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Astrotourism for development in Namibia — dark sky education and heritage

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Namibia is world-renowned for its incredibly dark skies by the astronomy community, and yet, the country is not well known by tourists and travellers as a dark sky destination. Forged by a collaboration between the Universities of Oxford and Namibia, together we are using astronomy as a means for capacity-building via educating tour guides and promoting astrotourism to relevant stakeholders. Astrotourism offers many benefits: heritage is preserved and celebrated; tour guides learn about astronomy and complement their earnings; meanwhile tourists engage in awe-inspiring activities while learning about topics like indigenous astronomy and light pollution.

In order to implement astrotourism sustainably, we have been working from both a bottom-up and top-down approach. The main barriers include access to training and astrotourism knowledge: (1) there exists a tour guide qualification in astronomy but this is currently unobtainable without the means and materials to study the topic. To bridge this barrier we are developing a course for tour guides, for which we are exploring both online and offline formats. Crucially, the content will not focus on western astronomy, but will include topics on indigenous astronomy in Southern Africa and light pollution, and will be made adaptable for other countries. (2) Namibia is already highly regarded as a country for its ecotourism activities. Thus, we are working with the Ministry of Environment, Forestry, and Tourism, and relevant tourism associations, to help establish Namibia as a country at the forefront of astrotourism.

This talk will explore the successes and challenges that we have encountered, whilst providing context internationally, so that dark sky education and heritage can be beneficial on global scales.