig some up and I can drop them off at your, at your place. I have a ton of goldenrod, if anybody needs it, and so, you know, it's kind of interesting because the, the, the, that garden is definitely like a, a focal point as I'm interacting with neighbors, many of which I don't know 'cause I live in a city and there are a lot of people walking around and so, you know, that's a way where I'm not necessarily going very far but I am I guess on that excursion with other people because they, they notice it and they comment on it. And my one tip about if you have a boulevard garden, you do need to keep it trimmed so you don't get in trouble with your city.

Mike: Good to know.

Megan: Pro tip.

Rowzat: I've learned the hard way.

Mike: This is an awesome example.

Megan: Or maybe there's just some education that we need to do, you know.

Rowzat: Yeah, I mean, it's how these prairie plants get to be five, six feet tall, so you know.

Mike: I'll just add that, that is an awesome example of how something like that prairie can, can build a community. I think we've said that at least a couple times already. But you know, that's the one thing the neighbors are stopping by to talk about and it, it's something people can kind of gather around, just like a campfire.

Megan: Mike's ready to go camping, listen to him, he's ready just light the campfire. Next thing you know, we'll be closing without talking about s'mores and hot dogs and the food just never ends, macaroni salad that the raccoons eat. That happened on our last camping trip. So anyway, this has been great.

Mike: Yeah, that was dreadful, that was, that was tragic.

Megan: It was tragic. This has been absolutely fan- - okay, before I do this, I have to tell the raccoon story, Mike, because it's going to be a funny way to end. Yeah, so what also happened on that camping trip is we had a conversation multiple times about people that are visiting parks that accidentally set off their car alarms in the middle of the night and how disruptive that is and how tragic it is when that happens because you're just peacefully asleep listening to the stream, listening to the wind blow, and then sure enough in our, you can't talk about people or things that happen like this because then that's just going to be a signal that it's going to happen to you because we had raccoons visit our campsite because old Michael did not put the salad into the cooler and he did not think that those raccoons could climb the car and knock it off and they certainly did, and then while trying to put the cooler into the car, he set off the car alarm not once, not twice, but three times 'cause he couldn't figure out at 3:00 in the morning how to turn it off.

Mike: In my defense, I actually had the gall to use the key and put it into the, the door lock on the car, and that set off the car alarm. So not my fault, Megan. The people who designed that car, it's their fault.

Megan: We call this karma when you're talking about other people and they're like gosh, how, how horrible people who set their car alarms off, and then you're the one who wakes up the entire campground, so anyway. Camp responsibly.

Mike: It was a humbling experience.

Megan: It was humbling. We had to remember that we should maybe think that these things can happen to everyone, little perspective to end the podcast with today. Rowzat, May, thank you so, so much for your perspective and for your work. It's very important work and we're just super pumped that you were able to share this with all of our listeners. I can't believe we're at the end of another season. Mike? How did this happen?

Mike: I know. I learned so much, Megan. I learned so much. Again, that's the main reason I do this show, to learn.

Megan: Me too. I learn all the time. I have to tell you my two words that I would pull out for this season if I, if I could are, okay I'm going to have three. I just lied. I want three words. Diversity, connection, and community. Those are the three words that just resonated with me all season long. I think they're just as important in our society as they are when we're thinking about how we're going to build prairie back and most importantly, how we're going to give and offer and allow people access to these spaces so that prairie is as it should be as Duane Benage would say for everyone, and so that is just something that I'm going to keep thinking about as, you know, the Indiangrass gets golden, the bluestem turns purple, and the prairie dropseed starts to smell like buttered popcorn. As always, you can find all the 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 it was engineered by the fabulous Jed Becher. I was going to say fantastic and then I merged like fantastic and fabulous together. He's both of those things, so there you go. We just appreciate you all so much. Go outside, spend time with one another, learn from another.

Rowzat: Thank you both so much.

Mike: Goodbye, you guys.

May: Thank you.

((Sounds of birds chirping and wind blowing))