

## Wilderness House Literary Review 8/3

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### How to Save the World

*A Personal Essay on Grassland Conservation in Namibia and the Great Plains*

When I told my friend Frank that I was accepting a 6 month fellowship with the Grassland Foundation, a conservation non-profit in Lincoln, Nebraska, he said to me, "You know, sometimes when you set out to save the world you end up feeling like you're not doing anything at all."

Because he's Frank, and because we were on our second round of PBR, I told him to shut up, and then I punched him in the arm.

But over the next few days, I wondered if Frank really considered me naive enough to think I could save the world. I asked myself why I wanted to work at the GF, and if the things I wanted were possible to achieve. As an undergraduate, I majored in English and minored in Environmental Studies, so I've read about activism and about the destructive relationship between our culture and nature. The problems seem endless: we're using water, oil, and minerals at an unsustainable rate, we're chopping down forests and polluting oceans and destroying wildlife habitat. I've always admired activists, and I admit a part of me did, maybe still does, want to save the world, or at least a piece of it, or improve part of it, in particular the prairies. Which I think Frank wants too. What he meant, I think, was that I shouldn't take responsibility for something so much larger than myself, shouldn't expect my work to produce glorious results.

When I thought about the fellowship, however, I realized my interest in it tied to intimate parts of my life. I grew up on farm in southern Minnesota, in a landscape similar to the one outside Lincoln. My mother home schooled my five siblings and me, and most days she kicked us out of the house for a few hours. We waged wars from inside the forts we built of fallen trees in our grove, capsized boats made of half-sawed plastic barrels into icy drainage ditches, rode horses we sculpted out of frozen snow drifts. The fields, the grove, the fence lines, and the mud pits were our playground. They were also our science lab and our counseling office. Experiments showed that itchweed burns your skin for 45 minutes before the pain vanishes completely. A honey bee will rarely sting you if you hold still until it's done searching your skin for pollen. A kid who is sad or angry or lonely can disappear into a thicket of raspberry brambles, and for some reason, come out feeling better.

When I went to college, I moved to the city, but I fell in love with a farm boy who took me hiking in the prairies. Each time we wandered through grassland, our worries about school and money lifted. We found the smallest flowers that bloom nearest the earth, hidden. We listened to the hush and rustle of the wind as it moved through swathes of blue-stem. We watched birds loop and soar, up, around and up again, until they disappeared into the sky. Out there, we remembered that our culture demands we *acquire* and *accomplish*, but nature nudges us to *appreciate* and *wonder*. We worried not only because prairies are disappearing, but also because so few of our friends sought respite in wild spaces. We wor-

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ried that if Americans ever return to nature for inspiration or renewal, we will find it ruined. I wanted to work at the GF because some of the most educational, most important parts of my life have taken place in nature. I wanted to learn more about problems facing the Great Plains and the plans people had to solve them. I wanted to stop worrying about the environment and see if I do could anything to improve it.

GF President, Tyler Sutton, a former attorney who grew bored of suing contractors and began non-profit work because he found it more rewarding, directed my fellowship. During my first few weeks, he assigned me a stack of reading material on the history of conservation in the Great Plains, including pieces that documented the GF's 10 year struggle to create change. I learned that the Great Plains, like the Midwest in general, has no strict boundaries, and is defined by what it is not, beginning in the east where the forests fade into grassland, and sweeping west until it breaks against the Rocky Mountains. In its natural state, the Great Plains gradually transitions from tallgrass (the type Laura Ingalls Wilder writes about) in the southeastern region to mixed and short grass prairie in the northwest. Lincoln rises out of the remnants of the tallgrass, which today has been almost entirely replaced by corn and soybeans. Tyler drove me for the first time up into the northwestern part of Nebraska to see the Sandhills, rolling loess dunes blown in at least 10,000 years ago. Since the Sandhills are too fragile to support crops, ranchers have kept the native short and mixed grass mostly in tact for cattle to graze on. Out there, fewer fences cut the land than do around Lincoln, and wildlife exists in much higher numbers. Tyler pointed out (and he was so obviously right) that small segments of protected land like the prairies I hiked in college, that used to seem, if not exactly large, at least adequate stretches of wilderness, aren't wilderness at all, in fact aren't even a functioning ecosystem.

When I saw the differences between the eastern and western landscapes of Nebraska, I realized I was seeing a small scale representation of changes white people have made in the Great Plains over the last 200 years. When Lewis and Clark first trekked through the region, they documented hundreds of plant and bird species that thrived there along with larger mammals including antelope, mule deer, elk, and bison that ran like herds do today in the African Serengeti. Now, less than 10 percent of the tallgrass still stands, in scraps of land too small to support the native plants and wildlife. Perhaps the speed and scale of this transition explain why it has gone undiscussed and unmourned. Instead, our cultural stories of origin celebrate the pioneers for settling the Plains, and heroicize farmers for feeding the nation. Tractors, cattle, corn, silos, and pick-up trucks saturate the Midwestern American aesthetic.

In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard marvels at the fecundity of nature, the urgent, unpent force to multiply that resides in the heart of wild spaces and represents the essence of life itself (156-176). Today, the Great Plains is fecund, of course, because it still lives, but the force of its fecundity is fading. Many of my discussions with Tyler questioned ways this loss of virility in our grasslands may change our society. For instance, *will a national disconnect from nature create a growing spiral in which people are more likely to permit the destruction of wilderness? Will diminishing fecundity translate to a lack of creativity in our culture? A lack of peace? Of awe? Is our art losing its taste for things unengineered? Will we ever meet another Willa Cather?*

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These concerns, along with the desire to reverse the decline of Plains wildlife, led Tyler and a small group of friends to found the GF in the first place. Since the highest percentage of native Great Plains plant and animal species reside in the northwestern subregion, the GF decided to focus on the section that runs from the Nebraska Sandhills up through Wyoming, the Dakotas and Montana, and into Saskatchewan.

At first, the GF collaborated on government led projects to save endangered species and refine public land management strategies. Their approach hinged on the standard American idea that conservation will never succeed if left to private landowners, and therefore public organizations and non-profits need to lead reform. Research and relationships developed during those years tie to projects still in progress today, among them the American Prairie Reserve's plan to purchase 3 million contiguous acres (a space larger than Yellowstone) of grassland in Montana.

While working on public land issues, the GF realized that two factors limit the potential for even extra large reserves to revitalize the Great Plains: 1) money to purchase these reserves becomes stagnant capital, and 2) almost all the land in the Great Plains is privately owned. If grasslands were to come back, wildlife needed to generate income on a scale that would compete with income brought in by cattle. Then ranchers could financially justify managing significant portions of their lands for conservation.

So the GF did something Americans rarely do, they looked outside the United States for ideas. A global survey revealed that nature based tourism is a popular land management strategy among the world's most healthy and successful grasslands. Further research led the GF to focus on the African country Namibia (located just north of South Africa on the west coast of the continent) because it shares significant similarities with the Northern Great Plains. Like the prairie of the Sandhills, Namibian grassland grows in dry, sandy soil that doesn't support crops. About half the land is privately owned, and Namibians have a long history as cattle ranchers. Namibian grasslands support so much more wildlife than ours in part because in 1990, after Namibians won independence from the South African Apartheid government, they wrote a new constitution which includes a provision to protect the environment. As part of this policy shift, the new Namibian government replaced subsidies for livestock ranching with support for low volume nature based tourism. Since then, ranchers across the nation have begun managing land to cater to both cattle and wildlife, and many supplement cattle operations with guest accommodations and nature based tourism activities.

Fueled by this research, the GF began sharing ideas with ranchers in the Sandhills, hoping to spark a movement to replicate Namibian tourism models in the Plains. Unfortunately, ranchers as a whole are a shy group, skeptical of outsiders, comfortable with tradition, and not exactly looking for land management advice. The GF did, however, find Calamus Outfitters, a small hunting business started by Adam Switzer, the eldest son of a fourth generation ranching family in the eastern Sandhills. Since Calamus Outfitters had generated enough income to allow Adam to work and live on the family ranch, the Switzer family was inspired by the stories from Namibia. Adam's sister Sarah and their parents Bruce and Sue Ann began,

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with support from the GF, to offer additional activities on their ranch including guided bird watching and jeep tours modeled after safari drives.

In part, Tyler offered me the fellowship because he felt the Switzers no longer needed the GF, and he wanted to collaborate on a second project, this one with the Dietleins, a ranching family in the western Sandhills. Tyler assigned me to help the Dietleins build the marketing side of their business, which meant visiting the ranch, learning about the birds and wildlife on Dietlein land, taking photographs, and brainstorming activities that would attract guests. Later, I would compile all this information into a website that would launch the Dietlein ranch as a nature based tourism destination.

My studies and our work with the Dietleins were intersected by the highlight of my fellowship, a 3 week trip with the GF across Namibia to survey nature based tourism businesses. Since the GF wants to see projects like the Dietlein's and the Switzer's spring up across the Plains, we were interested not only in the structure of Namibian businesses, but also their stories of origin and evolution, from start-up costs to current marketing strategies. We started in Windhoek, Namibia's capital city, and flew by charter plane southwest into the Namib Desert, then back up to the center of the country where our guide met us with a Range Rover. From there, we drove around the northern half of Namibia, west to east in a fishhook shape, landing back in Windhoek. In most places, we stayed 2 or 3 nights, meeting business owners, touring reserves and ranches, asking as many questions as we could.

The NamibRand Nature Reserve was the first place we visited, and the most expensive and luxurious stop of our trip, a high quality, low impact reserve that the GF dreams of replicating in the Plains. Located in the virtually unpopulated southwest quadrant of Namibia, NamibRand is pristine: grassy plains stretch for miles between mountain ranges, red sand dunes roll, ancient granite mountains crumble into boulders. There is not a fence nor a power line nor a lamppost to be found anywhere. Which, given NamibRand's vastness, is impressive. The reserve protects 202,000 ha (about half the size of Rhode Island), and is probably the largest private reserve in southern Africa. The best way to experience NamibRand is on a photo safari, a low speed drive in an open air vehicle, with a guide who stops and explains the scenery while you take pictures. On these drives, you see herds of zebra, oryx, and kudu that run wild across the reserve. A whole group of them will race your safari vehicle, stomp, munch, toss their heads, and snort. You also see mice scurry, foxes jog, klipspringer prance, springbok pronk, and birds dive. Scattered across the reserve, at spans of a couple hour's drive in a safari vehicle, lie surreal campsites, collections of canvas tents that rise on beams from removable wooden decks into whimsical chalet-like peaks. Each campsite has a main central tent with a lounge decorated in designer European safari style, a kitchen, a bar, and a dining hall where staff serve three course meals. The smaller bedroom tents include private toilets, enormous beds, porches, and lounge chairs. In the late afternoon, you are transported out to the top of a dune for a cocktail hour called *sundowners*, and after dinner, you spend the evening chatting around a campfire.

The current elegance of NamibRand is the product of more than 25

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years of growth and refinement. NamibRand began in 1984, when Albi Bruckner, a businessman of German descent, converted a failed sheep farm into a private reserve to protect the Namib Desert. The first guests were small groups of hunters that required minimal accommodations. Gradually, Bruckner expanded the reserve both by purchasing adjacent farms and by convincing wealthy landowners to let him manage their land for conservation. As the reserve grew, NamibRand began to cater to wealthier guests who were more interested in photo safaris than hunting, and eventually the reserve stopped offering hunting altogether. In 1992 NamibRand registered as an official non-profit, which is now run by a team of wardens and rangers that manage the reserve as a wildlife sanctuary. Today, tourism activities on NamibRand are operated by concessionaires, separate businesses that pay rent to the reserve in exchange for campsite space and access to the land. This arrangement gives NamibRand power to regulate tourist impact by enforcing environmental standards on the concessionaires including a limit of 20 beds per campsite, 1 bed per 1000ha, and sustainable use of water and energy. NamibRand is so large and successful, that in recent years wealthy guests have purchased adjacent land just to donate it to the reserve. Current landowners sign a constitution which grants them membership to an oversight board, but ultimately cedes their management power to the non-profit organization. The marriage of elegance to sustainability is one of NamibRand's main marketing points, and the overlap of interests between the non-profit and the for-profit organizations characterize the intelligence of design found at every level of the operation.

From NamibRand, we moved north into the Erongo Mountains to meet legendary former elephant hunter Kai-Uwe Denker, a tall and slender Namibian of German descent with a tour-de-force personality. In our Range Rover, we followed Denker's truck for a 45 minute climb up his boulder-ridden driveway to his wilderness ranch home which he built himself out of rocks from the mountains. At Denker's we ate dinner with his family in the main house and stayed in smaller, dorm-like buildings in the yard. Denker hiked us out to a rock plateau and where we scouted a valley for big game. In his younger years, Denker guided wealthy guests deep into the Naye Naye Conservancy on Bushman land, (often mocking the hunters for their lack of stamina) and told them how and when to shoot an elephant, an activity that includes a real possibility of death. After an ankle injury, Denker surrendered the Naye Naye concession, and now he and a group of neighboring landowners have removed fencing between their properties to operate tourism businesses on the shared space. The Erongo Wildlife Trust provides Denker and his neighbors financial support because they protect the Black Rhino and the Black Faced Impala, both endangered species. Some landowners, like Denker, guide guests on hunts of non-endangered species, and believe that regulated hunting can play a significant positive role in conservation.

We drove out of the Erongo Mountains into a desolate, rocky landscape scattered with giant euphorbia bushes that hide zebras, giraffes, lions, and occasionally rhinos. Late in the evening we arrived at Desert Rhino Camp, another canvas tent collection, similar to NamibRand but less luxurious. Desert Rhino Camp is a communal conservancy, which means that the land is owned by a group of native black Namibians who pool

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their resources and redistribute the profits throughout the community. A young black woman working at Rhino Camp explained to us that even though communal conservancies benefit native communities, their growth is impeded by generation gaps between people of her parent's generation who prefer village life, the AIDS crisis among people her own age, and the economic advantages of the descendants of white occupiers. The Namibian government officially recognized communal conservancies in 1996, in part because they attract international funding for both humanitarian and environmental projects. Desert Rhino Camp, for instance, is part of the Palmwag Conservancy which is supported by the international Save the Rhino Trust. Although the purpose of our trip was to study conservation, not social issues, racial and economic inequality appeared in every layer of our investigation, and reminded us of similar injustices facing Native American communities in our own Great Plains.

From Desert Rhino Camp, we drove into Etosha National Park, a popular tourist destination named for the Etosha Pan, a geologic depression that fills with hyper saline water and appears eerily, shimmeringly beautiful in photographs. Even through Etosha is more commercialized than the private lands we visited, it offers a dense population of wildlife including elephants, antelope, and hundreds of species of brilliant colored birds. Around Etosha, tourism businesses have sprung up on all sides, most of them variations on open air hotels. For relatively little money, we stayed at one that rented us small houses scattered on the side of a mountain. The central facilities included a gift shop, a communal pool, and both indoor and outdoor dining. If this type of symbiotic relationship between public and private organizations were to develop in the Great Plains, I imagine they would grow around national parks, other public lands, or the APR's 3 million acre reserve.

Of all the places we visited, the family ranch of Harry Waterberg-Schneider has the most potential for a Sandhills family ranch to imitate. Half cattle ranch, half tourism business, the Waterberg Guest Farm is more formal than Denker's, and includes a reception area and guest rooms done in simple white walls and warm wood furniture. The dining lodge lies separate from the family house, though the Waterberg-Schneider family joined us and the other guests for dinner. Activities on the ranch include hiking on well-marked mountain trails, tours of the cattle ranch, and guided drives to the adjacent headquarters of Laurie Marker, an American who founded the Cheetah Conservation Fund, an international non-profit dedicated to saving the endangered Cheetah species. The CCF has two buildings with posters and videos for educational tours, a large central building for gatherings, a gift shop, a set of cages for housing displaced or injured Cheetahs, a laboratory for genetic research, and accommodations for scientists and students. The Waterberg Guest Farm and the CCF mutually benefit from their proximity to each other because the Guest Farm offers guests tours of the CCF, and the CCF gains public exposure and potential financial support.

A comparison between Namibia and the Great Plains reveals not only a difference in land management strategies, but also a difference in social attitudes toward wildlife. Where wildlife in the Great Plains are considered at best accessories and at worst pests, wildlife in Namibia are viewed as assets. Namibians in general speak in greater detail about the types,

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number, value, and habitat needs of their wildlife, a direct result of the national shift in environmental policy. Leaders from the World Wildlife Fund note “between 1972 and 1992, the aggregate value of wildlife use on private lands rose by approximately 80% in real terms,” and that “by 2004, it was believed that 88% of Namibia’s wildlife was resident to private lands” (Weaver et al. 4).

Can the Namibian system function on a large scale in the Great Plains? Yes, maybe. It is terribly exciting to note that Namibians transformed their relationship with natural resources *on purpose*, and in a relatively *short amount of time*. While we do not have the potential for total political revision like Namibians did in 1990, we can find some reasons nature based tourism may work in the Great Plains: 1) Individual private landowners are free to start tourism businesses at any time, 2) Most of the land in the Plains is privately owned, and many ranchers need extra income, 3) Namibia ranchers prove that cattle can coexist with wildlife in a ratio that supports nature based tourism, and 4) The narrative of the Great Plains has enough cultural value to attract visitors willing to pay to see it.

While in theory nature based tourism could prosper in the US with or without government support, Namibia has two crucial pieces of legislation that we don’t. First, Namibia has devolved wildlife rights to the private sector. Which means that in Namibia, if you own land, you also own the wildlife on that land, with some limitations. Landowners must assess the type and number of the wildlife on their property and obtain harvest permits from the government. Once approved, however, landowners may eat, photograph, or sell wildlife as they please. The other key policy allows wildlife to be sold as food. In Namibia oryx, springbok, and zebra appear not just in grasslands, but also in grocery stores and on restaurant menus. Together, these two policies made wildlife immediately valuable during the time when nature based tourism was beginning to evolve in Namibia, and without them the growth of a similar industry in the US is difficult to predict.

When we returned to Nebraska and resumed our work with the Dietleins, we didn’t gloss over the barriers facing their project. Nor did we minimize the amount of work they would need to invest in a tourism business order to turn a profit. We did remind them that beyond increasing their own income, they have the opportunity to lead (along with the Switzers) land management and economic reform in the Plains. In my writing for the website, I tried to mimic the marketing strategies I saw at NamibRand and at the Waterberg Guest Farm. Namely, I distilled narratives about the history of the Plains and Dietlein family, narratives about the land and the animals, and the unique opportunity we have to experience them. If the Dietleins or any other Plains ranchers are going to build a tourism business, I think these narratives, along with quality accommodations and service, will be crucial to attracting guests.

This work didn’t make me feel like I was saving the world. But it felt better than doing nothing. Since I’ve left the GF, the Dietlein project has not developed into a flourishing tourism business mimicked by neighbors. Still, the website stands and at least offers guests the option to visit. When I began my fellowship, I wanted do something to improve the Great Plains, but I lacked enough knowledge to contribute anything useful. As I

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learned about plants and wildlife, public policy, private land management, and ranching culture, my understanding of the problems in the Great Plains transitioned from generalizations to specifics. The more I understood, the more hopeful I felt because the problems broke into manageable pieces, and I met people with real strategies to solve them. In the projects I worked on with the GF, I found some opportunities to act, and my actions, though small, contributed to a larger effort.

One of the most important lessons I learned at the GF is that if we are going to complain about the way things are, we must also suggest solutions. I also learned to view conservation in the Great Plains as a constant on-going project that cannot be completed by an individual. Instead, conservation is a regional, national, global effort that must evolve over time, from the work of many hands. Even though nature based tourism has not yet taken hold on a large scale in the Great Plains, the potential for change is real. We have lost a large portion of the prairie, but enough of it remains to imagine a story of revival. Each story has the power to inspire another imagination, a million imaginations. When I return to the prairies near my home, I see them now as flawed. But the wind still moves there. The youngest grasses whisper. They say hope is permanent. Awe is inexhaustible. Beauty is fecund.

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