Tourism and recreation as economic drivers in future uplands

By I. D. ROTHERHAM,

Tourism and Environmental Change Research Unit, Sheffield Hallam University, City Campus, Sheffield, S1 1WB

Summary

With dramatic change in the social and economic landscapes of upland Britain in the late twentieth century, politicians and planners hope tourism will revitalise these multi-functional zones. However, whilst tourism and recreation can provide important and maybe critical contributions to economic function, they are not the panacea so widely predicted. Ideas of upland landscape abandonment to become ‘re-wilded’ areas powered by tourism are naïve. The reasons are complicated and diverse. Firstly, tourism is fickle, unpredictable, and generally highly seasonal. Furthermore, and whilst organisations such as the National Trust are the exception to the rule, the tourism pound does little to manage either the landscape or the infrastructure of footpaths and facilities that the same tourists require. In the absence of a vibrant farming community, residential populations drift away, age, and are reduced to fringing commuter dormitories for adjacent cities and towns.

Key words: upland landscapes; re-wilding; ecotourism; farming communities

Introduction

Issues of ecology and rural economies were discussed in Legg (2001), and the specific matters of upland ecology and tourism in Anderson (2004). In the conference debate recorded in the latter the suggestion was clearly that upland abandonment by farming would be a good thing and that tourism would become the major economic driver. Vidal (2005) highlighted the popular excitement generated by the anticipation of herds of reindeer, wild horses and even elk roaming the High Pennine moors. It is worth briefly considering the context of this. The World Tourism Organisation (WTO) estimated 595 million international travellers in 1997 and US$425 billion spent and tourism economic impact was recognised. However, adverse impacts of mass tourism were obvious and ecotourism, a fast-growing component of tourism, was heralded as an answer (Higgins, 1996; Herath, 2002). In Britain in recent decades, with changing social and economic conditions in upland areas, it is seen as a potential panacea for deep-seated problems. However, there are issues of recognition and definition tourism and its component sectors of ecotourism and of wildlife tourism (Rotherham, 2006). Described as a niche market (Bell & Lyall, 2002), Preece et al. (1995) questioned the time and resources dedicated to ecotourism as a minor component of tourism. In 1996, Brandon claimed: ‘... ecotourism and nature-based tourism have not lived up to expectations...’, though ecotourism and nature-based tourism may ‘green’ mainstream tourism (Preece et al., 1995). Stucker Rennicks (1997) suggested nature-based tourism had come of age for ‘green’, cultural, and nature tourists, and mainstream tourists enjoying nature-based experiences. Nature-based tourism, wildlife tourism, adventure tourism, and countryside recreation are increasingly significant, but not all is ecotourism (Rotherham et
Furthermore, the tourism, leisure, and recreation industries are at a crossroads. Recognised as one of the world’s largest industries they face issues of sustainability and environmental compatibility, with local communities, and cultural heritage. Addressing issues of tourism, the environment, and sustainability there are five key challenges (modified from McCool (1995)): 1) Improved understanding of tourist values, motivations, and behaviours related to ‘natural’ environments; 2) Enhanced community wellbeing through leisure and tourism activities; 3) Identified key social and environmental impacts of leisure and tourism; 4) Establishment of management systems by the industries to address these impacts; 5) Maximized benefits and minimised damage (Rotherham, 2006). With rapid social change, and global social, economic, and environmental transformation, these are increasingly important. It is clear that tourism is not necessarily helpful or benign towards communities or the environment. It is also confusing in terms of policy to have only limited agreement on definitions and hence data collection for evaluation and monitoring, for tourism, day-visits, leisure, recreation and sport. This lack of clarity and awareness extends to professionals and potentially impacts adversely on attempts to link land management for conservation to economic impacts.

Methodology

The study is based on a broad review of literature, and on surveys of farmers and other stakeholders. Detailed case study assessments of nature-based tourism were undertaken along with assessments of regeneration projects. An ethnological study was also carried out.

Results

The countryside visitor in the uplands

There are serious issues in seeing tourism not as a complement to, but a replacement for, a traditional farm-based economy. The vital tourism spend may maintain coffee shops, the outdoor clothing boutiques, and local art and craft centres; these are powerful drivers in the emerging economy. But without a backdrop of a stable community resident all year round, many basic facilities haemorrhage away. In losing farming communities, we lose much more than functionality; we lose connectivity with the cultural past and knowledge of land management. Yet this past, or at least an image of it, draws many tourists in the first place. In the Peak District, interviews with local farmers confirm that many are leaving the industry. Farming families connected to the land for generations are selling up to itinerant graziers to farm in a wider ranch style. This may not be inherently bad, and much change may be inevitable, but to greet it as ‘re-wilding’ that will lead to an ecotourism-based economy is seriously-flawed. One reason is the obvious landscape history observation that these are not ‘wild’ landscapes but have had human settlement and use for several millennia. They are deeply cultural landscapes and for the tourist and much conservation this is important. This is not an argument against change per se; history shows that major changes have happened before. However, there is a cost often omitted from future scenario planning. In the long-term, the future of these landscapes is driven by economics, social trends and associated politics. Grant aid and special measures tweak around the edges and encourage short-term transitions, but are quickly forgotten, as crises like Foot-and-Mouth Disease fade from media and political memories. Sustainability demands continuity and stability of resource and opportunity. To work on the land and deliver a viable landscape, farmers need these to be long-term and predictable. This has not been the case for a long time, and it is not so now. Without the resident local working community, many facilities are not viable throughout the year, and are vulnerable to a bad tourism year. To attract and retain tourists and recreational visitors requires a managed landscape and infrastructure to facilitate visiting. Additionally, if tourism is to contribute economically, there must be ‘opportunities to spend’, delivered by and employing, local people. Only then is the recreational visit translated into local economic benefit. Managed effectively, these ‘opportunities to spend’ themselves
become tourist attractants. The circle is closed and the situation socially and economically more sustainable. However, to become environmentally sustainable too, it is necessary that the economic machine engages fully with the landscape. Through promotion of local and regional products like food and drink, embedded in distinctive landscapes of local and regional character, visitors buy in to the environmental resource. These aspects have been recognised, evaluated, promoted by organisations such as the National Trust in Cumbria and in Wales. Re-wilding or re-naturing (however defined), may play a future role, and the economy may be driven by tourism, but sustainability will be more complex.

The opportunities - wildlife spectacles

Britain’s wild uplands already have a significant nature based-tourism pull, and people enjoy wildlife spectacles if available relatively easily. This is generally wildlife and nature-based tourism and not specifically ecotourism. Neither is it necessarily sustainable, often depending on private car transport. Travel at the destination may be relatively environmentally friendly, but there is still the need to get there. A wildlife spectacle might be watching breeding seabird colonies at the RSPB Bempton Cliffs Nature Reserve in Yorkshire, wildlife safaris in Kenya, whale watching off Scotland, or raptor watching on the Bosphorus. Activities and experiences can organised and packaged like seeing the winter swans fed by floodlight at Cambridgeshire’s Welney Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust Reserve or informal when thousands of birdwatchers gather to see hundreds of ospreys wintering on the Potomac River, Washington DC. By providing conditions for wildlife and watcher, the spectacle can be created. In recent years, this has been done to improve wildlife habitat, provide recreational experiences and visitor opportunities, to kick-start local tourism, and boost the economy (Rotherham et al., 2005; Rotherham, 2006). To attract significant ecotourism or wildlife tourism visitors (as opposed to countryside recreational walkers and outdoor sports visitors) there must be a wildlife or nature spectacle to view. In order to turn visitors into economic impact there need to be opportunities to spend embedded in a local community, with appropriate accommodation and supporting infrastructure in the immediate target area. Without this, the economic mechanisms for land management and facility provision must be wholly generated outside the area through grant aid or NGOs. Without the local farming community there may be nobody to the work anyway and a lack of necessary skills. There will be no link between visitor and sustainable economic development in the target area.

Opportunity to spend - local food and drink

For ecotourism or nature-based tourism activities to benefit local people through economic impact there must be ‘opportunities to spend’. At the RSPB’s Dearne Valley Nature Reserve for example, this includes a shop, garden centre, café, and meeting rooms. These opportunities employ local people, become tourism attractants, and deliver core educational messages of the organisation. If supply chains for purchase and provision of goods and services are local, the benefits increase. Destinations can link sustainable and traditional land use, and maintenance of environmental quality through the marketing and financial benefits of locally distinctive produce. This is particularly so with production and promotion of local food, drink, and hospitality. It is possible to offer the visitor a distinctive hospitality experience with enhanced benefit to conservation land management (Rotherham, 2003). Managed carefully and developed effectively, this values local culture and expertise, helping sustain local farming and cuisine. The same applies to local crafts and products, but it requires a local working community.

Added Value – a critical difference

Locally distinct cultures, crafts, and cuisine, provide ‘added value’ to help local communities and grow local economies. Effectively marketed and supported they enhance destination
attractiveness and celebrate regional character. For rural areas in the UK, these benefits can be the difference between local services such as shops being viable and closing. The wildlife and nature-based tourist can make this difference. However, with mass tourism, souvenir shops and bars often replace local services; a phenomenon long-seen in the Peak District towns like Castleton and Matlock Bath.

Community issues

Local people may be vital to success or failure of ecotourism. Even the most carefully planned and executed project changes the host community, though social and cultural changes occur anyway. Even without tourism, change and rural decline may happen. Communities and culture evolve, and settlements wax and wane. Modern society struggles to accept the evolutionary not static nature of culture. We expect host communities, and destinations to remain the same despite global changes. A reaction is to visit remote areas before they change and decline as modern, contemporary culture, e.g. Disney and Macdonalds, do their worst. The role of the host community in driving change, taking responsibility to determine their own worth and their futures is recognised as critical to sustainability or ecotourism. But in the absence of the local working community who will decide? The upland zones may become abandoned rather than re-wilded, and the surrounding towns and villages evolve as a pastiche of outdoor activity centres and outdoor clothing shops, and shrines to a perception of the past, such as the ‘Wordsworth experience’ or the ‘Beatrix Potter phenomenon’ in the Lake District. These are the retreats from day-to-day realities of modern living for many people, and not necessarily a bad thing. If, as the National Trust seeks to achieve in Cumbria, the tourism pound links to employment of locally-skilled workers who maintain the landscape and often the traditions, then the potential is enormous. However, this is not re-wilding and does not happen without careful and long-term planning and finance.

Discussion

Upland zones such as the Peak District and Pennines, Mid-Wales, Cumbria and much of Scotland, present huge opportunities but also serious problems to land managers. Intensive grazing, widespread drainage, fallout from air pollution, and blanket afforestation are just some of the environmental problems. However, despite these impacts many members of the public and even some professionals seem to regard these lands as ‘wildernesses’. They are not, and in most cases have a longer and deeper cultural depth than lowland areas. With increasing depopulation (as is occurring across many regions of Europe such as around the Mediterranean), it is tempting to think that abandonment equates to re-wilding. Removal of the farming community seems to achieve the lower intensity of management that conservationists have been demanding for decades. To a large degree this will lead to recovery of some of the ecology that has been battered over the last hundred years or so. However, there are many elements of the landscape of these uplands that are not ‘natural’ but ‘cultural’, such as upland hay meadows and wet pastures, and for which abandonment will not mean recovery. These are the key habitats for birds like twite, lapwing and snipe and for many rare flowers too. To get these back will require more than a cessation of current management.

A wilder landscape holds enormous promise but there are deep seated issues as how this might function socially and economically (as discussed), and also ecologically. For genuine re-wilding we look to a long-term sustainable landscape perhaps powered by large grazing herbivores. The suggestion is that these would provide the attractant for high-spending ‘ecotourists’. But as noted earlier, where will they stay and spend their money, and how will this link back to land management?
In terms of basic ecology, many debates seem to lack an understanding of issues such as landscape carrying capacity and even the habitat requirements of particular animals. Suggestions that large herds of herbivores might roam the Pennines to provide a tourism attraction seem unrealistic from the top of Bleaklow or Kinder Scout in mid-winter. In all likelihood they will be heading off towards Manchester or Sheffield as quickly as they can. Furthermore, there are the perennial issues of animal welfare on the one hand and how much intervention or livestock management is allowed; a major issue for the lowland Dutch examples. Another big question is that of predators – top carnivores. If we mean re-wilding then we need a fully-functioning ecosystem to avoid the Scottish problems of half-starved red deer herds. It would be wonderful to have predators such as wolves and lynx back in our uplands, but will it be politically or publicly acceptable? Rumours of naturalised big cats are not exactly welcomed in most quarters. In the absence of these then a re-wilding policy needs quite intensive and costly management.

In the Peak District, we have been monitoring the re-establishment from escaped animals of a now substantial red deer herd. In fact there are two; with a western population since the 1940s monitored since the 1970s by Derek Yalden, and an eastern population that has grown since the 1980s. At present, this is the nearest analogy we have to a re-wilding experiment in the region, and it is greeted with excitement by many locals and visitors alike. However, there are other problems with a significant and vociferous minority of locals calling for a cull. These are generally people into whose gardens the deer retreat in bad weather or to sample garden produce. For the National Park authorities the issue is deeply sensitive and raises issues of ownership and liabilities. There is also concern over how the rising deer numbers equate with conservation grants to reduce sheep grazing on the same estates. In terms of risk to traffic and human health there are concerns over both road traffic accidents and deer ticks spreading Lyme Disease. With upland areas permeated by roads and traffic travelling at speed there is an increasing danger of road traffic accidents. Deer and other ‘wild’ large herbivores will generally get over or through barriers that might restrain sheep.

Perhaps one of the bigger but unspoken issues for an upland region such as the Peak District or the Pennines is the already apparent abandonment of the lower zones of heathland. Many have already gone through a succession into unmanaged and rather dull birch wood. This can generate considerable wildlife interest, but as a replacement for heath and bog, is a serious loss. Combined with abandonment or destruction of hay meadows and wet pastures this diminishes visual attraction and ecological diversity associated with the intimate mosaics of habitat formerly characteristic of these areas. The loss not only reduces biodiversity and cultural heritage but also the attractiveness to visitors. It is likely that with herds of large grazing herbivores this dense habitat would be broken up into a more diverse mosaic, but this would require quite large numbers of animals and raise the issues already noted. Re-wilding as abandonment implies an acceptance of ecological change through succession, and on many low-lying sites a potentially major loss of interest. Would this be acceptable to conservationists or to visitors? This is not an argument against a wilder landscape, but it hopefully questions some assumptions of an abandoned upland zone becoming an ecotourism Mecca.

References


