



Likewise Great Plains Conservation, the company Colin Bell set up in 2006 with four other leading Africa-based conservationists. It funds projects from a variety of initiatives. Primarily, its schemes in Botswana, Kenya, Tanzania and the Seychelles are paid for by high-end, low-impact tourism, which pays in the most part for conservation programmes in crucially important wildlife havens, which otherwise would be threatened by human encroachment. Great Plains wants such projects to inspire others around the world to replicate a model that triangulates communities, conservation and commerce to create profitable alternative land use to farming, poaching and, in marine environments, over-fishing.

The wheels are turning. Vamizi in Mozambique, for instance, appears to echo the North Island concept with villas and conservation projects. Misool Eco Resort off remote West Papua in Indonesia is another. But it is Paul Lister, heir to the MFI fortune, who is the most candid of all about why sometimes difficult, demanding but moneyed guests are to be tolerated at all in pursuit of a much bigger idea.

Lister has recently completed three luxury lodges at Alladale, his private 23,000-acre estate in Scotland where he wants to reintroduce wolves as part of a mission to “re-wild” territory from the UK to Romania and beyond. He admits the mechanics of hospitality can be challenging: “But it’s very important. I could just stick up fences, chuck in the wolves, and let them all get on with it. But you can’t do these sorts of things without involving people.” Lister may have the private funds to bankroll his Scottish project, but pure philanthropy isn’t the point. Tourism engages local communities by way of employment, he explains; it involves outsiders by the promise of a unique, transformative experience. In this mission, Lister connects with his mentors, Kristine and Douglas Tompkins, who have both used their private wealth – she was formerly director of Patagonia clothing, he

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the co-founder of Esprit – to help create or expand national and provincial parks (for now, in Chile and Argentina), protecting wildlife, reintroducing locally extinct species and developing eco-tourism projects to support the commercial objectives as well as drive the emotional engagement of visitors and locals. Because conservation is rarely just about nature; it is about communities seeing how conserved nature pays.

In this arena, the challenges are immense, with Norwegian Svein Wilhelmsen at Basecamp Explorer one among a new gang of mavericks trying to lead the charge. A traveller-turned-investor-turned-philanthropist, Wilhelmsen believes that tourism and conservation will only ever work together if they become truly sustainable in showcases that can be scaled up across different parts of the world. “Isolated experiences are nice, but they don’t have a lot of impact,” he says. “I want to tell a global story, not a one-dimensional one.”

Wilhelmsen is an unusual mix. He wanted to be a social anthropologist; instead, he pursued a different career, and in 2007 sold Norway’s then biggest privately owned fund management company. “I wanted to do something with the last part of my life that had some kind of impact – and which protected the wonder my youngest child expressed when I took my family to Africa,” he says. Basecamp Explorer was the result, a company currently made up of several different, high-end eco-tourism experiences, including camps in the Maasai Mara, dhows sailing out of Lamu in Kenya, a renovated farmhouse in the Pyrenees, lodges in Spitsbergen, a fort in Rajasthan and a guesthouse in Dharamsala in northern India. All share an authenticity

and cultural richness that Wilhelmsen deems as worthy of protection as wildlife and wilderness. All Basecamp projects also engage the local population on the understanding that ultimately the communities will manage and staff the business themselves.

“The usual thinking is to consider the indigenous people as difficult to train in tourism,” says Wilhelmsen. “With Basecamp, we try to show how they should be valued as a resource. The old model of buying them off and putting them elsewhere is no longer viable.” But is it profitable, this vision of his? “It is vitally important that Basecamp is self-financing. I have to prove that the concept of long-term conservation and cultural preservation doesn’t need to be completely donor-dependent. But no, it doesn’t need to make me rich.”

Wilhelmsen thinks the demand is on an upward curve: “By travelling you are exposed to experiences that you can contribute something to, and help sustain it. People really want to give – that is becoming more and more prevalent.” But while every contribution counts, says Jones, what is truly compelling is the engagement of the very rich, and their ability, like Wilhelmsen’s, to drive the next cycle of change. ♦

#### THE WILD BUNCH

The following rates are all per person: **Alladale Lodge**, Ardgary, Sutherland IV24 3BS (01863-755 338; [www.alladale.com](http://www.alladale.com)), from £129 per night. **Basecamp Explorer**, [www.basecampexplorer.com](http://www.basecampexplorer.com), from £1,908 per night at Maasai Mara. **Explora** (+562-395 2800; [www.explora.com](http://www.explora.com)), from \$1,980 for three nights at Hotel de Larache, Atacama. **Great Plains Conservation**, [www.greatplainsconservation.com](http://www.greatplainsconservation.com), from \$500 per night at Ol Donyo Lodge, full board. **Journeys by Design** (01273-623 790; [www.journeysbydesign.com](http://www.journeysbydesign.com)). **Misool Eco Resort** ([www.misoolcoresort.com](http://www.misoolcoresort.com)), from €1,800 per week. **Vamizi Island Lodge** (01285-762 218; [www.vamizi.com](http://www.vamizi.com)), from \$570 per night. **Wilderness Safaris** (+2711-807 1800; [www.wilderness-safaris.com](http://www.wilderness-safaris.com)), from €2,115 per night on North Island. **Wild Philanthropy**, see Journeys by Design.

**Vamizi Island, Mozambique:**  
the perfect example of luxury  
meeting conservation.