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Exploring the Badlands: Group attempts to re-create Roosevelt's experience

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By: **Katherine Grandstrand, Forum News Service**, The Jamestown Sun

BISMARCK — On Earth Day, April 22, the group Adventure Science sought to answer a question. "Can you go into the (North Dakota) Badlands and have a profound experience?"

The group wanted to see if explorers in modern times could recreate Theodore Roosevelt's transformative experience in North Dakota.

After 10-plus days traveling from west of the Killdeer Mountains to Medora through the Badlands on foot, a team of eight scientist and athletes — so fresh from the field that some had yet to shower — shared their findings with the public at the Bismarck Veterans Memorial Public Library on Friday.

"The Roosevelt wilderness that I've read about, that Richard's read about that Andrew's read about, it doesn't exist as it did during his time," Adventure Science founder Simon Donato said. "The reasons for this is land fragmentation. It's not saying there's not wild and wilderness in areas out there anymore. Our sense though is that they're smaller, more fragmentary now due to development and the development includes construction of roads, the existence of numerous oil pads and simply the ranches that have fences."

While the team came across several oil pads in their trek, the pads it found were clean and contained.

The team came across several animals and evidence of animals, including mule and white-tailed deer, pronghorns, bighorn sheep, bear and wolf.

"It was good for us to see these animals out there," said Donato, of Alberta. "But at the same time, we were reminded about the fragility of their state and how with future development, a balance needs to be achieved based on the goals."

Every few hours, the teams of runners would stop and fill out a questionnaire about the area they were in, including observations about terrain, sounds, views and wildlife, living and dead.

"I came down here with a very open mind," Donato said. "That's how we operate, we're a neutral organization. We come in eyes open, that's our book, we make our observations in there. We don't put feelings in there — we will all leave with certain feelings about our experience."

Members of the team will be writing reports, which it will make available and hope to put in the hands of state legislators.

The group is self-funded, meaning each member paid his or her own way to and from North Dakota.

"We are pleased and proud to be self-funded," said team member and archeologist Richard Rothaus of Minnesota. "We are totally neutral in that sense. We owe nobody nothing in terms of money on this expedition and when we write our reports we are going to write our reports and white papers because we believe what's in them not because a funder expects to get a white paper."

The team started April 22, with team member Andrew Reinhardt of New Jersey covering 105 miles between then and Thursday. Reinhardt, Rothaus and the rest of "Team Tortoise" spent 10 days in the Badlands.

On April 26, a team of ultramarathoners joined them: Donato, Jessica Kuepfe from Ontario, Jane Davis from Washington state, and Tim Puetz of Washington, D.C.

This team's mission was to cover as much ground as it could, acting as wings to Reinhardt's 105-mile trek west from the Killdeer Mountains and then south to Medora. Tyler Leblanc and Keith Szlater, both of Alberta, were there to make sure all members came back alive. Leblanc is a medic and Szlater is a safety expert.

The Explorers Club of New York — of which Donato is a fellow — found the mission important enough to send flag No. 112 with the group. Explorers Club flags have been to the top of Mount Everest and to the moon. About a dozen flags get flown on missions each year, Donato said.

The terrain is ever-changing, and what seemed to be easy, rolling hills at the onset proved to be challenging buttes, Puetz said.

"It felt like I was walking from the past to the current time to perhaps seeing into the future a little bit," Davis said of the blending of wilderness, agriculture and industry in the transect area.

A big challenge for the team was the weather. Southwest North Dakota had gotten 16 inches of snow a week before the first team set out, creating wet, muddy conditions, and forcing the group, which hoped to camp in uncharted places in the Badlands, to seek established campgrounds throughout the national grasslands, Rothaus said.

"It was wonderful to see spring happen when standing in it," he said. "I don't particularly want to do that again."

The group is excited to share its findings with the world about what's left of the North Dakota wilderness.

"There's some spectacular stuff out there and this is a team — we've been around," Rothaus said. "When we say we were impressed by what's out there, this is impressive."

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