

Grasslands concept worth involvement

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Nebraskans in the Central Platte Valley already are earning good money from the thousands of visitors who arrive each year for the spectacle of migrating sandhill cranes. That's only the start of what could be a new way to bring economic vitality to rural Nebraska, according to the Grassland Foundation headed by Tyler Sutton of Lincoln.

The foundation envisions a future in which wildlife thrives on large-scale protected grasslands, coexisting with agriculture and ranching.

The vista of grasslands rippling in the wind, dotted with grazing pronghorn antelope, bison, hawks on the wing and other native species would be a tourist draw for the millions who live elbow-to-elbow in teeming urban settings.

To make that happen will take the effort of small-town and rural leaders, state officials willing to join forces with conservation advocates like Sutton and others interested in seeing rural Nebraska survive and prosper.

The effort envisions a new approach to land use that is both wildlife- and people-friendly and relies on local populations and communities for management.

The first step is for Nebraskans to start talking about the concept and how it might be accomplished, how people now looking for a way to live in rural Nebraska might turn to wildlife tourism as another option for earning a living.

The foundation's new "Economic Benefits of Grassland Protected Areas" (www.grasslandfoundation.org) argues that "the Northern Great Plains once contained the greatest wildlife spectacle outside the continent of Africa and attracted travelers and adventurers from all over the world.

"The grasslands of Nebraska can capture the imagination of the nation once again. ..."

Providing momentum to the concept is the support of the World Wildlife Fund for a program called Grasslands 2010, which seeks to create biodiversity areas from willing, private land sellers. Its goal is to create protected grasslands that amount to 10 percent of a 279,000-square mile area that covers a large section of western and central Nebraska, as well as parts of four other states and two Canadian provinces.

Some Nebraskans like Hod Kosman already are establishing conservation areas in places like the Wildcat Hills near Scottsbluff. "We believe that agriculture and conservation uses are compatible and complementary to one another," Kosman said in the foundation's report. "If we can find cooperating neighbors in a region and have enough of this type of property managed in a more cohesive way with regional neighbors — hunting, bird watching, fishing — there certainly can be some economic benefit from it."

What's needed now are more people who want to move beyond the conceptual level to grapple with the practical realities of recreating and managing natural grasslands that will attract tourists looking for a respite from the grind of daily urban life.