

## Foundation believes ecotourism could thrive on the Plains

MARCH 21, 2008 | BY JOE DUGGAN

Namibia and Nebraska may be halfway around the world from each other, but they share more in common than first and last letters.

Namibia, in southwestern Africa, has cattle and, of course, so does Nebraska. Namibia has grasslands. So does Nebraska.

And they both have wildlife.

But in Namibia's economy, wildlife-related tourism ranks second only to mining. Tourism ranks third in Nebraska behind agriculture and manufacturing. But wildlife-related recreation in Nebraska — while not insignificant — is just a part of overall tourism.

The Grassland Foundation, a nonprofit advocacy group based in Lincoln, thinks ecotourism could generate significantly more income in the Northern Great Plains. And that could be good not only for ranchers and other private landowners, but also for wildlife.

Chris Weaver, managing director of the World Wildlife Fund program in Namibia, will talk about possible applications here of work he does regarding wildlife and sustainable rural development in Namibia.

The Grassland Foundation has long held that more wildlife-based recreation can occur alongside cattle ranching in the West. The foundation is particularly interested in models that encourage landowners to work together to create large-scale grassland areas.

Most of the innovative management techniques put in place in Namibia since the nation won independence in 1990 involve private or communal

land, not government-owned property.

In many places there, multiple land uses co-exist with wildlife tourism, Weaver said, including cattle, goat and sheep ranching.

“It's not an all or none type of situation,” he said. “People have woven the wildlife opportunities into preexisting agriculture production modes.”

In Namibia, some landowners cooperate on private wildlife conservancies while tribal groups operate communal conservancies. The tribes or the private landowners own the rights to manage and benefit from the wildlife on their lands.

For example, property owners can sell common wildlife to hunters, markets and even other governments seeking to repopulate preserves, within quotas established by the government. At-risk species such as black rhinos are protected.

Landowners and tribes also sell wildlife viewing excursions to tourists, with such amenities as gourmet food and comfortable accommodations. In other words, the more wildlife diversity they have, the more they stand to profit from ecotourism and hunting.

The approach has also greatly curtailed poaching. As a result, such species as springbok, zebra and gemsbok have flourished in Namibia.

The United States uses a different conservation model. Here, wildlife belongs to the people. Commercial exploitation and market hunting of wildlife forced some species into extinction and threatened many others, which is why early conservationists pushed for laws that put wildlife in the public trust.

The model also helped produce wildlife successes in the U.S., where such species as whitetail deer, elk and Canada geese have made tremendous recoveries in the past century.

But in the U.S., many still think land must be managed for either wildlife or agriculture. And while not everything being done in Namibia would apply to Nebraska, wildlife advocates believe some ideas are worth considering, said Tyler Sutton, director of the Grassland Foundation.

The government has a role to play, but some of the approaches Sutton envisions would be more the product of free enterprise than the public sector.

“We’re not advocating anything specific at the moment,” he said. “I do think the idea of contractual agreements between landowners to manage their land is applicable and I do think we’ll see this come to Nebraska and other places on the Plains.”

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### **If you go**

What: “Wildlife and Sustainable Rural Development in Namibia: Are There Applications to the Northern Great Plains?” Speech by Chris Weaver, Managing Director of World Wildlife Fund program in Namibia

When: 3:30 p.m. Tuesday

Where: Great Plains Art Museum, 1155 Q St.

How much: Free, open to public

For more information:

[www.grasslandfoundation.org](http://www.grasslandfoundation.org) or

<http://worldwildlife.org/wildplaces/namibia/>