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A young rancher herds cattle during a fall cattle drive on the Switzer Ranch near Burwell, Nebraska. MICHAEL FORSBERG

BIG SKY TOURISM

The people making grassland ecotourism work
in Nebraska took lessons from Namibia.

STORY BY Daniel Clausen
PHOTOGRAPHY BY Michael Forsberg

“We didn’t see anything that wasn’t comparable to what we have back home,” she said. “That’s when it clicked in my head: we can do this here.”

Sarah Sortum leaned outside her tent and gazed at silhouettes of camelthorn trees backlit by the Milky Way. In southern Namibia, after the sunlight settles out of the evening sky, it gets dark. Dark in a way that, if you live within several miles of your nearest neighbor, is new. In May the unmistakable tail of Scorpio rises opposite the sunset. Antares, the red heart of the scorpion, almost pulses. To the south, the bright smudges of the Magellanic Clouds slowly circle. Now and then, a cough rings out: the call of barking geckos roughly the size of your thumb. Sometimes, a hyena laughs.

NamibRand, Africa’s first international dark sky reserve, stretches for hundreds of kilometers under a darkness unbroken by artificial light. At the tents, or around the small campfire pits in the center of the communal deck, deep space feels surprisingly close. This kind of encounter with nature fuels NamibRand’s enterprise of emptiness.

Sortum and fellow travelers were gathering intel for their own flyover tourism operations in Nebraska, Kansas and the Dakotas. In the last five years, almost thirty tourism providers have joined the Great Plains Ecotourism Coalition. Sortum, who runs Calamus Outfitters the Nebraska Sandhills, hopes that ecotourism—which has buoyed the economy of Namibia with as much as 14% of its total GDP— will gain a foothold in her region.

Sortum jumped at the chance to go to Africa several years ago because of the mystique. “I thought of Africa, and I thought ‘big.’ Big animals, big predators,” she said. “I thought, we can’t compete with that.” But then her favorite day wasn’t seeing those big-ticket animals. It was simply a day long outing, with a great guide in a beautiful place, where she got to see the subtle, beautiful connections that create an ecosystem, a unique place on the planet.

And she realized something. “We didn’t see anything that wasn’t comparable to what we have back home,” she said. “That’s when it clicked in my head: we can do this here.”

AN ENTERPRISE OF EMPTINESS

In Namibia, a young nation on the southwestern tip of Africa, the nonprofit NamibRand is the one of the most successful of several ecotourism destinations. Nils Odendaal became CEO of NamibRand in 2008. He’s a rosy cheeked, cheerful looking man who in another life might have been pressured to play Santa at office parties. One night at a popular pub in Windhoek last summer, he played the part of a cheerful burgher. He encouraged one of his guests to order the kudu. “Not as gamey as oryx,” he smiled. He would know.

As the conversation progressed, he let his guests know what to anticipate on his reserve. It wasn’t about elephants or rhinos. It was about the whole landscape. He explained that when talking to booking agents, he often encouraged them to put NamibRand late on the list. “Let them get the wildlife bug out of their system,” he explained. “Then they can come down to us and see the big picture.”

As a graduate fellow of the Center for Great Plains Studies (CGPS), I traveled here to see first-hand how CGPS connects ecotourism's success in Africa with helping entrepreneurs stateside. The center's director, Rick Edwards, first came here with the World Wildlife Foundation in 2007 and was impressed by the draw to a region so like the Great Plains. "The first similarity one sees is the dry, lightly-populated grasslands used for cattle ranching, but on deeper inspection one notices how similar the people are, in their care for and love of their land and environment," he said.

"Come to see lions, and we will show you beetles," could be one slogan of the reserve. There's no game hunting at NamibRand—it's all about observing. One morning in May 2016, I followed a guide, Sebastian, with a group of seven other tourists on a multi-day walking tour of The Tok-Tokkie Trail. Meals are catered, and cots are set up each night for sleeping under the stars (or the bright full moon, in our case). Backpacks are unnecessary.

Sebastian is a practical ecologist, and he taught us to read the apparently empty landscape. Walking through the sandy dunes, he often stopped in the sand to show us tracks the size of a pencil eraser. They surrounded the nearly invisible burrow of a spider he claimed is the size of a tarantula. Using a stem of grass, he opened the spider's trapdoor—nothing more than a thin layer of sand grains held together by web. Next he used a magnet to pull the iron out of the sand, explaining the geology of the region. He then pointed out the many long-legged, black-shelled beetles scurrying across the red sand: the tok-tokkies for which the tour company is named. They need no surface water: they absorb water droplets from occasional fog banks. Nor do the gemsbok or oryx, which get all the moisture they need from the hardy deep-rooted grasses and other plants they browse.

People travel from around the world to stay at NamibRand. On my trip, fellow visitors included retired professors from Edinburgh, a midlevel Stuttgart manager and his wife, and honeymooners from a coastal US city. They pay handsomely, though not extravagantly, to stay in semi-permanent tent colonies, or to hike for several days through the reserve to pre-pitched, open-air campsites. It's a safari without the guns. For those who don't want to hike, there are game-viewing drives, multi-course meals, and gin and tonic sundowners to set the pace of the day. And for locals, who pay a discounted fee, one corner of NamibRand sports a self-catered guest house. Children from the nearby village come through week by week to the reserve's internationally recognized environmental education camp. The group of owners of nearly half a million acres—once more than a dozen ranches for sheep and cattle—now all make their living raising wildlife.

Even in dry years, wildlife is a consistent bumper crop in Namibia. The recently aired BBC documentary *Planet Earth II* shot hours of footage at NamibRand. One episode dramatized the hundred-kilometer commute of sandgrouse to watering holes, braving the acrobatic predations of pale chanting goshawks. David Attenborough's grandfatherly English narration enlightened



Sleeping under the stars



A tok tokkie



The "bushman's newspaper"

Photos by Daniel Clausen

viewers to the drama of the arid grassland ecosystem. And though Odendaal plays down the big animals, visitors to NamibRand will see springbok, oryx, zebra, ostrich, klipspringer, dik-dik, and endemic dune larks, sometimes all in a single morning. Giraffe roam the area. Harder to see are the predators: small, wary African wild cats, cheetahs or hyenas, even leopards.

But even when the large mammals duck out of sight, NamibRand breathes with life. Shepherd's trees cast thin shadows. Red dunes mark the horizon, while ancient, arid mountains cast their shadows across a valley with barely a single dirt road. At the foot of the dunes, mysterious rings in the sand called fairy circles polka-dot the landscape. At noon the silence is so complete that birds' wingbeats boom like drums.

MAKING ECOTOURISM SUSTAINABLE

Odendaal explained that British and South African soldiers were awarded "empty" Namibian land for their service in World War II. But there was a reason the land was empty: it was dry too often to support agriculture. In good years the grass was hip-deep. In bad years it was nibbled down to isolated crowns of grass. The South African government drilled thousands of wells, but the land was still marginal at best. Eventually, Karakul sheepskins became the most consistent commodity. The sheep were adapted to the harsh conditions.

The sheepskin market crashed in the early '90s after exposés on the cruelty of skinning day-old lambs, and the fall of the Soviet Union, the skins' biggest market. That's when a contrary German Namibian named Albi Brückner had an idea. He bought a bankrupt ranch at the edge of the Namib desert, in what was being called "the bankruptcy belt." The desert was a new national park. He convinced a few well-heeled friends to buy neighboring ranches. "It was all philanthropy at the start," Odendaal said. Brückner convinced his friends to sign an agreement to manage the land for *wild* animals. They would keep the wells. These would be watering holes. They would remove internal fences. Instead of farm labor, they hired game wardens. And eventually, they started offering tours.

Lee and Murray Tindall are the current NamibRand rangers. They live in an old colonial era ranch house with their children. There's a leaky water tank, a beautiful succulent garden, and an open porch full of the horns and found skulls of various African wildlife. It's not unlike a working ranch in western Nebraska. Murray's main jobs are enforcement (mostly keeping tourists with faulty information from setting up their tents on the roadside) and conservation science. There's an annual game count, and there are still fences to remove. NamibRand regularly hosts scientists from the University of Namibia and around the world. While the work is demanding and isolated, the life of adventure is exactly what they want, and their children grow up in a world where giraffe and cheetah sightings are almost routine.

The rules of the reserve stipulate that hosts called concessionaires provide the services, and pay a per-visitor fee to NamibRand. This system has given the nonprofit a budget surplus. The concessionaires also have individual agreements with the landowners, who earn what amounts to tourism rent. And they've decided this is a premium neighborhood. There is a maximum guest capacity of one tourism bed per 10 hectares (about 24 acres).

The concessionaires get to keep their profits, but they have to meet strict ecological guidelines. They've learned that such green sensibilities are themselves a selling point. Tourist activities now include tours of the solar power array, the garden and compost heaps, and education about water conservation (greywater goes to trees, while low-flow showers shut off for the day after several liters.) Much of the food is local, including meat from animals culled from burgeoning herds.

The tourists come and go, enjoying up-close encounters with exotic animals and plants, relaxing in the solitude of the open spaces. But the ecotourism industry is quietly working towards sustainable development for Namibians. At NamibRand, one concessionaire called Wolwedans has 100 full-time staff. Some have careers traditionally associated with tourism: guides, drivers, waitresses and cooks. But in a place so far off the beaten path, the ranch needs many additional jobs: carpenters, laundry staff, and a master tailor to build and maintain the tents. Gardeners to grow significant amounts of food for both tourists and the staff. Clerks, secretaries, marketing professionals, and bookkeepers to run the business end. And the reserve hires conservation scientists, game wardens, and other natural resources professionals. It also hosts a world-class environmental education center: NaDEET (Namib Desert Environmental Trust). Founded by Viktoria Keding, the camp educates locals about sustainability and living in the arid country through hands on activities. They are booked solid every week they are open, and hire interns and workers from across Namibia and the globe.

BRINGING THE MODEL TO NEBRASKA

On her trip to NamibRand, Sarah Sortum began thinking about how to adapt NamibRand's approach to her own plot of open country. Sortum saw parallels between Odendaal's paradise and the land in Nebraska's Sandhills, where she runs Calamus Outfitters with her parents and brother on the Switzer Ranch. Ecologically, both regions are dry grasslands. Both are full of sandy, wind-blown soils and grassy dunes. And while Namibia's biodiversity is admittedly higher, the Plains also host megafauna with nearly mythic status. Mule deer and, increasingly, American bison on ranches roam over the mixed grass prairie. Pronghorn antelope huff warnings to one another and flare their white rump hair in warning. Swift foxes, badgers, several species of prairie dogs, and even the perilously endangered black-footed ferret are present on the Great Plains. Burrowing owls—fierce, short, and



A guide indicates elephant tracks on a NambiRand tour. DANIEL CLAUSEN

quizzical—stand watch at their dens, and northern harriers and red-tailed hawks are everyday sights. Lately, mountain lions have been working their way east in Nebraska. There are whispered rumors of elk returning soon. In other parts of the Great Plains, conservationists are placing bets on which month they will first find evidence of wolves. And on moonless nights the Milky Way is so bright it seems to cast a shadow, while the glowing Andromeda galaxy is easily visible if you know where to look.

As for the soldiers in Namibia, land for the Switzer Ranch came at a low monetary cost. The Switzer family originally claimed the ranch under the 1904 Kincaid Act, which allowed larger claims in western Nebraska than the national Homestead Act of 1862. The idea was to provide enough land base for ranching in the arid Sandhills, which couldn't support row crops.

Today, irrigation and other technologies have led to the production of more cattle than ever. Yet increasing efficiency and market consolidation has reduced the need for labor. It's hard to find a job in the Sandhills. The population peaked in the 1920s, and most of the same families still own the land.

The Switzers have managed their ranch for five generations. Bruce and Sue Ann Switzer still work the cattle on horseback, and like most cowboys, are proud of their working heritage. They love the land, and so do their children.

So when Bruce and Sue Ann's son, Adam, wanted to come back to live on the ranch in 2002, he started a hunting outfitting company, Calamus Outfitters. In a matter of a few years, the business grew include to more year-round, family-oriented activities. His sister Sarah and her family relocated to the ranch as well. They've renovated buildings for tourist lodging, which fill up quickly during deer season, but even quicker when the prairie chickens are dancing at their leks.

At the Switzer ranch, Sortum's family has brought what they can of this model to the Great Plains. Sortum is tall, with dirty-blond hair cut in a practical bob. She wears square-toed cowboy boots and a tan Carhartt duck vest. At the ranch, she hosts guests in a repurposed schoolhouse. She looks the part of any rancher out here in Burwell. But like Brückner, she's convinced that ranching for wildlife is the best use of the land. The tourists come to see the Sandhills and their unique wildlife. Over the local reservoir, white pelicans with 6-foot wingspans fly in formation, watched carefully by bald eagles perched in cottonwood trees. In March, guests get up before dawn, pile into an old school bus and drive out to a prairie chicken lek to watch the birds' elaborate mating dances.

But Nebraska is not a perfect match to Namibia in history, resources, or ecology. And so Calamus Outfitters is a different business than NamibRand. For one thing, as Sortum proudly pointed out, Calamus is still a working ranch in addition to a tourism site. That's helped in several ways to earn points with the local community. "People were hesitant," Sortum said, choosing her words. But, as they hire local kids during the busy seasons, and as more tourism money flows into the local economy, people

have embraced both tourism and wildlife management—including setting fire to grasslands to mimic past ecological management by Native Americans and support the growth of native plants adapted to the practice.

“When we did our first prescribed burn, our neighbors were pleading with us,” Sortum said. “They wanted to rent the pasture. Anything so that we wouldn’t burn it.” But ranchers are practical people, and the results were clearly evident: a healthier pasture than ever before, with more forage and more wildlife. Now they help neighbors with their burn plans, and have a large cooperative crew that helps with burns around the area.

To Americans, ecotourism is exotic: it means going to Africa or Costa Rica to see the rainforest, some rare Antarctic bird, elephants. This nature tourism strikes a mournful tone: “see it before it’s gone.” When Americans go on ecotourism vacations, they go to other countries. They see their own ecosystems as either not special or simply lost.

BEING A PROPHET IN YOUR HOMETOWN

But to Namibians, ecotourism is about caring for the ecosystems around them. It’s tourism with a green sensibility—recycling, renewable energy, sustainable development. Odendaal even sees tourism that’s not environmentally sustainable as parasitic: a long-term ecotourism business plan should be tied to the growth of the ecosystem. At NamibRand, the ecosystem is still growing. Murray told us that NamibRand has yet to reach carrying capacity for most species. Sortum and others like her in the Great Plains Ecotourism Coalition are betting on this type of growth for the Great Plains.

In the U.S., language describing rural areas still often depicts nature as an obstacle. Weather has to be “combated,” landscapes “improved,” and resources “developed.” Out of necessity, it often centers on markets and scarcity. The archetypal hero is the lonely cowboy, willing to transgress society’s rules for its own good.

Calamus Outfitters resists this trend. The cowboy is a part of their story—but it’s a gentler cowboy, a cowboy poet, not a gunslinger. And another piece of the American myth is in the foreground: the wide-open spaces and the earth beyond tame city life. Their products and goals overlap: to raise their kids in the Sandhills, to keep the ranch going, to sustain the wildlife and local environment that underpin it all. Bit by bit, they and others like them are working toward those goals.

But is it possible that a business like Calamus Outfitters could bridge political divides over land use? The business faces a different cultural challenge than does NamibRand.

Both Nebraska and Namibia are sparsely populated. Complex colonial histories give both a heritage of political tension between indigenous peoples and the politically powerful settlers. And one result is that most land is privately owned. There is little governmental control over much of the Sandhills region, or over much of the arid grasslands of Namibia. But in Nebraska, the large-scale

Ranchers are practical people, and the results were clearly evident: a healthier pasture than ever before.

cooperation between landowners that created NamibRand has yet to materialize.

“It’s hard to be a prophet in your hometown,” said Sortum. While at least one neighbor also manages the land with a mind to conservation, many Nebraskans are suspicious of tourists and tourism. And most Americans are suspicious, somewhat paradoxically, of private tourism in particular. There is a growing movement in the West toward privatization of federal public lands, even though the reason many of these lands became public is that they couldn’t support agriculture. Yet when land that is already private turns to tourism, charges of “aristocracy” begin to fly. Talk quickly turns to “land grabs” and being “buffaloed.”

On the other side of the political spectrum, ecotourism faces opposition from some environmentalists due to a general suspicion of commerce. Environmental politics often comes along with hostility toward business. Though some Silicon Valley progressives might have big social entrepreneurial visions, most conservation groups are nonprofits. Of these, only a few, like the Nature Conservancy, control land. Generally, environmentalists focus their efforts on grassroots advocacy and lobbying for changes in government policy on public land.

Then there is the contentious question of government. In Namibia the government designated the geographic area encompassing NamibRand as the Greater Sossusvlei-Namib Landscape. One of several landscape-level co-management plans, it consists of state-owned National Parks, tribally managed Communal Conservancies, and private landowners and co-operatives like NamibRand. Together, stakeholders work through consensus to manage the land for biodiversity and ecological sustainability as well as economic development. It’s as if Badlands National Park, the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, the many indigenous sovereign nations and local rancher’s co-ops all had a say in the management of the “Greater Black Hills-Pine Ridge Landscape.”

In the United States, such a partnership might seem impossibly distant. But Namibia again might offer a model in local people doing more with scarce resources. The country faces its own set of challenges. Apartheid was the law of the land until independence from South Africa in 1990. Racism and its effects are pernicious and persistent. Drought is a constant presence, and when there isn’t too little water there is too much. Influence from global powers, especially China, worries locals. Corruption is a real problem. Development often seems to present itself as a tradeoff between people and ecology.

And yet there is a real sense of optimism in Namibia. Perhaps it’s the youth of the population and the size the landscapes. Anything seems possible here. Residents of Windhoek might see the president in the grocery store. Access to national lawmakers is fairly open. And in a society with so much change, many people do much with little. In the shantytowns of corrugated tin shacks called *blikkiesdorp*, barbecue shops abound. Local ingenuity finds



Ornate box turtle tracks. Switzer Ranch. MICHAEL FORSBERG



Greater prairie chickens battle for courtship. Switzer Ranch. MICHAEL FORSBERG

ways to patch shoes with handmade recycled paper. Opportunities are limited, and many people are underemployed. But many with some capital and access feel a social responsibility to the community. People are hungry for knowledge, for ideas. And success—for some—feels within reach. One local man spending a Sunday afternoon in the park with his children, when approached, offered a high-level analysis of the Namibian political situation. He traced a development project to its likely source in tribal nepotism. He explained what he saw as the Chinese gaining power through infrastructure building—but he wasn't despondent. He was engaged. Enthusiastic. Insightful. A prime example of the generation of leadership who came of age after independence.

Sortum visited South Africa and Namibia last fall to attend guide school. Last May, a class of undergraduate Nebraska students spent several weeks touring Namibia as part of an ecology class. This April, the annual Great Plains Symposium will focus on Ecotourism, and Odendaal is expected to be a speaker. The idea of a more permanent exchange program has been tossed around.

"Facts and information are good," Sortum said. "But really, people want to have a story—to see the connections between those facts and themselves." She intends to further hone her skills in interpreting the landscape. And that's paid off. The business has grown steadily, in part as the ongoing national controversy over the Keystone XL pipeline drove awareness about the ecologically fragile and globally unique Sandhills ecosystem. And locally, word of mouth has been a major contributor to visitors. There's optimism in the Sandhills, too, even if it flows through different channels.

Part of this energy comes from going to African grasslands. The exchange—Namibia to Nebraska and back—is invigorating for both sides. Nebraskans are learning to see their grasslands through a different lens. Namibians are proud that they've got something to teach the American heartland, and that they are getting interest from a place so far away. For a Namibian, after all, a bison is far more exotic than a giraffe.

"One of my proudest moments was when Nils came to visit us several years back," Sortum tells me. "I knew where he came from, what he had seen. But, we went out to see the prairie chickens dance, and on the way back, he said, 'That was one of the greatest wildlife spectacles I've ever seen.' So you know, what we have here, it's got just as much mystique as anywhere else in the world." ▲

Daniel Clausen is finishing his PhD in American Literature at the University of Nebraska, where he captains the Great Plains Graduate Fellows. To procrastinate, he posts woodworking photos on Instagram as pequodworkshop and plans fly fishing road trips.

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Founded by a journalist in 2015, The New Territory is a quarterly print magazine on a mission to cultivate connections among the land, people and possibilities of the Lower Midwest.

We are writing an autobiography of the Lower Midwest.

Our founding principles:

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