

Cows in the Campground

Theme: Recreation; National Parks; Water Quality

Participants: Grades 3, 4, 5

NDE Standards: LA 3.2.1, 4.2.1, 5.2.1 (Writing); 3.3.2, 4.3.2, 5.3.2 (Listening)
SS 4.1 (Recalling history)

SDDE Standards: 3.W.4.1, 4.W.4.1, 5.W.4.1 (Writing); 3.L.2.1, 4.L.2.1, 5.L.2.1 (Listening)

Goals:

- By exploring the community of the Niobrara valley students will develop an understanding of the significance of development and it's hand in hand existence with preservation of a natural resource.
- Students will understand the interrelationships contained in the river system.
- Students will write a descriptive essay
- An alternative essay would be a compare/contrast essay
- A second alternative essay would be a cause and effect essay

Background:

- Habitat: The area or environment where an organism or ecological community normally lives or occurs: Ex: *a marine habitat or a prairie habitat*
- Early development and history of the river. Handout provided.
- The people of the area. Story handout provided.

Methods:

- Organize a field trip to an area of the Niobrara River valley such as the Fort Niobrara Wildlife Refuge or Smith Falls State Park. To arrange an interpretative session during the field trip, contact the Niobrara National Scenic River headquarters in Valentine at 402-376-1901 and ask for Sandi Kinzer, Chief Interpretive Ranger.
- Before the visit to the park, read and discuss the background material (habitat, ecosystems, and people of the valley).
- Before you actually go to the river area, explain the following writing assignment(s).

Materials included:

- Lesson plans
- Memory anecdote
- A Brief History of the Niobrara River valley
- Graphic Organizer

For more information:

The National Parks Service website: <http://www.nps.gov/niob>. This site also has a map of the scenic river which is downloadable and printable.

Possible assignments:

Explore the park and use your imagination.

- Write an essay that **describes** the possible changes that have occurred because of people living in the area.
- Alternative assignment: **Compare/contrast** the river usage, the habitat or the people of the river valley from earlier (for example 25 years ago) to present.
- Second alternative assignment: Develop an essay that explores the **causes and effects** of increased recreational use of the river. This essay might focus on the habitat and animals, people living in the valley and uses of the river.

Student instructions:

Explore the area. Ask yourself these questions: What would this area have looked like 25 years ago when your parents were kids? How have an increased number of people (visitors to the area) caused changes to this area (good changes or bad changes)? How has the river added to, or made difficult, the lives of the settlers and the lives of people who once lived or are currently living in the valley?

Keeping the theme of **change** in mind as you walk around, think about the habitat, think about the people who may have lived here, think about uses of the river. Chose one of these areas you would like to write about. Then choose three ideas within that area (subtopics). On the graphic organizer, list ideas that could work for these subtopics.

(For descriptive essay) On your own paper, take the ideas you noted on the graphic organizer and write an essay which describes the changes that may have occurred in last one or two decades. If you are writing about habitat or water usage, you may want to think about terms of the time being longer than two decades.

Camping at Smith Falls—a Memory

Thinking back to when my children were about your age, I reflect on camping with my family at Smith Falls. It was not Smith Fall State Park at that time, but, of course, the falls were there. My family enjoyed floating the river in canoes. Once a year or so, we would load the canoe with tent and sleeping bags, food and needed paraphernalia. Looking back, I would guess the “needed paraphernalia” was sometimes of the not needed variety. I would be accused of taking everything but the “kitchen sink.” In those days, before the commercial bags to keep all of the gear dry, we scrambled to store gear in “water proof” containers—garbage bags, five-gallon buckets, other plastic bags—anything we could use that would attach to the canoe in case we would tip over. Now picture this in your mind—two adults, two elementary age kids, and enough food and equipment to spend the night. The canoe was often overloaded and crowded. Nevertheless, we always made it down to Smith Falls from the launch site at Cornell Dam. We took our time, hiked to Fort Falls and played on the sandbars on the way down the Niobrara. The hotter the day, the more we would play.

It was great to arrive in the area of Smith Falls and set up camp—the family rule was to set up camp BEFORE we played in the falls. One thing we always kept in mind was the location of the tent. You see, this camping area was really a pasture—a pasture that was actively being used by cows of many colors. Black cows, white cows, black and white cows; unusually friendly cows everywhere. Keeping the resident cows in mind, it was very important to choose the campsite with care to avoid cow pies for placing the tent and for a clear path for any late-night wanderings. Some camping trips boasted of a busy campground with five or six or even ten other groups of campers to share the spontaneous campground better known as a pasture. Other times, we were the soul human occupants of the campground.

After pitching our tent and stowing our gear, we hurried up the narrow, dirt, sometimes muddy, path to the falls. Ah, the falls—oh, so cold, yet refreshing, on a hot day. Sometimes the water of the falls beat down so hard it made us feel like we were being pelted by hail. Finally we cooled off and played in the falls and then wandered back to the camping place.

We would build a campfire in a site previously used so we did not destroy more grass and habitat. Hesitant eyes of the cattle watched our attempts to cook a meal. And always, during the evening Fred (the landowner) would wander down from his small, nearby house that perched just out of sight. He came to collect his dollar--the fee for allowing us to camp in his cattle pasture. Later, as I remember, he raised the fee to two dollars for the privilege to camp with the cows and to enjoy the falls. He would always remind us that we were welcome to “come up to the house and get water” if we wanted water to drink. On occasional evenings, Fred would share stories about his family and the falls and the development of the area. His family had owned the land since they purchased it in 1941 and he always encouraged and welcomed visitors to visit the falls and spend time in the campground.

Sitting around the campfire, we would enjoy sharing stories and s’mores, if we remembered all the ingredients and the chocolate hadn’t melted in the hot summer sun on the way down the river. After the stories and been told and the cattle had bedded down, mosquitoes often drove us to give up and head into the tent and our sleeping bags. It was not unusual to hear an argument about who would tidy up the camp and put the fire out for the night, but usually we all pitched in. Usually, after a busy and activity-filled day we were all tired enough to fall immediately to sleep. But all too soon...sound began to rouse us.

“Wake up! Did you hear something?” echoed deep into the night when all should have been sleeping and the sun was just beginning to lighten the eastern horizon.

“Go back to sleep, it’s probably just a coon,” was often the reply.

“But, Dad, it sounds BIG,” usually prompted Dad to get up and check.

Remember those colorful cows? More often than not, curious cattle grazed near the tent becoming our very early morning visitors. Sometimes they might even press their soft noses into the tent to inspect the interlopers into their world. It always made me a little nervous, but the cattle didn’t seem to mind sharing the camping space.

Because the cattle felt it was a good time to rise and shine, we crawled out of our tents, exclaiming at the glorious morning and began making a fire to cook our breakfast. Breaking camp was an arduous task, but we were anxious to continue our adventure. We loaded our gear, taking care to secure it tightly to the thwarts of the canoe in case we tipped over going through “the chute” down by Fritz’s Island. Soon enough, we were on our way.

If we were quiet in the water, the early morning was perfect to see some of the white tale deer and even a fawn if the season was right. There was always abundant birds singing and cawing and flitting around to make our silent passage pleasant. If we were lucky we might see a beaver or muskrat or rarely a mink. After a three or four hour conclusion to our trip, we would arrive and take out at Rocky Ford. We would always spend some time at the rapids wondering what it might be like to raft through them, but never quite getting up the nerve to do just that.

We loaded up our canoe and gear and headed back to Valentine, none the worse for wear, but definitely filled with joy and awe for the trip.

The Niobrara River Valley A Brief History

At the northern edge of the Nebraska Sandhills a vast region of rolling grass-covered dunes, the Niobrara River sculpted an extraordinary valley where sandstone bluffs tower unexpected forests. Through careful stewardship local ranchers have preserved this unique rural landscape since the 1870's. Dependable springs and seeps feed the river. Over 200 cascades and waterfalls pour directly into the river or its tributaries. The Niobrara is a premiere floating river. Each summer thousands of visitors enjoy canoeing, tubing and kayaking the Niobrara. *National Geographic Adventure Magazine* named it one of America's best 100 adventures in 2000.

Six different ecosystems--**ecosystem** [(ee-koh-sis-tuhm, ek-oh-sis-tuhm)]A collection of living things and the environment in which they live. For example, a prairie ecosystem includes coyotes, the rabbits on which they feed, and the grasses that feed the rabbits—come together along the valley. Deciduous forests of oak, ash, elm, linden, and cottonwood expand west up the river valley; forests of Ponderosa pine spread eastward from the Rockies and Black Hills. Relics from the glacial era: paper birch, ferns and club mosses still form on north-facing slopes and within shady side-canyons. Fields and patches of tallgrass prairie flourish along the river valley. The mixed grass prairie of the Sandhills dominates rolling hills south of the river, while shortgrass prairie grows on the drier table land to the north.

Wildlife abounds—deer, coyote, porcupine, beaver, and mink are mammals commonly seen by visitors. During the summer floaters are likely to spot a variety of birds like the great blue heron, belted kingfisher, spotted sandpiper, turkey vulture, red-tailed hawk or bald eagle. Spiny-nosed softshell, painted and snapping turtles sun themselves along the riverbanks. Fish that are common are the channel catfish and the trout.

The river valley has five geologic formations. The south rim abuts the sand dune formations of the Sandhills. On the top, is the Ash Hollow Formation which is a ledge-forming grayish sandstone. Below that is the Valentine Formation, a soft, poorly cemented sandstone that forms cliffs on both sides of the river. Next lies the Rosebud Formation which is a harder pinkish-brown sandstone formation. Because the water flows over this resistant bedrock, the water is clear with frequent stretches of riffles and rapids. Beneath the bedrock of the Rosebud formation is the Pierre shale formation. Many fossils from marine life such as shark and marine reptiles are found in this layer. The Ogallala Aquifer lies within the sandstone formations and it is because of the aquifer that floaters see waterfalls and seep along the reddish-brown layers.