The tourism economic argument for wetlands: a case study approach

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Abstract

In debates about the future of the countryside and future landscapes, the coherent economic case is often lost or at best weak. This is surprising since numerous case studies highlight the potential and positive contributions of wetland sites to both rural and urban areas. This oversight sometimes compounded by ideas of economics poorly applied, leads to failure to maximise benefits. It often places wetland landscape projects outside the economic planning pale, as an issue of biodiversity benefit and perhaps ‘added value’ only.

This serious oversight can disadvantage attempts to restore wetlands, and undermines possible economic and social benefits of projects too. By selling ourselves short, we miss the political high ground of economic sustainable development with sound ecological underpinning. The environmental resource is seen as peripheral to issues of social benefits and economic growth. Hidden in sustainable development rhetoric and best value indicators, it is there nevertheless.

We demonstrate case studies showing how a more enlightened integrated approach can change this. Holistic consideration wider benefits and functions of wetlands justify their conservation, and with targeted investment provide tangible benefits that grow over time. It is not intended that economics displace ecology as a key discipline in wetland conservation, but ecologists must learn to value more effectively what we do, and do more effectively what we value.

Key Words: wetlands, rural tourism, leisure, economic impacts,

Introduction

Despite importance to conservation and sustainability, and significant impacts on local economies, the ‘Wildlife Leisure Industry’ (Rotherham et al., 2000) is often neglected. Evaluating trends is not easy, wildlife experiences, resources and services being interlaced with heritage, landscapes, archaeology, and outdoor activities. With land use and planning driven by economics they make token gestures to quality of life and biodiversity. Environmentalists have mostly failed to engage with economic planning processes, a major reason for failure of biodiversity targets. Direct and associated economic impacts of nature conservation are ignored and overlooked by planners, politicians, and by the environment movement. Yet available data are impressive, the Wildlife Trusts Partnership for example, (forty-seven Trusts in the UK), (without HQ contributions) has £125 million per year turnover (Rotherham and Egan, 2005), with public benefit and economic impacts. The UK National Committee of IUCN indicated economic value of wildlife or wild living resources use in the UK (assessing consumptive and non-consumptive purposes for leisure, construction, nutrition, and health) as a minimum of £4.8 billion, supporting over 35,000 jobs. Interestingly, countryside recreation and sports using wildlife were major components at £3 billion. Sports fisheries, inland and marine, both game and coarse, accounted for most of this figure. Wildlife watching by the RSPB’s one million members was responsible for £11.8 million to local economies near nature reserves. Yet most studies ignore wider impacts of wildlife and conservation related work, particularly the leisure activities of members, friends and families.
Nature-based leisure and tourism

Tourism in the English Countryside is worth £8 billion per year, with £350-450 million in England and Wales in 1991/1992 with around 53,500 jobs. [Six jobs for every one directly employed in conservation itself] attributable (directly and indirectly) to natural heritage and wildlife leisure. Countryside leisure day visits have huge economic impacts, many depending directly on nature and landscape, and many on nature reserves and protected areas. In 1998, 24% of leisure trips were to the countryside, walkers being 15% of all tourists in England. Countryside walkers in England spent £6.12 billion, generating £2 billion income, and 245,000 full-time jobs. In 1999, UK countryside day visitors spent £9.2 billion (77% of the countryside tourism), with 2003-4 total leisure day visits spend at £71.1 billion, a quarter (£17 billion per year) in countryside areas, especially wetlands.

Inland pleasure boating especially in the Norfolk Broads is well known as a mainstream tourism activity, and it brings people close to wetland nature. The Broads boat hire industry is worth £146m per year related hospitality worth £45m, with sixty-five operators offering boats for weekly hire. The trends are for short breaks, ‘empty nesters’, and special interest (heritage, wildlife, and other recreation) holidays. In the Cambridgeshire Fens, Wet Fens for the Future considered wetland management and utilisation, with establishment and management costs, likely income, and grant aid. The report gave information on direct impacts of leisure and tourism linked to wetlands, noting along with wildlife watching, potential interest in game shooting and field sports. Membership of affiliated clubs increased by 254 per cent between 1980 and 1990 and wildfowling remains popular. The report also assessed fishing, with 3.9m anglers in the UK and concluded that success relies on good marketing.

There are specific wetland wildlife studies with Rayment and Dickie (2001) reviewing case studies on economic benefits such as Blacktoft Sands RSPB Nature Reserve (East Yorkshire): 23,706 visitors and £93,000 to the local economy; Leighton Moss Nature Reserve (North Lancashire): 22 full-time / part-time staff, 100,000 annual visitors; Abernethy (Osprey Visitor Centre, Scotland): 11 people employed and £1.7 million annual visitor spend from the nature reserve, 69 full-time jobs. The RSPB (1999) brought together key information to promote nature conservation as significant for the economy, through direct employment in nature conservation; expenditure on nature conservation; conservation schemes; attraction of visitors and expenditure on local goods and services. These reports under-estimate total wildlife leisure economic effects. Wildlife activities are part of countryside recreation and sports, often involving specialist equipment, training, services, clothing, catering, guidebooks, magazines, and other media, with increasing economic impacts. Mintel (2004) estimated sports clothing spend increased to £4.48 billion in 2003, a per capita spend of £72. Walking makes money (2004) indicated outdoor clothing and equipment sales rose from £25 million (1980), to £1 billion (2000). Particular datasets can highlight a specific level of activity and an assumed impact. So the number of adult days leisure walking in the UK was 1,912 million (1994), 2,147 million (2002), increasing to 2,171 million (2004) (Leisure Forecasts 2000-2004). This says little about economic impacts but assumes they are considerable. Recreational visitors (tourists and day visitors) including visitors to country parks and nature reserves, impact on local / regional economies an important component of regional tourism.

Conservation projects impact on the local economy through both construction capital and subsequent revenues. With from 50,000 to 1,000,000 day visits per year, projects contribute anything from £0.5 million to £6 million per year to a local economy through visitor spend
and more through employment of site-based staff, supplies of goods and services, and through volunteer and educational activities.

Case study: RSPB Dearne Valley Nature Reserve (South Yorkshire) 1990s / 2000s:

- 150 people employed on the building project; 20-25 people working on site each day for a 25-week contract period; 13 FTE years associated with the building project; total economic impact of the project spend of £550,000 to be £600,000 -£750,000; 90% of the people employed were local (defined as within a 30 minutes drive); 75-80% of the materials were sourced locally.
- 13 full-time staff employed with 9 seasonal field teachers giving 16 FTE; 40 registered volunteer workers; 50-60 person days per month – approximately 400 volunteer hours for the retail section; Volunteer workforce days - once per month with 1-15 volunteers each time; induced jobs in the local economy likely to be 5-15 within 5 years; 30,000 visitors to a nature reserve will result in an estimated job creation of 8.6 FTE jobs at that visitor level; Visitor spend income at Year 5 = up to £630,000 plus up to £300,000 induced per annum. Supports around 2-5 extra jobs in the local economy; 5% of shop stock sourced locally; all fresh produce for catering is sourced locally - around 30% of the products sold.
- Leverage of 30% added value on the grant aid funding from HLF; using the methodologies of the ODPM this project will generate around £350 million value of ecological services.

Some contributions of water and wetlands to tourism and leisure economies:

- **The implications of the case studies:** Economic impacts from immediate and short-term (research, design, construction and establishment), to long-term leisure and tourism benefits; short-term economic inputs modest (£1,000-10,000) for site recovery / restoration scheme, to major (£100,000–1,000,000) for reclamation and creation projects.
- **Initial start up** (capital investment and grant aid draw down) of a facility such as a major nature reserve and visitor centre. Short-term employment for construction of a major new site = up to 85 or more jobs. The start-up benefits of projects such as visitor centres and nature reserves can be significant. Nature reserve projects can inject from £1,000 - £10,000 for site recovery / restoration schemes like YWT Woodhouse Washlands (South Yorkshire); to £100,000 – £3,000,000 for reclamation and creation projects like SWT Blackburn Meadows (Sheffield), RSPB Dearne Valley (Barnsley), or Rother Valley Country Park (South Yorkshire); running (revenue costs and generation, grant aid, commercial function and induced local impacts); 10-100 direct jobs and induced impacts.
- **Direct and induced impacts:** 100,000 to 600,000 annual day visits each per year for South Yorkshire’s wetland sites; plus site-based staff; major projects contribute from £0.5m to £6m per year to the local economy through visitor spend, and more with employment and service impacts.
- **A recent study by Sheffield Hallam University showed Carsington Water Reservoir (Derbyshire) impacts:** Nature conservation benefit of huge regional importance; provision of opportunity for close contact with nature; of viewing opportunities (bird watching hides etc.); good interpretation; excellent access for diversity of users; a major positive element of the site; local people feel social and economic impacts positive; increased trade and amenity value; thirty-one full-time and forty-two seasonal/part-time jobs created at the site; over one million annual visitors; 436 jobs in the local economy; visitor spend £14,125,000.

Leisure, Tourism and Wider Issues
Biodiversity conservation targets relate to environmental economic values very directly, but a big problem for rural tourism is that income often does not support land management on which it depends, or the ‘free’ provision of access, footpaths and facilities. Providers (local authorities, Wildlife Trusts, National Trust etc) bear land management and access costs, often free at the point of delivery. So the funds must come from elsewhere, often as public grants for public good. To persuade funders to pay more, then a more convincing case must be made, based on these impacts. It is mostly recognising and taking credit for that which we already do, but with more awareness and understanding. These derive directly from core delivery of wetlands sites and visitor facilities. Current research suggests that visitors to wetland sites are now growing tourism in areas formerly without. Furthermore, it appears that the tourism industry itself has been slow to realise this.

To fail with the argument is to remain marginal, forever fighting over scraps from development at any price, and grant aid after others take their share. It will also mean a continued fall in recruitment of key staff and ultimately of gifted and dedicated volunteers too.

References


