

Remaining salt basins are unique natural resource



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Back in 1869, Horace Smith of the well-known firm of Smith & Wesson had a significant interest in the salt basins surrounding Lincoln.

In the early 1870s, he invested in salt manufacturing improvements. A.B. Hayes and Sam B. Cox in the "History of the City of Lincoln, Nebraska" described the early fame of the salt basins in Nebraska's Eastern Saline Wetlands and their important role in the founding of the city. Today, the remaining salt basin areas are recognized as a unique natural

resource.

Of the types of wetlands found in Nebraska, the Eastern Saline Wetlands of Lancaster and Saunders counties are among the most unique and threatened in the state. Limited to the floodplain swales and depressions within the Salt Creek, Little Salt Creek and Rock Creek drainages, it's estimated that the Eastern Saline Wetlands once covered an area of more than 20,000 acres. Today, because of degradation, draining and filling, and development for agriculture and expansion of the urban area, less than 4,000 acres remain. Many of these remnants are highly degraded.

The seepage of groundwater over thousands of years from deeply buried saline aquifers has accumulated salts in the floodplain soils, allowing this unique wetland type to form. Nebraska's saline wetlands are characterized by saline soils and halophytic (salt tolerant) plant species such as spearscale, inland salt grass, sea blite, prairie bulrush and the state-endangered saltwort. The abundant mud flats of the saline wetlands are rich in invertebrate life and visited by a variety of migratory shore birds, other bird species and wildlife. Audubon Nebraska has recognized the eastern saline wetland complex as an Important Bird Area.

In 2003, a group of local and state agencies and organizations established the Saline Wetlands Conservation Partnership, including the city of Lincoln, Lower Platte South Natural Resources District, The Nature Conservancy and Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. The Nebraska Environmental Trust provides support to the partnership to implement and continue efforts to conserve the wetlands. Several other local, state and federal partners also have provided significant resources for the conservation of the wetlands.

The partnership established a plan to address the conservation of this fragile resource and the needs of the community. The goal: "No net loss of saline wetlands and their associated functions with a long-term gain in sustaining wetland functions through the restoration of hydrology, prescribed wetland management and watershed protection."

In order to achieve this, the plan identifies comprehensive strategies and landscape

objectives. In the past 10 years, the partnership has acquired nearly 1,300 acres containing saline wetlands and has worked to restore more than 500 acres of saline wetlands. These wetlands not only provide wildlife habitat, but they help to improve water quality and reduce flooding. Several of these properties also include high-quality native prairie.

More than 3,500 fifth-grade students have gone through educational programs about the wetlands and, since 2005, there has been an outdoor learning program for Lincoln North Star High School students.

The wetlands offer visitors a number of outdoor activities such as wildlife watching, nature viewing, photography and short hikes. Several saline wetland sites are available for the public, including Whitehead Wetlands (27th Street and Interstate 80), Frank Shoemaker Marsh (North 27th and Arbor Road), Little Salt Fork Marsh Preserve and Little Salt Creek Wildlife Management Area (First Street and Raymond Road), and Jack Sinn Wildlife Management Area (U.S. 77 and Ashland Road). Several saline wetland sites are open to public hunting opportunities.

People can enjoy these areas at all times of the year. In the fall and early winter the temperature is mild and there are fewer insects, while spring provides excellent bird watching. The summer months provide wildlife viewing and observation of prairie and wetland plant communities.