

Buffalo could cause tourist stampede

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Crowds of curious sightseers came to look at the great wild monsters of the plains and to hear the barker shout out all the other western wonders. -From "The Buffalo Hunters" by Mari Sandoz

Some people might think the program announced last month to set aside a large swath of the Northern Great Plains for grasslands is a bit oversold.

Proponents of "Grasslands 2010" boasted that the program would be a boon to tourism, attracting all sorts of eco-tourists: hunters, anglers, equestrians, hikers and bird-and-wildlife watchers.

But a glance at history makes it relatively easy to accept the premise that the grasslands could be a tourist draw, particularly when imagination conjures up a vision of a herd of bison thundering across the plain. That's the sort of once-in-a-life time experience that could draw people from around the globe.

It has in the past. In her book "The Buffalo Hunters" Nebraska author Mari Sandoz regales readers with tales such as the visit of Grand Duke Alexis of Russia.

"As fitting a true man of Moscow," Sandoz wrote, "he was coming in the middle of the hardest winter most of the frontiersman could remember." A member of the Russian nobility, however, had resources to ward off the elements. The duke's wall tent was floored, carpeted in deep royal red and heated with a stove.

The duke made a lasting impression. "Fifty years later there were grandmothers who spoke wistfully of the handsome warm-eyed grand duke they met in their budding days."

Why should it be difficult to envision celebrities dropping in on Nebraska to watch buffalo stampede?

Just last month golfing legend Jack Nicklaus dropped in on tiny Mullen in the Nebraska Sandhills to finalize the design of the Dismal River Club in western Hooker County. And guess what. Jobs are being created. They're even talking about having a job fair.

All over the world business operators are capitalizing on the wonders of nature. Despite the challenges of Third World travel, tourists visit Africa's Serengeti. Tourists endure the heat, humidity and mosquitoes of Costa Rica's Tortuguero National Park and call it an adventure.

The goal of the ambitious grasslands program announced by the Grasslands Foundation in Lincoln and the World Wildlife Fund in Bozeman, Mont., is to create biodiversity conservation areas that equal 10 percent of the 279,000-square-mile area of the Northern Great Plains.

The land would be acquired from willing sellers only — eminent domain would not be used. Tyler Sutton, president of the Grassland Foundation, stressed that the grassland preservation areas would not replace farming and ranching, but would coexist with them.

The World Wildlife Fund, with five million members and annual revenues of about \$125 million, has the clout to help make things happen. Even the herds of bison wouldn't be that hard to find. Media mogul Ted Turner, who owns about 380,000 acres in Nebraska, already has more than 30,000 bison scattered across his western holdings.

Curt Freese, director of the World Wildlife Fund's Northern Great Plains program, said during a visit

to Lincoln to promote the program last month that Nebraska, at the fringe of the grassland conservation area, is ideally positioned to exploit its tourism potential.

Nebraska officialdom, which often wrings its hands about finding ways to stem depopulation and stimulate the economy of rural Nebraska, should jump aboard this bandwagon with both feet.