

Can Ecotourism Save the Great Plains?

Printed in the March 2013 edition of *Prairie Fire*

By Richard Edwards

Bill Taddicken, director of the Rowe Bird Sanctuary in central Nebraska, says the four saddest words in the English language are “You should have seen...” They might be followed by “vast flocks of passenger pigeons” or “oceans of rolling tallgrass prairie” or “immense herds of Buffalo, Elk, deer, and Antelopes feeding in one common and boundless pasture.” That last bit was written by Meriwether Lewis.

Taddicken’s observation is double-edged. It is a lament for things not seen and that can now never be seen. But it is also an exhortation to see those natural marvels still available and to preserve them.

One way to see them is to view Michael Forsberg’s stunning photographs now on display at the Great Plains Art Museum. But Taddicken’s call is to see the real thing, to experience the noise and flutter of the sandhill cranes along the Platte or smell a Sandhills prairie in spring or thrill at the return from near-extinction of black-footed ferrets in the Conata Basin. Nature, the real thing, activates all the senses.

Today you have a growing number of excellent opportunities to see the real thing, to become an “ecotourist” in the Great Plains. But can ecotourism be more than just an interesting vacation option—can it, in fact, help save the Great Plains’ remaining virgin prairie and precious biodiversity? I and other interested observers believe so, and acting on that belief, we at the Center for Great Plains Studies recently surveyed naturalists to identify the region’s best spots. Mike Cooper and Linda Ratcliffe put them on the map ... literally ... our “Top 50 Ecotourism Sites” map is available free from the center (and reproduced in our ad on the back page of this issue). Our goal, beyond providing a handy guide for adventurous nature-seekers, is to aid the larger conservation effort in the Great Plains.

America’s central grassland originally stretched from Illinois to the Rockies and from north Texas to mid-Manitoba, and it astonished early travelers. Many could not get comfortable in its vastness and lack of visible landmarks, and few could resist using the “sea of grass” metaphor. Others saw the profusion of its wildlife, and it amazed them. It remained for



Photo by Michael Forsberg

the first true field botanists, Charles Bessey’s students Roscoe Pound and Frederic Clements at the University of Nebraska, to discover the incredible biodiversity contained in each small patch of prairie, which typically harbors 150 or more different species of grasses and forbs.

As settlers remained to work the land, the prairie steadily disappeared. It was plowed under to seed fields of corn, soybeans and wheat. Only the shortgrass prairie, beginning at roughly the 100th meridian and extending to the foothills of the Rockies, survives in large intact areas. But it is under terrible threat. High grain prices, improved irrigation equipment, “drought-resistant” seeds, and highly subsidized federal drought insurance (which makes row-crop farming profitable even when the plants shrivel in the fields)—all these produce incentives to plow deeper and deeper into the semiarid prairie. No one seeks to roll back settlement and cultivation, but perhaps it is time to save the grasslands that remain. Ecotourism serves as a counterweight to the plow-up.

Ecotourism provides an experience of nature both powerful for the individual and respectful of the land. Much ordinary tourism doesn’t meet this standard, which is fine. But it’s not ecotourism just because it happens outdoors, for example, in parks that feature swimming pools, water slides and casinos. Many outdoor leisure activities actually harm the ecology—motorized or other activities that scar the land, contaminate the air, dim the night sky or disrupt nature’s sounds of wind and animal

Why Is Ecotourism Important?

Ecotourism generates revenues critical for funding conservation initiatives, it increases public awareness of and support for conservation and it helps nearby human communities to thrive economically. All three elements are crucial to sustained and healthy conservation in the Great Plains. And ecotourism offers some of the most magical and inspiring moments of the human experience.

calls. Such entertainments do not speak to Taddicken's call. Our vision is for low-volume, high-yield tourism that creates highly memorable experiences, promotes conservation and raises awareness of and love for the biodiversity around us. It ought to leave the ecotourist transformed and the land unchanged.

In defining ecotourism sites for our map, we limited locations to any place primarily devoted to environmental or biodiversity conservation that provides public access, either free or for a fee. We did not include places whose primary purpose is hunting and fishing (though ecotourist sites may permit hunting or fishing). The sites may be owned by government, a nonprofit or tribal organization or a for-profit business. Ecotourist sites provide places to walk, hike, camp, photograph, observe, learn about and reflect upon the wondrous natural environment that is the Great Plains; some sites also offer opportunities to engage more deeply, by volunteering or participating in programs that support and sustain this precious legacy.

So how can ecotourism help save the Great Plains? There are at least five ways:

- Ecotourism creates greater public awareness of nature and its fragility.
- Ecotourism generates revenues for parks and reserves to operate.
- Ecotourism builds public support for policies that protect the environment.
- Ecotourism gives nearby local communities an economic stake in conservation, changing them from potential opponents to benefitting partners.
- Ecotourism helps change the whole national culture in favor of conservation.

This model of ecotourism-driving-conservation is no pipe dream—it has been implemented with remarkable success in Costa Rica and the southern African countries of Namibia and Botswana. Namibia is an example of conservation success on private lands. It has made great strides in conservation: unlike most of Africa, nearly all wildlife species show stable or growing numbers, its public opinion has swung decisively in favor of conservation and its economy has benefited from hugely growing ecotourism revenues. And its success rests largely on ecotourism revenues.

Walking the Waterberg Conservancy you can see this strategy in action. Waterberg is a private voluntary association of 11 members—10 cattle farms and the Cheetah Conservation Fund, which owns land and has some farming operations. The members each continue to own their farms and run their livestock, hunting, and ecotourism operations separately. The conservancy jointly manages the wildlife on the combined property of all the members. For example, one joint function



Photo by Paul Johnsgard

is carefully monitoring animal populations. CCF organizes an annual 24-hour full-moon game count, using more than 90 volunteers who count game around 45 waterholes on conservancy farms. On the basis of its monitoring, the conservancy sets sustainable quotas for huntable species; perhaps more importantly, it is able to maintain a careful inventory of the health of all its species. Waterberg now includes about 370,000 acres, providing habitat for amazing populations of kudu, warthog, leopard, eland, hartebeest, baboon, more than 240 species of birds and many other animals.

But you don't have to go all the way to Africa to see this strategy working. The Switzer Ranch and Nature Reserve in the Nebraska Sandhills, one of our "Top 10" sites, is run by fourth- and fifth-generation ranchers who have combined cattle ranching with a highly attractive ecotourism destination. They are perhaps best known as the place to see prairie chickens and sharp-tailed grouse do their "booming" and "dancing" during the spring mating ritual. Their land management philosophy is "ranching to conserve, conserving to ranch." They and their neighbors in the Gracie Creek watershed are demonstrating how ranchers can profitably combine biodiversity conservation with traditional ranching. The Switzers' conservation efforts depend importantly on ecotourism revenues.

The Switzers' work has been widely watched and applauded: the Omaha World-Herald noted, "Disabusing visitors of the notion of Nebraska as a 'flyover' state that's flat and boring isn't difficult—once they see the [Switzer Ranch and Nature Reserve]." "Audubon Magazine" featured it in its March–April 2010 issue and "Travel + Leisure Magazine" named the Gracie Creek project its winner of the 2009 "Global Vision Award."

In the process the Switzers are creating positive "spillover" opportunities for other local businesses and communi-

ties—for example, other ranchers have begun to offer prairie chicken tours, several individuals have launched wildlife-guiding businesses and a high-end restaurant, which opened recently in Burwell, benefits when birders and others stop. The Switzers' success is of growing interest to other landowners facing higher taxes and increasing economic stress. Area citizens benefit from nature by attracting others to nature.

The American Prairie Reserve (APR) in Montana, another “Top 10” site, offers a nonprofit model for private lands conservation. APR aims to construct a 500,000-acre private reserve abutting the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge; already it has purchased (from willing sellers) or leased about 150,000 acres. In future APR and the “Charlie

Russell” together would constitute a nearly three-million-acre wildlife reserve. APR has reintroduced bison, and its genetically pure herd now numbers more than 200. Its lands contain a profusion of nearly the full array of prairie wildlife, including pronghorn, burrowing owls, elk, prairie dogs and more. APR has received considerable well-merited praise for its accomplishments, including “National Geographic” labeling it our “American Serengeti” in a beautiful film of that name.

Other private nonprofit conservation initiatives also depend on ecotourism revenues. The central Platte River complex of Rowe Sanctuary (Audubon) and The Crane Trust are crucial leaders in maintaining and improving habitat for a half-million migrating sandhill cranes (and the few remaining whooping cranes). Jane Goodall called the migration “one of the seven wonders of the natural world.” Thus ecotourism is bringing new revenue streams to private (either for-profit or nonprofit) landowners, helping them pay land taxes and financing efforts to preserve and restore biodiversity.

Of our “Top 50” sites, 31 are federal lands and eight are state parks; and of the “Top 10” sites, five are national lands (Badlands National Park, Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge, Theodore Roosevelt National Park, Devils Tower National Monument and Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument) and one is a state park (Nebraska's Fort Robin-

son State Park). Public lands are absolutely critical to Great Plains conservation, yet they are vulnerable to many threats: from demands to open them for energy exploration to pressure for additional road building to commercial intrusions and simple underfinancing. Deb Fischer, during her recent successful U.S. Senate campaign, even proposed selling off large chunks of federal lands, allegedly to reduce the federal deficit. Clearly there is more education work to be done.

On managing public lands, Botswana is a leader. Here, wildlife and indeed whole ecological systems flourish, especially in the miraculous Delta region where water literally rises out of the desert to support an incredible array of species. Ecotourism revenues spread to a thick infrastructure of private-

sector services and jobs, employing approximately a third of the local labor force, who can easily see how their economic prosperity depends on protecting the precious water and wildlife.

So, too, does ecotourism shape national public opinion in these countries. For example, Botswana President Ian Khama recently declared that his government will stop issuing hunting licenses and beef up anti-poaching measures to protect the country's fauna. Although most naturalists see controlled hunting as a useful wildlife management tool, Khama was concerned that in Botswana it was linked to the killing of elephants and rhinos. He said because elephants are the main attraction for tourists, he could never allow them to be killed. The economic pressure in Botswana appears to have swung decisively in favor of conservation.

How Were the Top Sites Chosen?

The Center for Great Plains Studies in 2012 conducted a two-phase survey of 51 naturalists with knowledge of the Great Plains residing in nine states; the survey group included field personnel from nonprofit organizations, ecotourism industry managers, state agency officials and people in the private sector. In the first round these individuals were asked to identify as many as 20 Great Plains sites that, in their opinion, were “those sites you consider to offer the best, most powerful environmental experience and/or the ones that are ecologically the most important. These are the places you would definitely recommend to your best friends to visit.” After eliminating redundant nominations, sites outside the Great Plains and others that did not fit the criteria, we were left with 93 nominated sites. In the second round we shared with respondents the results of the first round and then asked respondents again to nominate their top sites. The most frequently identified sites were then named as the top sites.

Our work to identify the Top 50 Ecotourism Sites is, at one level, simply intended to promote greater awareness of the natural grandeur that is the Great Plains. But we have a deeper aim: to mobilize efforts to conserve, sustain and pass along to future generations this marvelous, diverse environment that we have for so long taken for granted. In preserving what remains, let's eliminate the need to say, “You should have seen...”

For more information about CGPS and their events and seminars, visit www.unl.edu/plains.