

PRAIRIE DOGS

A KEYSTONE SPECIES HIGHLIGHT

Prairie dogs are nature's soil engineers

Prairie dogs are a keystone species that shape entire ecosystems with their burrowing and social behaviors. Their underground tunnels aerate soil, improve water absorption, and create habitats for countless other species, from burrowing owls to insects. By grazing selectively, prairie dogs promote plant diversity, preventing overgrowth of invasive species and maintaining healthy grasslands. Despite their ecological importance, prairie dog populations have declined due to habitat destruction and misconceptions about their impact.

Protecting these small but mighty creatures is essential for preserving the balance and resilience of North America's prairies.

Keystone species

A plant or animal that plays a critical role in its ecosystem. If removed, the ecosystem would change drastically, leading to the loss of biodiversity, habitat degradation, and ecosystem collapse.

Ways to help:

Prairie dogs need our help to change public attitudes after a century of misconceptions and habitat destruction. We need to change laws regarding the status of prairie dogs and protect their colonies.

- Protect their habitat & colonies
- Advocate for coexistence
- Buy land with prairie dogs on it
- Educate others on their value
- Donate to charities supporting PDs

Known as habitat creators for numerous species

Prairie dogs dig extensive burrow systems that provide shelter for many species, including burrowing owls, snakes, and endangered black-footed ferrets. These tunnels offer protection from predators and extreme weather, creating safe spaces for a variety of animals to thrive.

Prairie dogs improve soil health and can rehydrate dry land

Their burrows can aerate the soil, improving water absorption and nutrient distribution. Additionally, their waste acts as a natural fertilizer, enriching the soil and promoting plant growth. This process enhances the productivity of grasslands, making them more resilient to environmental changes.

Among the most effective grazers for preserving native grasses

By grazing selectively, prairie dogs prevent certain plant species from dominating the landscape. This allows a variety of grasses and wildflowers to flourish, supporting a balanced ecosystem that benefits pollinators, herbivores, and other wildlife.

Prairie dogs are a critical food source for many predators

Prairie dogs are a preferred meal for owls, hawks, coyotes, foxes, and eagles whenever they are available, playing a crucial role in sustaining predator populations and ecological balance. The decline of prairie dogs has directly impacted species like the black-footed ferret, which relies almost entirely on them for survival.

They are prairie ecosystem stability providers

Prairie dog colonies influence the survival of **over 150 other species** by shaping the landscape and maintaining biodiversity. Their burrows, grazing habits, and interactions with other wildlife create a dynamic and thriving ecosystem that would struggle to function without them.

Less than 2% of their habitat remains, destroyed by human-driven intolerance and development

Prairie dogs are imperiled due to harmful land management practices for the last 200 years. Many myths have been shared for over 150 years leading to human misunderstanding of the role of prairie dogs. Here are some facts. **1) Prairie dogs do not spread plague**—they are actually highly vulnerable to it. When exposed, entire colonies can be wiped out within days, making them more victims than carriers. **2) Scientific studies show that prairie dogs have little impact on cattle grazing operations.** In fact, their presence can improve soil health and plant diversity, benefiting ranchlands rather than harming them. **3) Modern research has found that it is extremely rare for livestock to break their legs in prairie dog burrows.** Prairie dog holes are small and shallow, and large animals are generally able to avoid them.

<https://gprc.org/research/prairie-dogs-the-truth/prairie-dogs-and-soil-impacts>
<https://www.slvcc.org/post/prairie-dogs-a-keystone-species-worth-fighting-for>
<https://www.usgs.gov/publications/prairie-dog-a-keystone-species>
<https://www.worldwildlife.org/stories/8-surprising-prairie-dog-facts>

Check out these
information sources



southernplains.org



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grasslandscolorado.org

