



## **Going beyond the choir: an arts-based approach to informing the public about rangelands, grasslands and grasslands peoples in the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists 2026**

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### **Abstract**

Rangelands and grasslands are highly productive and valuable perennial-based ecosystems that provide a multitude of benefits for society. Yet they are highly threatened throughout the world which was the impetus for the UN designating 2026 as the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists. In North America alone, these ecosystems have contracted by 60-80% due to conversion to intensive agriculture, urbanization, power development, and other causes. While causes of loss vary, wide agreement exists that these biomes are undervalued by society despite their ecological, socio-cultural, and economic significance. This has led to increasingly urgent calls for wide-reaching education campaigns to raise awareness among the public and policymakers, and spur action to stop and reverse losses. In response, we look to the approach of Indigenous Peoples who have and continue to use art as a means of educating and are designing and deploying a pilot mass communication effort. Specifically, we aim to “go beyond the choir” and use “more than facts and figures” by developing 25+ creative, multi-media public exhibits to test the efficacy of arts-based education. We will use a mixed methods research design to evaluate the effectiveness of art in public settings (specifically variables of exhibit venue, media type, and messaging strategies) to increase awareness and knowledge, and drive behaviour change regarding support for rangelands and rangeland communities. We assembled a team of 30+ professionals across 12+ US western states and the Pacific Islands, Canada and Mexico who will help to recruit, design, and deploy content and exhibits. Content will be digitized and curated in collaboration with the Rangelands Partnership and key subject matter specialists including land stewards, Indigenous communities, rangeland scientists, Extension professionals, an evaluation researcher, and artistic directors. Outreach efforts are a key need identified by diverse groups working and living in rangelands and a clear guide for where limited resources will be most effective will be a critical factor in helping to preserve these lands.

### **Introduction**

Rangelands (grasslands, shrublands, tundra, savannahs and woodlands) are threatened ecosystems around the world. Their services and relationships provide carbon sequestration, soil stabilization, water filtration, habitat, and human food. However, in North America alone, 60-80% have been converted to crops or non-agricultural

use (Nature Conservancy Canada 2024, USFWS 2024, USGS 2023). While causes of loss vary, agreement exists that these biomes are undervalued by society despite ecological, socio-cultural, and economic significance (Bengtsson et al. 2019, Birdlife International 2024, Sayre et al. 2013). Rangelands have been mapped as “leftover areas” (Sayre et. al 2013), marginalizing their influence on public perception and land-use decisions.

Inadequate knowledge of rangelands has negative environmental, economic, and social consequences, including conversion (Lark 2020, Briske et al. 2024), desolated cultural landscapes (Rattling Hawk, Pers. comm.), and rural economic decline (Bardgett et al 2021). Consequently, producers and range professionals have called repeatedly for education going beyond the “choir” and using more than facts and figures. A promising avenue for the range-grassland community to explore that may prove effective is art-based education, which is known to provoke reflection and expand awareness through the ‘affective’ or emotional domain (Drumm et al. 2013, Lawrence 2008, Thompson et al. 2023). Indigenous Peoples have for many years utilized art as a means of sense-making, educating and documenting, creating dynamic and engaging expressions of knowledge and understanding (Sorenson 2013). At present, there is a lack of structured coalitions for mass communication to explain how different approaches may have different impacts across diverse populations (Devine et al. 2023, Lesen et al. 2016). As such, we have developed a coalition that seeks to explore the impacts of different art-based education approaches across diverse demographic populations. Our goals with this project are to:

1. Develop a western region network of 24 to 36 educational art exhibits to evaluate the effect of ecological context, city size, venue type, and exhibit openings on public comprehension of and engagement with critical rangeland and grassland issues.
  - a. Evaluate the impact of art-based rangeland exhibits on public audiences not historically familiar with grass/rangelands by locating exhibit venues in non-rangeland ecological contexts and larger metro-urban areas.
  - b. Evaluate our ability to reach new audiences with rangeland messages by partnering with and displaying arts-based educational content at novel exhibit locations such as airports, city halls, libraries, and shopping malls.
  - c. Evaluate the impact of social gathering (i.e. public opening vs. no public opening) on level of engagement of attendees.
2. Investigate the potential for arts-based learning to enhance a sense of connection among Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth to their range/grassland landscapes
  - a. Evaluate the effect of farm-based art-education workshops on comprehension of range/grassland topics among Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth.
  - b. Evaluate the effect of classroom-based art-education workshops on comprehension of range/grassland topics among Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth.

## Methods

This is a multi-year project with major portions of the effort being deployed in 2025 and 2026. Our first goal of developing a network, and then creating and disseminating educational art packets, is currently in progress. A network has been established with 24 confirmed venues and another 12 venues with conversations actively happening on logistics, including major venues like the Port of Seattle and the City of Los Angeles. We will continue to build on our network over the coming year and with installations put up in 2026. The educational art exhibit packets will contain 10-15 exhibit items (photography, mixed media, painting, etc) from around the world and we will start to compile materials for these in the beginning of 2025. We will develop a publicly accessible digital and physical library in collaboration with Rangelands Gateway consisting of at least 100 submissions of artistic audio-visual resources that are paired with one of ten priority messages about grass/rangeland issues in addition to the pre-composed exhibit packets. Exhibits will be installed in diverse

venue types and at diverse geographic and demographic locations across the US, Canada and Mexico (Table 1) with active and passive surveys conducted at the different locations.

Table 1. General study framework for educational art exhibits.

<b>Treatments</b> (independent variables)	City size, venue type, ecological context, exhibit opening/no opening
<b>Knowledge</b> indicators	What rangelands/grasslands are; ecological, economic, and social importance; extent and decline; ecosystem services including habitat, C sequestration, biodiversity, water; services provided by producers
<b>Attitude</b> indicators	Expressed desire to learn more about grass/rangelands and increase support for producers, interest in meeting and purchasing from producers
<b>Practice/behavior change</b> indicators	Access information on policy, range issues; participation in community collaboration or association; purchasing intentions of grassland-based product; participation or facilitation of urban-rural cross-cultural exchange
	Speak out on behalf of rangelands; promote policy to include grasslands in climate response strategies;
<b>Survey tools</b> (passive)	QR codes on content, paper response questionnaires
<b>Survey tools</b> (active)	QR codes on content, participant observation, exit interview with venue host
<b>Survey tools at case study sites</b>	QR codes on content, participant observation, exit interview with venue host, intercept surveys, follow-up interviews with willing viewers

For our second goal, we will test two methods for educating youth about rangeland/grassland landscapes. The first method (a) is getting youth to the landscape (school-to-landscape), and the second is (b) taking the landscape to the youth (landscape-to-school). The first approach will utilize existing programs and programs in development where professionals host youth in a rangeland/grassland landscape and use art workshops (including photography, film, or other) to teach youth about the ecology, culture, and agriculture of the area. The second method is a less time and resource intensive endeavor wherein educational packets will be created for a multimedia experience about rangelands/grasslands that can be enjoyed in the classroom. This approach is tailored to the US primary and secondary education system to meet criteria required of teachers for science and art. While the experience will likely be less profound than actually going to a rangeland/grassland biome to learn about the ecosystem and the types of land uses that exist, we believe the opportunity to reach a larger population of youth is important. This approach will provide students with an opportunity to learn about rangelands/grasslands, while fitting within the time limitations of teachers and instructional requirements.

### Results Thus Far

This project is currently in progress with the full deployment set to occur during the 2026 International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP). Efforts associated with the educational art exhibits are scheduled to begin in 2025 and while this effort is currently North America focused, we welcome the participation of our global rangeland communities. Material developed for this project will be made available on the Rangelands Gateway website (<https://rangelandsgateway.org/>). An overview of exhibit information and materials will be given in this presentation.

Program development for school-to-landscape events and material packet creation for landscape-to-school efforts are currently underway. In this presentation, we will be giving examples of how collaborators are developing school-to-landscape programs and we will be presenting examples of the landscape-to-school materials. These materials will also be available on the Rangelands Gateway website and the US based teachers-pay-teachers website (<https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/>). These materials are being designed with adaptive capacity in mind: people will have different needs in terms of art-based educational material and we want to create content that can be used broadly, with individuals having the opportunity to add their own local flair.

### Discussion

The goal of this project is to provide diverse groups of people in rangelands/grasslands with ideas and materials to help educate people in non-rangeland areas and instill a sense of value and appreciation for the lands that many of us call home. While the direct impacts of efforts of this nature can be difficult to quantify, we know that talking amongst ourselves will not provide a solution to the current challenges that many of us face. As such, we need to reach beyond the choir and find diverse ways to reach diverse audiences. Findings from these

studies will be shared through podcasts, extension products, webinars, conferences, manuscripts and partner networks. Our hope is to not just provide an outreach campaign for the 2026 IYRP, but reach beyond 2026 and create a culture of caring for rangelands into the future.

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