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Rural Tourism and Sustainable Rural Tourism

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This theme issue of the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* is devoted to the issues surrounding the development of rural tourism and of more sustainable forms of rural tourism. They are examined in the context of rural areas in the developed nations of Western Europe. Earlier versions of these papers were presented at the Second International School on Rural Development, held in Galway, Ireland in July 1993, which took rural and sustainable rural tourism as its themes. Consideration is given to developing rural tourism in ways where the supply of tourist facilities and experiences is appropriate to the needs of the host community, the environment and the local suppliers, and where it also matches the requirements of tourists on the demand side. Concern is expressed that rural tourism should not develop as the hapless outcome of inexorable, external forces, and hence prominence is given to the role of local communities and local businesses in shaping rural tourism.

Interest in Rural Tourism

It was the pressure of visitors on rural areas in developed nations that led to the development of many of the early ideas about sustainable tourism. Most notably, a number of influential concepts of alternative tourism were developed in the Alpine mountain regions of Europe in the 1970s as an answer to the severe development pressures being put upon rural communities and environments by the rise of intensive winter sports and summer vacationing. It is also the case that many of the new projects and initiatives in sustainable tourism are also to be found in the countryside.

Why have rural areas featured so prominently in the development of sustainable tourism, with its concern for the mainte-

nance of environmental and cultural quality and diversity? A crucial point in many developed countries is the specially high regard in which the countryside is held: it is seen as special and therefore particularly worthy of protection. For example, many observers have noted how in Britain the countryside is highly valued for its inherent variety of landscape, habitat and human heritage (Glyptis, 1991; Middleton, 1982; Prentice, 1992). The cultural commentator Raymond Williams has also shown how in the British literary tradition the countryside has frequently symbolised a lost 'golden age' — an age which supported an idyllic and readily identifiable 'good life'. He illustrates how in this tradition the countryside is defined and experienced as the opposite to life in the town. The countryside is a powerful evocation of a way of life which contrasts favourably with the more utilitarian and materialistic values in urban areas. Rurality embodies all those qualities that are missing from the urban area and modern urban society (Williams, 1975). In many other countries too, the rural areas have become deeply embedded into people's ideas of themselves as a nation (Bowden, 1992). Studies of public attitudes to the countryside also suggest that many people value the countryside because of its symbolic role — the countryside is perceived as a better physical and social world. Whatever the reality of these often idealised values and images, people's views about the qualities of the countryside are often deeply felt (Harrison, 1991). There is nothing new in the high esteem in which the countryside is held, but what is relatively new in many places is a fear for the countryside's future survival in the face of the threat of tourism, with previous threats more likely to be thought to come from industry, mining, depopulation and decline.

The high value which many people (and visitors) place on the countryside provides one justification for this collection of articles. However, the selection of rural tourism as the theme must not be taken to imply that the development of more sustainable tourism is only appropriate for rural areas. Indeed when towns develop tourism then they too must strive to ensure that this development is as sustainable as possible. Urban areas might be more resilient to certain of the adverse pressures of tourism, but their cultures, environments and economies still need careful management and stewardship.

Economic change means many rural areas in Western Europe are facing dilemmas about their future. Changing agricultural practices have led to rural unemployment, and the growth of food surpluses has forced European governments to introduce measures to curtail agricultural production. Many rural areas have suffered from emigration, often of the youngest and most able, and this depopulation has eroded the vitality of rural services and of rural communities. As a result, increased attention has been focused on rural development issues. One particular focus has been to identify ways of encouraging the diversification of rural economic activities, and tourism is one activity receiving heightened attention. Similar trends are evident in developed countries elsewhere. In the United States there has been growing concern about rural economic problems, and a survey in 1991 of state tourism agencies there found that 60% had made increased efforts in rural tourism and 30 of 50 states had tourism programmes specifically targeted for rural areas (Luloff *et al.*, 1994).

Such economic imperatives and the increasing demand for countryside visitation means that many rural areas in Western Europe are under considerable pressure from tourism (FNNPE, 1992). Recognition is growing that tourism can bring many adverse consequences for the countryside, such as the erosion of its distinctiveness. This includes a concern that rural areas should not fall into decline in the tourist-area life cycle (Butler, 1991; Johnson & Snepenger, 1993; Getz, 1992). Rural areas can be under especial threat because of their relative physical fragility, especially in high mountain and other less than robust habitats, and their cultural

fragility due to their weakened cultural and political condition after years of economic change and decline, with power flowing to the urban centres. However, the development of sustainable rural tourism has the potential to help secure the economic viability of rural communities and activities, which consequently can help maintain the special qualities of the countryside. The retention of these special qualities is an objective of sustainable tourism more generally, in order to secure long-term conservation and stewardship and also to benefit the host communities and the tourists. Of course rural tourism providers may also see this objective as in their best interests because many tourists who seek out the special characteristics of the countryside might not return if these were lost.

Is Rural Tourism Distinctive?

This collection of papers could be justified by the assertion that rural tourism is relatively distinct from tourism in towns, cities and coastal resorts. The basis of such a claim may appear obvious, but it needs to be demonstrated to be the case. Does the physical existence of tourism in rural areas create a rural tourism that has a significance beyond the self-evident combination of particular activities in a specific place? In other words, do the special characteristics of rural areas help shape the pattern of tourism so that there is a particular rural tourism? This issue is rarely considered in the tourism literature. Consequently, it remains unclear whether rural tourism is distinct from tourism in other geographical settings and, if it is, then in what ways. Here it should be noted that there is a wider debate within the academic discipline of rural studies that questions whether a countryside setting has any significant causal effect on the character of the society and economy of rural areas (Halfacree, 1993). This debate is very pertinent to the question of whether or not there is a distinctive rural tourism.

On one side of the debate in rural studies, there are those who are happy to describe rural areas as possessing to a greater or lesser degree characteristics that distinguish them from urban areas. It is recognised that rural areas are not identical and some are quite similar to urban areas, but it is suggested that to varying degrees

rural areas tend to have four main qualities: relatively low physical densities of people, buildings and activities; less social and cultural heterogeneity; less economic diversity; and a comparative physical isolation from general economic, social and political networks. Some researchers have extended these ideas on rural characteristics to suggest that they can have further effects on rural society. Rural society has been depicted as possessing, for example, greater social integration within relatively stable communities (Harper, 1989).

However, such descriptions of rural distinctiveness have been criticised. It is suggested that they are simply based on what we intuitively consider to be rural and that they have not been tested independently from our immediate commonsense thoughts (Newby, 1986). Others argue it is unhelpful to suggest that rural areas tend to have distinctive patterns of social life as there are no necessary connections between a place, its environment and the society found there. Such ideas are reinforced by claims that much of the rural scene in developed countries is becoming progressively less self-contained, due to such influences as television and counter-urbanisation, and has broad access to external values and aspirations (Hoggart, 1990).

Despite these criticisms, some still contend that it may be a mistake to deny our commonsense thoughts that rural areas can have distinctive characteristics or that these can have consequences for social and economic interactions in the countryside. Certainly, people do tend to hold images and views of the countryside that differ from those of the town; in this sense the countryside undoubtedly is distinctive, and this distinctiveness has at least two inextricably related dimensions. There is both our individual responses to the countryside and also the popular social representations of the countryside, such as those in the media, with the latter reflecting and affecting our individual perspectives. These social representations and personal responses to the countryside are important, not least because they affect how people interact with rural areas. In terms of rural tourism, they affect whether people want to visit the countryside and what they see and do when they are there (Squire, 1994).

Whatever the extent to which rural tourism is a distinct activity, it is hoped that this

collection of papers presents some useful insights into issues which concern those interested in tourism in rural areas. Some of these issues are presented elsewhere (in Bouquet & Winter, 1987; Gilbert, 1989; and Pigram, 1992) and these are related to case studies in Bramwell (1990) and in Hawkes & Williams (1993). This collection might also be of value to those concerned more generally with the theory and practice of sustainable tourism.

Sustainable Rural Tourism and Tourism Demand and Supply

Several of the articles here examine tourism in rural areas in relation to the matching of the supply of tourist facilities and experiences to the character of the demand for tourism. They assess how tourism in the countryside could be more sustainable when it meets the requirements of the local community and environment and of local suppliers on the supply side of the tourism system as well as of the tourists on the demand side.

Richard Hummelbrunner's article suggests that a combination of changes on the demand and supply sides of tourism has led to the emergence of a 'new rural tourism'. The supply side changes include an increasing interest in rural tourism among a better-off clientele, and also among some holidaymakers a growing environmental awareness and a desire to be integrated with the residents in the areas they visit. Hummelbrunner considers these trends are likely to promote forms of rural tourism supply which build on the inherent character of rural areas, notably their attractive natural environments, original local culture and traditional systems of land use and farming. In his view, rural areas should look inward to their own resources when developing rural tourism, although the common rural weaknesses of a lack of local entrepreneurs and of local capital and expertise may mean that at times it is sensible to seek external or exogenous capital. It is important, however, that this external involvement is managed with caution. Such deficiencies as a lack of local entrepreneurs can be tackled by establishing a network of advisors to build on endogenous entrepreneurial resources. He illustrates this by examining the local advisory and consultancy support provided by the

Austrian Association for Regional Self-Reliant Development.

Agnes Gannon's article contends that more attention often needs to be paid in rural tourism to the needs of the consumer, that is, to the requirements of tourism demand. This can require a shift from 'selling what we can produce' to 'producing what we can sell'. It must be balanced, however, by attention to the needs of the rural locality, including striving for authenticity, involving the community, and promoting human values and ecological stability.

Changes in rural tourism demand are also seen as important by Xavier Greffe. Greffe considers that the shift in the socio-economic profile of those interested in rural tourism towards the better-off socio-economic groups suits a move from the common, but often self-defeating, search for economies of scale in tourism to the search for economies of scope, that is, from maximising the number of tourists towards an emphasis on increasing the opportunities for them to spend. This emphasis on economies of scope may be very relevant to the development of sustainable tourism in rural areas. He also considers some of the requirements for tourism supply in rural areas given this preference for economies of scope. Prominent among these are a need for government to assist in the renovation and extension of the supply conditions in order to attract and hold on to the strong potential demand from better-off visitors.

Another requirement identified by Greffe is for rural tourism supply to be organised in networks which link together individual suppliers. This is illustrated in the article on agri-tourist businesses in Austria by Hans Embacher. He argues that, while the small scale of farm tourism businesses is a strength in relation to sustainable tourism, this is also a weakness in the market. For these small operators to reach the market effectively there needs to be co-operative marketing. Embacher examines the demand and supply characteristics of agri-tourism in Austria as well as the assistance which farm tourism can provide to sustaining rural life in general and the farming sector in particular. Detailed consideration is also given to the Austrian Farm Holidays Association as a co-operative marketing organisation which links individual farm businesses at regional, provincial and federal scales and which pro-

vides a range of marketing, training, advice and educational services to its members.

Concepts and Methods of Sustainable Rural Tourism

Lars Aronsson's paper on sustainable rural tourism in Sweden directs its attention to conceptual frameworks which link tourism demand and supply to sustainable tourism. He advocates the use of the concept of the 'meeting place' as a way of examining the encounters between tourist demand (in the sense of people's values and consumer patterns) and the tourist product, including the environment and society of tourist destinations. Proposals are put forward for what may be required of a tourism system — with its two main aspects, demand and supply, and the 'meeting places' between them — to be sustainable. The other article which highlights conceptual frameworks is by David Crouch. He argues that visitors' perceptions of rural places and cultures and their 'demand' for tourism is shaped in part by the tourist promotion. Taking rural Ireland as a case study, he concludes that the tourist promotion of Ireland caricatures the rural cultures found there. For Crouch, a central task in developing sustainable tourism is the construction of a different set of cultural 'identities', and these should present rural cultures very differently from how they are presented when simply directed at the tourist consumer. This concept of 'identities' is developed from recent ideas about culture in post-modern society. A central concern in the shaping of these 'identities' is the need to give people in rural communities the confidence to draw upon their own experiences and expertise; in other words, the need for community tourism and empowerment.

The last two articles examine the practical application of methods which are potentially of use in the development of sustainable rural tourism. Bernard Lane assesses sustainable tourism strategies as a method to achieve both development and conservation in rural areas. The paper by Adrian Phillips and Mary Tubridy explains how they have applied a range of methods to assist in the development of rural tourism in the Irish counties of Wicklow and Wexford, with the intention that this tourism is stably rooted in the rural economy,

enhances the well being of the community, and draws on the unique local natural and human heritage. The methods which they have used and are examined here include the production of resource databases using Geographical Information Systems, the development of interpretive plans, as well as methods of involving rural communities in interpreting their heritage.

Conclusion

Among the differing contributions on rural tourism in this collection, there is a frequent concern that rural tourism should not be allowed to develop as the inevitable outcome of powerful and inexorable outside forces. These forces include the shifting and increasingly global pressures for economic restructuring and the commoditisation of the countryside by external tourism interests as a retail experience for tourist consumers. A new concern is emerging in the theory and practice of rural tourism which invests considerable importance in the economic well-being and cultural integrity of rural communities and in rural environmental stewardship. Increasing prominence is now given to rural communities and individual local residents and businesses and to their role and degree of control in shaping rural tourism in the context of external forces (Britton, 1991; Drake, 1991; Evans & Ibery, 1989; Getz, 1994; Long *et al.*, 1990; Marsden, 1992; Prentice, 1993). Inevitably there will be contested opinions on what is desirable in the development of rural tourism in specific places. It is hoped that these articles will help clarify what may be desirable, indicate possible ways forward, and also stimulate further analysis and debate.

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