

One small steppe for grasslands



📷 Courtesy photo: Emily White

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BROOKINGS – Brookings resident Emily White will embark on a study-abroad program to Mongolia on June 11 for 10 days. White will study steppe ecology, specifically the native grasslands, preservation methods, and local wildlife.

Currently a Hillcrest Elementary teaching assistant and a former National Geographic employee, White is working on her master's degree in conservation biology from Miami University of Oxford, Ohio.

The program called Project Dragonfly allows graduate students to work in different countries all over the world. Project Dragonfly began in 1994 based out of Miami University and is funded by the National Science Foundation. It focuses on real-world applications that students are able to learn from and bring back to their respective countries.

Some of the other areas this program sends students to include the Amazon rainforest, India, Galapagos Islands, Australia and Costa Rica.

“One of the main reasons why I chose Mongolia is that I will be studying steppe ecology there, which is essentially like the prairies here (in South Dakota),” White said.

White is a Maryland native and moved to South Dakota to settle down with her husband and two boys after getting her undergraduate degree at Frostburg State University. Her job with National Geographic was as a liaison between them and South Dakota schools for a National Geographic education outreach program.

A specific assignment that she will be researching is about the Przewalski's horse. This is an endangered horse that functions similarly to bison. Her research is going to be comparing the two animals to see how bison can be used in the same way as the horse does to allow native species of grass to grow better. White referred to them as “keystone” species, meaning that there is a mutually beneficial relationship between the animals and the environment they live in.

The master's program has a human component to it as well. Much of the program focuses on how to bring communities together to function in a way that will better the environment.

“Part of the degree work is analyzing the community,” White said. “I want to come in and say, ‘What do you need?’ and figure out what really works in the area. I want to be able to work with anyone and figure out how to make this work.”

White is not entirely sure what specific capacity or profession she will take once she has completed her master’s degree, but she knows that she wants to work within the community to find ways to preserve native grasslands. There are several different companies and organizations within Brookings, said White, that are already working on programs that are finding ways to preserve grasslands and wildlife.

She has already been to Belize through Project Dragonfly and has planned on potentially going to study grasslands in Namibia next year.

“There’s no reason not to,” White said when asked about why she was travelling so much. “There will never be enough time or money, so the only thing that can make you go is you.”

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