

Trip to Africa offers look at stars, structure of wildlife-based tourism

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Desert elephants with orange dust on their broad backs, a treetop cheetah marking his territory, giraffes doing the splits to reach down and drink from a waterhole, hundreds of zebras, springbok, oryx, kudus, impalas, wildebeests and other African antelope grazing on dusty grasslands ... all became part of the joy and adventure for six Lincolmites on a tour of Namibia.

For 12 days in June, at the beginning of the Namibian winter on the southwest coast of Africa, the group, plus a Montana companion, participated in a study tour to examine wildlife-based tourism and economic development, to compare that experience with possibilities for the northern Great Plains. The Grassland Foundation of Lincoln and the Montana office of the World Wildlife Fund hosted the tour.

Participating from Lincoln were Tyler Sutton, president of the Grassland Foundation, and his teenage son, Eric; Rick Edwards, foundation chairman and economics professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln; and Anna Shavers, foundation board member and UNL law professor. My wife, Maxine Moul, former Nebraska economic director, and I completed the Nebraska group. Dawn Montanye was the wildlife fund representative from Bozeman, Mont.

Namibia, a former German colony placed under a South African protectorate after World War I, became independent in 1990 and adopted English as the official language. Many people also speak Afrikaans and tribal languages. The country is mostly semi-arid and desert, twice the size of California but with a Nebraska-size population of 1.8 million people. Windhoek, the capital, is the size of Lincoln, with 250,000 people.

The country is probably the most peaceful, democratic and safe African nation, with clean, progressive cities and utilities, such as cell phones and electric power covering a mostly rural landscape. Tourism and trophy game hunting is behind diamond mining as the most lucrative national economic activity, with agriculture a distant 10 percent of annual income. Land is divided among national parks (about 25 percent of all lands), state property, privately owned freeholder farms and private nature preserves.

A law in 1967 made a radical change in wildlife ownership, with freeholders (mostly white farmers) owning all wildlife on their property except protected species, such as black rhinos and elephants. That right was extended in the 1990s to tribes and communities living on state property.

The effect of that action has been a virtual end of poaching and an enormous national increase in game animals, predators and protected species. Quotas are available for trophy hunting, with that income going to farmers and local populations, and people are able to hunt game for their own tables and for retail sale to restaurants and stores. Live animals are also exported to South Africa and other nations to repopulate preserves and parks.

Another radical change after independence was to establish communal conservancies, where tribes staked out their boundaries on state land and combined interests in cooperative tourism, game management, industry and agriculture. Freeholders have also formed voluntary conservancies, but with less formal organization and success.

The study tour from Nebraska was an opportunity to examine these different conservancies, stay at

luxury resorts to view wildlife and speak with national leaders about their various efforts. Speakers included professional hunters, safari organizers, community leaders, game reserve managers and the head of the famous Cheetah Conservation Fund.

The trip involved driving and tramping through hundreds of miles of red sand dunes, dusty roads and wild grasslands, plus visiting Etosha National Park, one of the world's largest reserves.

The tourism emphasis in Namibia is on high quality, low impact experiences to view wildlife and wild landscapes.

A good example of that was the tour's first stay outside Windhoek, the NamibRand Nature Reserve, almost 450,000 acres of red sand dunes and grasslands. Four different camps provide overnight accommodations for a total of 40 guests, and there were more than 14,000 visitors in 2006. Meals are included, and available activities include hot air balloon rides, visits to the contiguous Naukluft National Park and open-air wildlife bus tours. A desert environmental camp hosts children for weeklong learning sessions.

The reserve was the dream of founder Albi Bruckner, who bought 13 overgrazed cattle ranches at depressed prices, combined them by taking out nearly 1,000 miles of fences, and then sold portions back to investors interested in conservation. Wildlife have repopulated the former farmland through a strict management plan, and five concessionaires provide lodging and activities. A \$20 nightly park fee per person funds the conservancy and its staff of nine, mostly game conservationists.

An allied business is a chef's institute and gourmet restaurant in Windhoek and graduates provide the meals in the reserve's lodges. They feature African game, splendid desserts and fine wines.

Boar holes, or wells, are used to fill strategic waterholes near the lodges and throughout the reserve, to attract wildlife. At the Wolwedans Dunes lodge, nine wooden structures with canvas blinds sit atop red sand dunes, open to the desert air and large vistas. The luxury chalets include baths and the ambience of a tented camp while providing the comfort of a spacious suite with private veranda.

Guests at breakfast can watch wild oryx amble up to the close-by waterhole for their day's drink, then trot off over a hill.

Next the tour group traveled north to the Waterberg Guest Ranch, a farm that combines a bed and breakfast with cattle ranching, and game management with trophy hunting and photography tourism. The owner, Harry Schneider, works closely with the neighboring Cheetah Conservancy Fund, to protect large predator cats while minimizing calf losses to cheetahs and leopards.

Schneider told the group that wildlife conservancy is economically solid in Namibia, based on partnerships among the nongovernmental organizations such as the cheetah fund and wildlife fund, the private sector, communities and the national government. It did not happen overnight, he said, but took more than a decade of investment and work. "Now, the conservation principle is part of our farms," he said.

The next day, the tour bus crossed the farm and its cattle herds to the Cheetah Conservancy Fund for lunch, talks by staff members and a chance to see the cheetah star, Chewbacca, mark his territory from a tree and pose for photos. The fund has a nonprofit research and education center focused on conserving wild cheetahs; Namibia has about 20 percent of the world's population. Orphan cheetahs, unable to survive in the wild because they weren't trained to hunt naturally, are kept at the facility.

The trip's most spectacular wildlife viewing took place at Etosha National Park and the adjoining Ongava Reserve, managed by Wilderness Safaris. Again housed in separate luxury chalets, tour members had viewing verandas looking over waterholes that attracted large numbers of various antelope, giraffes, black and white rhinos, zebras, wart hogs, hyenas and jackals, plus a wide variety of birds. The park tour added lions and elephants to its wildlife lists. A big waterhole attracted large herds of zebras and antelopes.

The final overnight stay in the wild was at Torra Communal Conservancy, one of the oldest and most successful in the country, and its Damara-land Camp, also managed by Wilderness Safaris. Bennie Roman, conservancy chairman, said that in the past the community had only cattle grazing rights for the state land they lived on, and there

was much wildlife poaching, both from inside and outside the town. Now, with the conservancy owning the wildlife, all profits from that resource go to the four tribes making up the large community, and they get income and jobs from the lodges.

Dinner at the lodge was outdoors, an African game feast from a campfire, with servers providing native music. The morning wildlife tour in special desert vehicles was a crazy 2½-hour drive through dry river bottoms and impossible roadless landscapes to find desert elephants. A small herd of seven cows and a calf were finally spotted and watched as they placidly stripped leaves from trees and dusted their backs.

A flight back to Windhoek on two single-engine planes gave the group an aerial view of the Namibian landscape.

The tour was both a chance to see the wonders of wild Africa and hold serious conversations with people who have spent many years in wildlife conservation, tourism and agriculture in Namibia. The group learned that inspired Namibian leaders have successfully pursued radical ideas in biodiversity and very large nature preserves to bring wealth to the country while increasing its natural resources and ambience.

That lesson, applied to the northern Great Plains, is that similar ideas — while noting the many differences between the U.S. and Namibia — could work for a wildlife-based rural economy in key areas. The emphasis would be on partnerships among private landowners who could open up rangelands to natural biodiversity, find investors for luxury accommodations and attract multiple-use visits to their lands.

Francis Moul is an environmental historian.