WILDLIFE AND HERITAGE TOURISM IN THE MAINSTREAM OF THE RURAL ECONOMY OR STILL ON THE FRINGES

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ABSTRACT

With impacts of food scares and crises in the traditional rural economy, recent years have spawned many initiatives to bring rural renaissance to Britain’s countryside. Similar things are happening elsewhere in Europe and indeed around the World. Tourism and leisure, however defined, have been presented as the saviours of rural communities and of the economic fabric of their landscapes. In parallel to this has been a plethora of studies that demonstrate for example the importance of the walker’s pound, and the value of the countryside recreation trail to the rural economy. There have also been policies and strategies to re-engage the consumer with the producer through local foods and to grow associated tourism spend (National Trust, 2001; Ramblers’ Association, 2004; Rotherham, 2003 & 2006; Rotherham et al., 2006a).

At the same time, but dismissed by many tourism specialists, there has been a growth in the demand for, and the sophistication of the wildlife- and heritage-tourism experience (Rotherham, 2004a & b). Key organisations such as the National Trust and the RSPB for example, have well over one million members each; and these are high-spending individuals with a countryside-based hobby.

In response to the above and to other drivers of change, there is an emergence of a new entrepreneurial sector in the rural economy. Increasingly conservation bodies are managers of land including farms and production units, of cafés and shops, of visitor centres, car parks and visitor facilities. These new enterprises have grown from selling a few guide books and a sandwich plus cup of tea, to significant businesses. They range from small retail outlets with catering, to large garden centres and substantial restaurants. They now impact on local communities and local economies in a dramatic way, in some cases becoming the keystone to the network of local enterprise. For some organisations and indeed many of the individuals involved, this change has been almost by accident, and often accepted with reluctance. However, some bodies such as the RSPB have begun to see this as a new opportunity, a new way (Rayment & Dickie, 2001; Rotherham et al., 2003 & 2006b). They can help justify funding drawdown of monies otherwise unavailable. They can be major contributors to regeneration and sustainable development. They can lead on quality of life and rural renaissance. Moreover, they can still conserve birds; which of course is their main remit.

This new rural entrepreneurship provides many exciting opportunities but also creates lines of tension within organisations (Beard et al., 2000; Potts & Rouke, 2000; Reynolds & Braithwaite, 2000; Rotherham et al., 2000). Conservation bodies and sometimes voluntary groups are becoming a new breed of socially responsible businesses. In some cases the individuals and even the organisations have not yet identified themselves within these new roles. For some this is a direction with which they feel uncomfortable or ill-prepared. In many cases the new directions can be seen to bring new responsibilities and new relevance to an organisation. In other cases there are clear and sometimes significant conflicts about roles, line-management, and policy direction.

There is a final point to be made here in that many services that provide free public benefits, such as local authority countryside services for example, or long-distance trails, bring enormous advantages to a rural area. However, the providers of the service are often ill-equipped or for other reasons unable to take advantage of the economic opportunities that they bring. In such cases there may be scope for public-private partnerships; or it may be that the wider community and in particular politicians and policy-makers, must recognise the need to invest in the long-term in the public sector, in order to generate and maintain the rural economic benefits (Egan & Rotherham, 2001; Rotherham et al., 2004a & b). This is not a message that many today wish to hear, but the old saying of ‘no pain, no gain’ rings true.

This paper reviews the background literature and presents primary observations and data from pertinent case-studies.
INTRODUCTION

Issues relating to EU funding policies for agriculture and their social, economic, and environmental impacts have been debated for many years (for example Bowler, 1985). In this context the last two decades witnessed almost unprecedented changes in the rural landscape and its economy (for example Goodman & Redclift, 1991, and Anon.1, 1984). In 2002 the UK Government's Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food (Defra, 2002) reported that the Country's farming industry was becoming economically unviable. So with taxpayers spending £3 billion per year on agricultural support, and farm incomes falling from £7 billion in 1973 to £2 billion in 2000, the situation was critical. EU grant aid to the agricultural sector has been changed to better meet environmental and economic needs, but this remains a contentious subject. Farming's share of the UK National economy has fallen to around 0.9%; the food sector as a whole being worth around 8% GDP (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 1999). The broader environmental and development issues were set down in landmark publications such as Biodiversity; the UK Strategy (Anon.2, 1994) and Sustainable Development: the UK Strategy (Anon.3, 1994), and their subsequent revisions.

However, rural crises generate opportunities and forge partnerships that only a decade ago would have been unexpected. These trends have been brought to full focus by apparently endless crises in Britain’s food-producing landscapes UK – BSE, Foot-and–Mouth, etc., etc. Even before the most recent of these, there was a burgeoning market of added value of organic and alternative food produce. There are also serious moves by nature conservation organisations to move into environmentally sustainable and friendly farming beyond mere demonstration. The National Trust led the way but the RSPB is following. This development has gone hand-in-hand with the emergence of whole food and organic restaurants and shops, and the increasingly popular idea of farm-based shops, farmers markets and locally distinctive produce. In rural Britain tourism supports around 400,000 jobs (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/farming, 26.11.02). At the same time it is increasingly recognised that farming and especially traditional farming, underpins much of the rural nature conservation, landscape and tourism; contributing to the employment of around 12.5% of the UK working population.

These initiatives make significant contributions to local economies and the environment (Mathieson & Wall, 1982; Mazzanti, 2002; McCool, 1995). Local products of distinctive local character, grown or produced and processed locally have increased substantially in recent years. These are sold to local people and via hotels, shops and restaurants, to visitors. Presented as healthy and exciting additions to the tourist and leisure palate they become a distinctive part of the tourism experience. Squaring the circle to bring positive environmental, alongside rural economic and social recovery, linked to production, processing and marketing of these goods and services is a serious challenge. The economic drivers for these links are tourism and the leisure consumer (Rotherham, 2003; Rotherham et al., 2004b).

This holistic approach to rural entrepreneurship begins to resolve some of the core problems of the new rural economy. It also addresses some serious difficulties presented by many tourism initiatives. Tourism development often contributes little to a sustainable rural environment and can be essentially parasitic on the natural and cultural resource. The approach described here links tourism development to the rural economy directly through landscape and culture.

SUSTAINABLE-, NATURE-BASED, WILDLIFE- AND ECO-TOURISM

Tourism developed regardless of negative impacts may be short-lived. Researchers therefore developed ideas of ‘sustainable tourism’ to embrace a continuum of sustainable tourism development (Wight, 1997; McCool et al., 2001; Eagles, 1995; Harrison, 1996; Bramwell and Lane, 1993). However, the Bruntland definition of sustainable development
(WCED, 1987) was described as ill-defined and multi-faceted with over 300 sustainable development definitions to suit different disciplines (Heinen, 1994, in Sharples, 2000). Sustainable tourism, ecotourism, and nature-based tourism all face similar issues (Sarakaya et al., 1999; Briguglio et al., 1996). There are many definitions of sustainable tourism (Bramwell and Lane, 1993) some including economic, social, and environmental factors, others just tourism. McCool et al. (2001) asked the question ‘what should tourism sustain?’

It is here that the new rural entrepreneurs may be of central importance. In a rural location needing long-term economic stability and predictability, parasitic tourism alone cannot be sustained or sustainable. New income generation based around visitors’ service and commodity demands provides strong incentives for tourism development that is more sustainable and that has embedded in the local, host community.

Nature-based, wildlife tourism, and ecotourism are often used interchangeably (Blamey, 1997) with related heritage tourism, alternative tourism, and adventure tourism. The latter may be described as ‘hard’ nature-based experiences (wilderness trekking, bush walking) as compared to scenic driving and nature reserve or countryside visits that are considered ‘soft’ nature-based experiences (Potts and Rourke, 2000; MacLellan, 1999; Fennell and Weaver, 1997). Much literature is on ecotourism but the approach is often muddled, and whilst nature-based tourism has been reported less often, this is changing. Both nature-based and ecotourism are described as occurring in natural or near-natural environments. The ecotourism approach emphasises community and cultural issues (Newsome et al., 2002; Wight, 1997; Fennell and Weaver, 1997), but there is no reason why wildlife and heritage tourism should not also engender such benefits. Ecological practice and ecotourism profit margins are seen by some as incompatible (Sarakaya et al., 1999) with deliberate misrepresentation, or ‘green-wash’ of tourism activities (Lindsey, 2003; Wight, 1997). However, for a business to be viable and to provide incentives to investors there must be a significant profit margin. Perhaps it is the fate of this profit that should be looked at, not just its size?

THE GROWTH OF WILDLIFE AND HERITAGE TOURISM

There is much talk of ecotourism as a rapidly growing sector of the tourism industry (Brandon, 1996; Fillion et al., 1992; Higgins, 1996); but reality and vision differ. Much activity is wildlife- or nature-based tourism, not ecotourism. However, with economic impacts recognised in developed countries such as the UK and the USA, the World’s emerging economies are also cashing in on the benefits. Tourism providers often do not understand their industry’s resource base, and conservation bodies disengage from tourism and economics. As early as 1994, there were between 106 and 211 million wildlife-related tourists worldwide (Ecotourism Society, 1998). Here nature tourists were defined as people visiting to experience and enjoy nature. Wildlife-related visitors were tourists at a destination to observe wildlife. Ecotourism is nature-based speciality travel defined by the Ecotourism Society (ES) as “responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people.” This definition is widely accepted in principle, but is not a functional definition for gathering statistics, and there is no globally accepted mechanism for gathering ecotourism data. Many workers consider ecotourism as a specialty segment of the larger nature-tourism market. However confusion arises with many researchers and practitioners using the terms inter-changeably. There are issues of definition of wildlife- or nature-dependent beyond the scope of this paper and Reynolds & Braithwaite (2000) considered this in detail. These are important because they affect datasets and also business viability. A further complication often ignored in pure tourism studies is the potential importance of local visitors and regional day visitors to attractions such as nature reserves or country parks (Rotherham et al., 2004a & b, & 2005). Our approach is to consider the broader definition and to be inclusive since for the business entrepreneur this is what counts.

Joining tourism, local people, and land management is central to resolving this; tourism economic benefits feeding back to environment and community. Enlightened rural entrepreneurship is the key. In the UK, land management can link locally distinct hospitality to tourism experience and visitor attractiveness. Sustainable rural tourism relates landscape
and community character to distinctive visitor experience. Local food supply and traditional cuisine join wildlife tourism to land and species conservation, supporting local farmers and extensive farming methods. Marketing of local crafts and local products produced sustainably supports traditional land use, but only through effective business intervention. There are issues of commitment to the local supply chain, and quality assurance of product and experience. Solving these difficulties makes economic and social benefits flow, with scope to exchange ideas and best practice between stakeholders and actors in developed and emerging economies. In recognising sustainable business opportunities, we can avoid the pitfalls.

Ecotourism and nature-based tourism may ‘green’ mainstream tourism. Stucker Rennicks (1997) suggested nature-based tourism had come of age for ‘green’, cultural, and nature tourists. However, mainstream tourists engaging in nature-based holiday experiences (nature-based tourism, wildlife tourism, heritage-tourism, and adventure tourism), are increasingly significant. By the late 1990’s the World Tourism Organization (WTO, 2000) estimated over 595 million international travellers spent US$425 billion per year. Tourism economic impacts were recognised and the negative impacts of mass tourism becoming obvious. The tourism, leisure, and recreation industries are at a crossroads, facing issues of sustainability and compatibility with local communities, cultural heritage and the environment.

**THE SIZE OF THE MARKET**

Nature- and heritage-based leisure and tourism are dynamic tourism sectors growing at up to 30% per annum in the 1990s (Wright, 1996; Lindberg, 1991). As early as 1993, WTO estimated that nature-based tourism generated 7% of international travel expenditure. The World Resources Institute found tourism grew 4% per annum, but nature-related visiting was faster at 10% to 30% (Lindberg, 1991). Fillion et al. (1994) assessed the ecotourism market from general tourism statistics, qualifying ecotourism as "travel to enjoy and appreciate nature", but in practice this is nature-based tourism not ecotourism. Analysing inbound tourist motivations Fillion found 40-60% of international tourists were ‘nature tourists’ and 20-40% ‘wildlife-related tourists’. ‘Nature tourists’ were ‘visiting a destination to experience and enjoy nature’ and ‘wildlife-related visitors’ were ‘observing wildlife (e.g. bird-watchers)’.

**THE NATURE OF THE CHALLENGE**

The leisure, tourism, and recreation industries face difficult development choices as they affect the lives and economic opportunities of tourism destination communities. Communities and destinations may lose their distinctive character and competitive edge that attract visitors and income in the first place. Whilst this affects the tourism industry providers often move on to pastures new; tourism and leisure being potentially fickle and parasitic on their hosts.

However, in a rural setting tourism can support service and retail sectors with economic benefit to local communities through provision of accommodation, transport, food, and retail. Through this the industry is adapting to visitor values and preferences for tourism product and destination. There are issues of leisure and tourism products, scale, development acceptability, sustainability, quality of life, and host community needs. With rapid social change, and global social, economic, and environmental transformation, these are of increased importance. More and more they are addressed by small to medium-sized rural businesses.

Rural business development may involve many stakeholders, but often a few key decision-makers. Future visions for rural communities and how they are affected by tourism often overlook the ability or otherwise of host communities to absorb or influence changes. Decisions adversely affecting traditional natural resource utilisation, land management, or custom are controversial and affect long-term sustainability. Many people benefited from traditional practices and modern changes have caused declines in local culture, traditional crafts, and landscape quality. New rural business can support these but there is a problem that distinctive, traditional culture can become merely a museum showcase for visitors. There can be associated loss of community pride and a decline in basic economy, skills, trades,
crafts, and land use. Local and especially young people decant to nearby towns or further afield. In worst-case scenarios distinctive character and culture are diluted and ‘Disneyfied’. However, with or without tourism, change and decline often occur through urbanisation and rural de-population. If tourism or leisure activities and associated development are planned and implemented sensitively they may halt or at least slow the process.

THE OPPORTUNITIES - WILDLIFE SPECTACULARS

There is a growing market in specialist adventure holidays and wildlife experience tours. However, most people enjoy wildlife spectacles especially if available relatively easily. This is often wildlife and nature-based tourism and not specifically ecotourism, and it has strong synergies with heritage and garden visiting. It is not necessarily ‘sustainable’ or especially ‘green’ for example generally depending on private car transport. Travel within a destination region or at an individual site may be relatively environmentally friendly, but most tourists and day-visitors get there by car. The spectacle might be watching breeding seabird colonies at the RSPB Bempton Cliffs Nature Reserve in Yorkshire, a wildlife safari in the Scottish Highlands, whale watching off Pembrokeshire, or raptor watching in the Chilterns. The activities and experiences may be very organised and packaged such as seeing the winter swans fed by floodlight at Welney Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust Reserve in Cambridgeshire or very informal when wildlife watchers gather to see hundreds of Common Seals at Donna Nook in Lincolnshire (Rotherham et al., 2002a & b; 2004c; & 2006).

Some spectaculars result from happy accident of nature; others are constructed to maximize nature’s potential. By providing conditions for wildlife and watcher, the spectacle can be created. Increasingly this is done to improve wildlife habitat, provide recreational experiences and visitor opportunities, and to kick-start local tourism, and boost the economy.

OPPORTUNITY TO SPEND

So why is the rural entrepreneur so important? In order for an ecotourism or nature-based tourism activity to benefit local people through economic impact there must be ‘opportunities to spend’. If there are not, then there is tourism economic leakage and limited retention or local benefit. This may be through entrance fees, car parking, fee-paying walks and events, shops, garden centres, cafés and restaurants, meeting rooms and conferencing facilities, and accommodation. For example at the RSPB’s Dearne Valley Nature Reserve in South Yorkshire, this includes a shop, garden centre, café, and meeting rooms. These opportunities employ local people and in themselves become tourism attractants. They also help deliver core educational messages of the organisation. If supply-chains for purchase and provision of goods and services are local, the benefits increase dramatically. There are different approaches that have emerged over the last ten years and these can be exemplified by particular case-studies e.g. Crowe et al. (2002), Rotherham & Egan (2005), and Rotherham et al. (2006b). Some of the approaches and trends are described below:

Carsington Water, Derbyshire

This is a major rural business development based around a water-supply reservoir located just south of the Peak National Park. Comprehensive water-sports and countryside recreation facilities were a condition of the planning consent. However, the owners (Severn Trent Water plc) went beyond the condition and have established a major site and a beacon development for recreation, for tourism, and for nature conservation. Since first opening in the 1990s the visitor figures have topped one million each year. A multi-functional retail, craft, activities and eating area is a major and high-quality attraction. Units are owned by Severn Trent and leased to individual businesses. Through tourism and leisure–day visitors, via businesses on site, and through the direct employment of staff, the site has a huge impact on the local economy. However, it has also acted as a tourism growth-pole for the immediate area surrounding. As an indicator of this, several hundred businesses use Carsington Water in their promotional literature and on the Web.

Whinlatter Forest Centre, Cumbria
Located in the northern part of the Lake District National Park, Whinlatter is a partnership between the Forestry Commission (site owners), the RSPB, and the Lake District National Park. High quality retail, interpretational/educational, and countryside recreational facilities are provided alongside excellent catering. The site sub-lets to business partners to run the retail and catering. Impacts are massive through the high profile attraction of visitors away from the core Lake District tourism honey-pots, and with the development of ‘opportunities to spend’. Core staff are employed in site management and in education/interpretation, and the visitors drawn in also impact significantly in the local economy.

**Martin Mere Wildfowl and Wetlands Centre, Lancashire**

Located in central west Lancashire, Martin Mere is a well-established and major visitor facility owned and run by the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust. It mixes excellent wild bird spectaculars with captive collections, education/interpretation, and both retail and food.

**RSPB Dearne Valley, South Yorkshire**

The RSPB view this as a ground-breaking initiative and it moves them from being a conservation body that has social and economic impacts to being a key player in at least some rural economies. They maintain that their primary role is still nature conservation and specifically wild bird conservation. However, they also heralded this as a major new direction. Also, and importantly, they would not have received the substantial grant-aid to develop the site without the social and economic aspirations. Investment from Heritage Lottery Fund was over £1 million and was targeted at developing ‘opportunities to spend’ – with a shop, a garden centre, a café/restaurant, meeting rooms, toilet facilities and car parking. The aim is to be self-financing from tourism and countryside day-visitor revenues within five years.

**Low Sizergh Barn, Cumbria**

This is a very different facility to the others. It has grown from a farm with ‘pick your own strawberries’ around fifteen years ago, to a thriving rural business. It has a farm shop, tea room, craft gallery and farm trail on an organic dairy farm near the Lake District National Park. The farm shop has selections of local and speciality foods from Cumbria, with farm products, their own organic Kendal cheese, organic eggs and ice cream made from their milk. This is now a dynamic and successful business attracting good numbers of day-visitors, local shoppers and tourists.

**LOCAL FOOD AND DRINK**

Tourism and leisure destinations can link sustainable and traditional land use, maintenance of environmental quality and through the marketing and financial benefits of locally distinctive produce generate real benefits for local people. Through 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 effectively developed, this valorises local culture and expertise, and sustains local farming and cuisine. The same process and benefits can apply to local crafts and products. For the business entrepreneur they will be decisions on the balance of mass tourism short-term economic incentives with sales of mass-produced, imported ‘tat’, and less lucrative but more sustainable quality local goods and services markets. The latter may have longer-term and market niche benefits too. There are also considerations of the interactions between local goods and services, and high quality imported goods. Low Sizergh Barn in Cumbria for example, offers both so that the imported goods from around the World complement the local produce to maintain a high quality experience.

**ADDED VALUE - A CRITICAL DIFFERENCE**

Local and regional distinction and character are now widely recognised in the ecology and the attractiveness of areas of British countryside. Similarly locally and regionally distinctive cultures, crafts, and cuisine are often related to landscapes and provide ‘added value’. They
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. ‘Short-termism’ may encourage mass tourism, souvenir shops and bars often replace local services to the detriment and displacement of local character and local services. Small towns such as Castleton in the Derbyshire Peak District become tourist show-cases without a genuine local culture. This is where the enlightened entrepreneur is so important and the wildlife- and nature-based tourist can make a difference.

**COMMUNITY ISSUES**

Local people and especially business entrepreneurs may be vital to success or failure of such enterprises. However, even the most carefully planned and executed project changes the host community, but often social and cultural changes are inevitable anyway. So even without tourism, change and rural decline may happen; communities and culture evolve; settlements wax and wane. But people struggle to accept the evolutionary not static nature of culture, expecting host communities, and destinations to remain the same despite wider changes. A reaction to globalisation is to visit perceived remote areas away from the tentacles of modern living, and before they change and decline with Disney and Mcdonalds doing their worst. Local entrepreneurs can drive positive change, taking responsibility and investing in sustainable rural futures.

**BUSINESS BAD, BUSINESS GOOD: RURAL LANDSCAPES FOR FOOD PRODUCTION**

During the second half of the twentieth century the production of food in Britain was responsible for huge environmental damage (*Nature conservation in Great Britain, 1984*; and *Biodiversity: the UK Action Plan, 1994*). Dictated largely by consumer demands and perceptions, subsidised economics, and political short-term necessity, the rural entrepreneurs of the time made a killing. However, this was not only in terms of the financial gain they accrued, but also that they in effect killed the goose that laid the golden egg. The intensive agro-industrial systems of the late 1900s were clearly not sustainable and eventually caused severe damage not only to the environmental resource, but to host communities too. Interestingly in the frequently heated debates of the 1980s and 1990s the entrepreneurs, food processors, presenters and consumers rarely expressed views on agriculture and the environment. It is also clear that many conservationists understand little about food production and processing, or of hospitality and catering, and retailing. Yet these are the issues that link food and its production to its roots within the environment, strongly influencing local countryside character and quality. For many environmentalists these interactions of land use and food production and presentation to the consumer, with the wildlife or heritage they wish to conserve have been little recognised. In the 1990s there were moves to make land use and other environmental functions more sustainable. These were driven by *Sustainable Development: the UK Strategy* (1994), and it is from this that progress began to be made during the late 1900s and early 2000s, but from a low-point of environmental quality and a high-point of rural incomes. The business landscape has metamorphosed and the situation is changing rapidly. Crises in the countryside and the rural economy followed from environmental disasters of habitat loss, species extinction, ground- and surface water pollution, and soil erosion. Recent problems hit farming and rural communities very hard; BSE, Foot-and-Mouth, and even transport costs and fuel shortages, have all taken their toll. Rural communities now look to improve quality of life through tourism as an economic driver (Jurowski and Brown, 2001). A critical part of the rural renaissance is a new breed of rural entrepreneur creating initiatives in hospitality and the marketing of locally distinctive foods. Food and drink tourism are moves in this direction. If embedded in environmentally sustainable development, these offer genuine opportunities for a new and alternative direction. Not only is this a major issue for nature conservation, but it is an emerging area for hospitality and tourism management too.

**NATURE-BASED LEISURE AND TOURISM**
A key factor driving these changes is a belated recognition that countryside leisure day-visits and tourism have huge economic impacts. Many depend on nature and landscape, a significant proportion related to nature reserves and other protected areas. Figures from recent years are informative. In 1998, 24% of leisure trips were to the countryside, hikers and ramblers making up 15% of tourists in England; countryside recreational walkers spending £6.12 billion on trips. This generated over £2 billion income, supporting 245,000 full-time jobs in England. Countryside day-visits in 1999 generated £9.2 billion expenditure and amounted to 77% of the countryside tourism total in England. By 2003-4 the total expenditure on leisure day-visits was £71.1 billion with countryside spend of £17 billion per year in England. Clearly the visitor profile and behaviour are important with overnight stops increasing local economic benefits (Rotherham et al., 2004a & b). Research for the National Trust found 40% of tourism-based employment in their target regions depended on high quality environments. In rural areas, dependency is 60% to 70% (The National Trust, 2001). For Wales, £6 billion GDP depends directly on the environment. In Cumbria, the Trust spent £3.5 million on staff costs, £33.4 million on goods and services, supporting 2,700-4,600 full time equivalent jobs (FTE’s) or 15% of the total jobs in Cumbria’s visitor economy. Rayment and Dickie (2001) reviewed UK case-studies on the economic benefits of nature conservation and tourism. They produced data for easily identifiable economic impacts of visitors to RSPB nature reserves:

- Bempton Cliffs RSPB Nature Reserve, East Yorkshire: 44,093 visitors; £407,000 p.a. to the local economy;
- Blacktoft Sands RSPB Nature Reserve, East Yorkshire: 23,706 visitors; £93,000 p.a. to the local economy;
- Leighton Moss Nature Reserve in North Lancashire: 22 staff; 100,000 visitors per year.
- Abernethy (Osprey Visitor Centre in Scotland): 11 staff; £1.7 million p.a. to the local economy supporting 69 jobs in the local economy.

However, the total economic values of these activities are under-estimated (Rotherham & Egan, 2005). Analysis ignores wider leisure and tourism, and the wider context of countryside recreation and sports; an increasingly sophisticated sector with diverse and significant impacts (Beard et al., 2000; Rotherham et al., 2000). Most conservation bodies are unaware of this, and the tourism industry overlooks them too. Activities involve specialist equipment, training, services, clothing, catering, guidebooks, magazines, and other media, with increasing economic and social impacts. Mintel (2004) for example estimated that UK expenditure on sports clothing including for outdoor activities had increased to £4,480 million in 2003, with £72 per capita. Furthermore, the Ramblers’ Association in 2004 found UK outdoor clothing and equipment sales rose from £25 million (1980) to over £1 billion (2000) (Ramblers’ Association, 2000).

GENERATING IMPACT THROUGH OPPORTUNITIES – THE NEW RURAL ENTREPRENEUR

In recent years tourism has been seen as a growth industry; a development tool to halt economic and social declines, through increased employment, income potential, and diversification (Saeter, 1998; Sharpley, 2000, 2002a & 2002b; Fleischer and Felsenstein, 2000). It is described as a development ‘growth pole’ and often accepted uncritically (Sharpley, 2000). However, as noted earlier it is not necessarily benign and negative impacts on communities and environments generated demands for ‘ecotourism’. So whilst tourism offers alternative income-streams, as a resource-dependant industry (McKercher, 1993) it makes demands and competes with established industries (Mazzanti, 2002). Tourism may displace established activities and affect employment and skills. Service-based export industries displace commodity-based exports (Fleischer and Felsenstien, 2000; Zhou et al., 1997) and mainstream tourism may involve inappropriate development, excessive visitor numbers, resource depletion, and environmental degradation. These impacts may engender negative images of a region and cause declines in both visitor numbers and quality. Then, if tourism has become central to a local economy a decline will have serious and rapid consequences.
Whilst ecotourism and related activities have sought to address some of these negative impacts to environment and local community, it is still regarded as marginal. However, it seems to us that wildlife- and nature-based leisure and tourism offer greater and more immediate economic and social benefits to the UK’s rural economy. Yet these are often overlooked by both academics and practitioners. Much of the literature relates to tourism and development, but terminology generates confusion. There are alternative and contradictory uses of tourist, visitor, wildlife tourism, nature-based tourism, and ecotourism, whilst academic literature has tourism-related terms with specific meanings and particular contexts. Practitioner literature mixes tourist and visitor and both clarity and differentiation are lost. However, whilst definitions may be seen as trivial and as diversions from the real interest they are central to data collection and interpretation. Through this they also influence policy and strategy. So for example many UK datasets are ‘day-visits’ and ‘visitors’ not ‘tourists’. Other statistics including regional Tourist Boards and Regional Development Agencies are for ‘tourists’ and specifically visitors from outside the administrative region. For small, rural economy this can be a serious impediment since information received may mask key trends. Spatial areas assigned to economic impacts or activities are also problematic with ‘local’ communities, ‘local’ economies, and ‘local’ impacts being implied but without definition. For the rural entrepreneur the visitor profile is important and affects total spending power and likelihood of repeat or return visits. However, the key to business viability is visitors and for them to spend money. Whether they are leisure-day visitors, tourists, or local people doesn’t really matter.

The new breed of rural entrepreneurs brings a range of novel and traditional approaches to the rural economy. It includes small businesses and individuals but alongside major organisations such as conservation NGOs. Furthermore, there are new synergies and partnerships emerging to grow and to development these business opportunities. It seems that the effects, benefits and opportunities are cumulative with the natural resource, local and regional distinctive cultures, and individual attractions being a new rural growth-pole for the economy.

**CONCLUSIONS: IMPACTS AND BENEFITS OF THE NEW RURAL ENTREPRENEURS**

As discussed many tourism providers fail to understand the wildlife resource of their industry and nature conservation bodies understand little of tourism or economics or of business management (Rotherham & Egan, 2005). With many tourism and leisure activities having no direct economic link to conservation land management they fail the most basic tests of sustainable development. It is therefore encouraging to witness the new rural entrepreneurs emerging across much of Britain. In the past the ties between tourism, local community, and land management have been weak with tourism reaping economic rewards that exclude local people and their environment. The case-studies support these arguments and demonstrate possible solutions. Given the vulnerable state of the rural economy in Britain, resolution of these issues is important if tourism is to evolve in a framework of sustainable development, and if the environmental sector is to become a serious player in the rural economy.

The changing rural economic landscape mirrors social and environmental changes in Britain’s countryside. With these changes awareness has grown of the significant economic potential of diversification and especially of leisure and tourism based around the rural resource. Examples can be seen of individual entrepreneurs and business partnerships established to exploit these opportunities, but themselves becoming a component of the rural tourism attraction. However, the other very exciting trend is the shift in financial focus of major conservation players not previously deliberately engaged in the rural economy. These include massive NGO organisations such as the RSPB, the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, and the National Trust, but also private utility businesses such as Severn Trent water plc. In some cases lead partners in collaborations are government agencies such as the Forestry Commission.

These developments begin to more fully engage such organisations with local people and local economies. They can bring significant direct employment to a small, rural economy, but
more importantly perhaps, can generate a flow of tourism and leisure visitors than enable small-scale business entrepreneurs to exploit opportunities. A key aspect of turning environmental projects into local economic benefits is the establishment of ‘opportunities to spend’. Without thee, the benefits simply do not flow. In the past many organisations, and often their members and certainly their staff found such an approach as at best beyond their interests or expertise, or at worst against their core principles. In today’s climate of economic-self-sufficiency and sustainability such views are out-dated and outmoded.

However, there continue to be some problematic issues at the core of this rural renaissance. These include the need for environmental conservation organisations (often charities) to retain awareness and focus on their core missions whilst embracing their new roles. This is not necessarily easy when staff and volunteers from an environmental background may lack key business and management skills. Business operators brought in may lack knowledge of or even sympathy towards the organisations aspirations and values. Experience suggests that this is generally not the case yet; but there are examples of environmental education trust visitor centres in effect ‘taken over’ by business entrepreneurs for corporate hospitality functions run close to the wire. If current trends continue then there will be much more need to provide adequate training in business management for conservation professionals, and conservation awareness training for rural business managers.

This work also highlights the need for excellent professionals in this field, if opportunities are to grow. It also emphasises the need for genuinely broad collaborations to develop sustainable land management linked to local distinctiveness of hospitality product. Food and cuisine linked to tourism experience and visitor attraction can help grow initiatives to promote sustainable rural tourism. They join landscape and community character to a distinctive visitor experience. Furthermore, through local food-supply and traditional cuisine, these projects relate wildlife tourism to land- and species-conservation, supporting farmers and extensive farming methods. Support for marketing of local crafts and local products produced sustainably implies traditional, sustainable, land use and all underpinned by local financial benefits. The latter means ‘opportunities to spend’ and the necessary infrastructure developments may then be controversial in a sensitive environmental setting. However, if the economic benefits are to flow, and from these we hope that the environmental benefits will be sustained. The pain if carefully managed should be justified by the long-term gain.

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