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Ecosystems, Beauty and Survival

by David Orsini

Recent articles on the provincially-rare savannas of High Park have focused on the importance of this ecosystem as habitat for certain plant and wildlife species. But the Savannah is also an important habitat for humans.

Savannas are found throughout the world. A Savannah is a transitional ecosystem – ecotone – between woodland and grassland and contains components of each. It is broadly defined as a plant community containing a discontinuous canopy of tree cover with a ground layer of grasses and wildflowers.

The savannas of the world are alike in structure rather than species composition. Their openness is dependent on ongoing disturbances. In the vast savannas of East Africa, where humans are said to have descended from the treetops, some 8 to 13 million years ago, elephants are the key to Savannah maintenance. They keep the forest from spreading by uprooting small trees. In North America, fire has been responsible for the maintenance of savannas. Ecologists have only recently discovered that fire was an important landscape management tool of the Amerindians. Fire was used by first nations to drive game, decrease insect population (i.e. mosquito, blackfly), and to clear land for crop cultivation.

Savannas combine two environmental attributes which appears to have been very important to the evolution of the human species – openness and protection. Jay Appleton, a British geographer, says that there is a benefit to survival in being able to see and not be seen or to see from a secure position. He says that “...a landscape which affords both a good opportunity to see and a good opportunity to hide, is aesthetically more satisfying than one which affords neither...”. Appleton believes that humans subconsciously attribute beauty to environments which are conducive to survival.

In a series of landscape preference studies, Dr. John Falk, discovered that people have a “deep, innate preference” for savannah landscapes, even if they had never experienced one before. He concluded that human beings may have “a genetically transmitted predisposition for the surroundings of the species’ birth and early development”. He believes the popular use of carpeting to be analogous to the Savannah’s ground layer.

Whether we give credence to these ideas or not, we cannot deny that so many designed landscapes closely resemble savannas – widely spaced trees in grassland. Savannas are considered to possess one other attribute which is said to be vital to landscape preference – mystery. Landscapes exhibit “mystery” when they give the impression that there is more information to be gained if one travels deeper into the scene. I think that the present day allure of savannah landscapes is that they possess sufficient mystery and intrigue in a relatively open setting. In this setting people are able to receive sufficient

environmental stimulus while still being able to ascertain the presence or absence of elements in the immediate surrounding which they consider threatening.