



# Bringing the Prairie to Life

Josh Anderson

## North Dakota Natural Resources Trust

In September, high school students from North Valley Career and Technology Center swapped the classroom for the country, making a special trip to South Branch Bison Ranch near Grafton, North Dakota. There they explored the lush prairie, collecting seed heads, grasses, plants and soil. What they gathered became art.

With the help of a professional artist, the students learned how to transform soil samples into natural paint pigments. Handmade paper was made using fibers from plant materials. Plants and seeds were pressed into clay and glazed for dinner plates. Later, these plates will be used at a potluck dinner showcasing the artwork created by the students and lessons learned about the important relationship between soil health and prairies, the state's most important ecosystem.

Prior to their prairie visit, students first learned how to read soil maps, conduct soil sampling, identify key prairie plants, and met with land stewards who practice soil health principles. It was all part of a program called "Thinking Like a Prairie" led by the Walsh County Soil Conservation District in partnership with the North Valley Career and Technology Center, and made possible with funding from the North Dakota Natural Resources Trust's (NDNRT) Small Grant Program.

The NDNRT partners with organizations across the state, supporting conservation initiatives, education and outreach to the public about the value of our natural resources, including through its Small Grant Program. Since 2014, the Trust has awarded nearly 110 grants totaling over \$860,000.



Interest in grant supported projects has been strong, from potential grant recipients and the media. Recent projects funded include an educational podcast, public trails, a native plant walk, pollinator gardens, native prairie planting for educational use, nature parks and educational signage, classroom outreach and hands-on learning for students, nature-based community and public events, and educational workshops for teachers. The “Thinking Like a Prairie” program was featured in an article and podcast of a leading North Dakota newspaper and then picked up by other media outlets, generating visibility across the state.



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Students at North Valley Career and Technology Center create paintings with pigments made from soils gathered from the prairie.

### Conservation begins with public awareness.

Through the education and partnerships supported by the Trust’s Small Grant Program, people learn the value of grasslands and wetlands – inspiring them to take action to protect the ecosystems that sustain our land, water, wildlife and communities.

-Heather Husband, Meadowlark Initiative Coordinator

