

Editorial

Rural Tourism — 10 Years On

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INTRODUCTION

The rural, a diminishing global resource, provides us with an increasingly important environment for tourism. On the supply side, its impacts, both positive and negative, are well documented, widely debated and the subjects of an increasing literature. Often overlooked, however, are the benefits to rural visitors, the welfare effects of improved mental and physical well-being that are the widely sought (if imagined) effects of assimilating the restorative and curative powers of nature. The convergence of supply and demand, the phenomenon loosely called 'rural tourism', takes differing forms, develops within a vast range of physical, social and political environments, and results in a wide diversity of outcomes. Rural tourism is a dynamic phenomenon, both creating and reflecting change within its reach.

Perhaps rather ambitiously, this special edition has a twofold purpose. First, the contributions reflect an international perspective that aims to identify common themes and also to highlight the multifaceted and interdisciplinary nature of 'rural tourism' across continents, and to illustrate its varying roles within wider development agendas. Second, a decade on, it offers something of a reflection on earlier perceptions of rural tourism as they were identified and defined in the 1994 special edition of the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* (JoST).

The special edition of JoST was not, of course, the first publication to address issues related to tourism in rural areas; indeed, the relationship between tourism or, more generally, recreation and leisure, and the countryside has long proved to be a fruitful area of research and, by the early 1990s, there existed a significant literature on the subject (see Lane, 1993). However, the 1994 special issue was notable for, arguably, being the first publication that attempted to identify and define rural tourism as a specific form of tourist activity as well as exploring in some depth the processes and challenges of integrating tourism into sustainable rural development. In other words, although a variety of specific issues, such as farm diversification (Frater, 1983), rural resource management (Pigram, 1983), the socio-cultural implications of rural tourism development (Bouquet and Winter, 1987; Perdue *et al.*, 1987) and the concept of 'rurality' (Hoggart, 1990), as well as international comparisons of rural tourism (Grolleau, 1987), had been addressed previously, this was the first attempt to construct a theoretical framework for the study of rural tourism development. In particular, Bernard Lane's (1994) paper 'What is rural tourism?' was ground-breaking in its attempt to define and clarify rural tourism.

During the decade since the publication of the special issue, increasing attention has been paid to rural tourism development within the tourism literature (see, e.g. Sharpley and

Sharpley, 1997; Butler *et al.*, 1998; Roberts and Hall, 2001a), and commensurate with the continuing decline in the contribution of agriculture to rural communities and economies, efforts to realise the potential contribution of tourism to rural development have been in ever greater evidence in many Western countries. The experience in Britain with respect to the 2001 outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD), however, would suggest that the significant economic contribution and the scope of tourism in rural areas remains largely unrecognised, manifest in the continuing bias within national rural policy towards the agricultural sector (Sharpley and Craven, 2001). Therefore, this special issue explores, through a comparison of rural tourism in a number of different countries, the extent to which the concepts, principles and themes highlighted 1994 still present us with issues 10 years on.

A number of common themes emerge from the papers in this collection that both reinforce and challenge earlier ideas. The purpose of this editorial is to identify what the editors see as the early core themes and to review the contemporary contributions in relation to them. Essentially, three overarching issues are identified relating to definition and conceptualisation, sustainability, and rural tourism as an agent of rural development.

RURALITY AND RURAL TOURISM — ISSUES OF DEFINITION AND CONCEPTUALISATION

Perhaps the most widely cited paper in the 1994 issue remains Lane's consideration entitled 'What is rural tourism?' Certainly, his analysis of the characteristics of rural areas and his 'typology' of rural tourisms are referred to in all subsequent key publications on the subject in the English language and more widely at an international level.

Lane suggests that 'rural tourism' exists as a concept, albeit a diverse one. The notion of a 'pure' rural tourism is introduced; tourism that is located in rural areas, is rural in scale, character and function, reflecting the differing and 'complex pattern of rural environment, economy, history and location' (Lane, 1994) — interestingly, this forms the basis for many of the principles of sustainable rural tourism

development. At the same time, and drawing on Patmore's (1983) earlier work, Lane suggests that, mirroring concepts of rurality, the nature of rural tourism can be represented by a continuum. Thus, countryside on the urban fringe enjoys a 'strong day-visitor trade'; conversely, peripheral regions may attract lower levels of visitation although they may offer opportunities for more traditional or 'pure' rural tourism activities.

Importantly, two interrelated subthemes are implicit here. Firstly, it is suggested that the demand for rural tourism is related directly to the particular characteristics of rural areas and, secondly, it is assumed that the principal motivation for visiting the countryside is to experience rurality. In other words, a causal relationship is seen to exist between the rural environment and tourism, justifying the definition of rural tourism as an identifiable type of tourism, and rural tourism is an end in itself — to experience the countryside.

From this contemporary snapshot of the state of (rural) play, it would appear that problems with definition and conceptualisation persist. Barke's paper clearly articulates how the lack of clarity with regard to definition has influenced data collection resulting in only partial information on rural tourism in Spain with regard to both scope and scale. Briedenhann and Wickens comment on the way in which concepts of 'rural tourism' have grown and Gartner suggests that this has happened alongside accelerated 'demand for touristic use of rural areas'. The notion of pure rural tourism as an end in itself is not a focus of any of these papers. Barke identifies the development of 'active' pursuits as one major change in countryside use in Spain. Indeed, rural tourism's wider conceptualisation suggests that it may be more commonly accepted as any form of tourism in a rural area, potentially extending Lane's continuum and placing a focus on activities that contrast with the 'pure' product and are a means to an end rather than ends in themselves. The rural may indeed have become another playground.

If, as is suggested by most of the contributors to this journal, rural tourism is largely a domestic phenomenon, the disparate nature of the industry and the multiple ways in which it is perceived across continents may be no more

than an academic debate. A tourism that is 'rural' in scale, for example, is a concept unlikely to be shared by North Americans and Europeans although there may be more understanding of it in South Africa or in Australia. It may appear, therefore, that useful definitions of rurality depend not upon particular combinations of functional elements such as population density or land use, for example (Lane, 1994), but rather are socio-cultural constructs that reflect people's learned perceptions of that which represents rurality and which are, therefore, culturally bound. Beeton's paper on rural image in the Australian film industry suggests that such socially constructed meanings are influenced (perhaps even created?) by popular media such as cinema. Thus, images of rural Australia as threatening and unforgiving; a place to be respected and even feared have resulted in a perception of Australians that reflects strength, defiance and pride in place. Beeton suggests that change in the tourist gaze, even within one country, is a dynamic process that is subject to an increasing range of social influences.

For Hall, imaging and, in particular, re-imaging, have an importance for countries that wish to recast images tarnished by conflict. Rural areas provide opportunities for the promotion of countries of central and southern eastern Europe to promote themselves as tourist destinations through portrayals of bucolic timelessness synonymous with sustainability.

RURAL TOURISM AS 'SUSTAINABLE' ACTIVITY

The influences of the Brundtland Commission and the Rio Summit are, of course, evident in the content of the JoST papers. As Bramwell (1994) observed in his introductory paper, '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'. The focus of any tourism development in rural areas, therefore, should be on sustainable development that protects or retains the intrinsic qualities of the countryside. Lane (1994) goes on to provide four further reasons for adopting sustainable development policies: (i)

the need to implement sustainable management systems to protect fragile areas; (ii) the need to mediate between the conflicting aims of conservation and development; (iii) the need to encourage balanced, broad-based but community focused economic growth; and (iv) the need to maintain the 'rurality' of rural areas. These principles are, of course, common throughout the sustainable tourism literature and a number of other papers in the 1994 issue suggest means of operationalising them.

Effectively, therefore, rural tourism is seen to be synonymous with sustainable tourism development, with all that is implied for the nature, scale, character and ownership of tourism development. However, the concept of sustainable tourism development as a universal blueprint for 'appropriate' tourism development remains contested both generally and within the rural tourism context (see Roberts and Hall, 2001a). Perhaps of more relevance to the present discussion, it is based upon three fundamental assumptions: firstly, that all tourists visit the countryside primarily to experience rurality; secondly, that sustainable tourism is the most effective (and universally appropriate and acceptable) means of achieving economic growth; and, thirdly, that the character and quality of rural areas should be protected or held stable while the world around them transforms or progresses. Certainly in the case of the British countryside, much planning and policy making appears guided by a 'countryside aesthetic' (Harrison, 1991) that seeks to maintain a nineteenth century Wordsworthian countryside in a twenty-first century world.

Hjalager's paper on the Randers Fjord area in Denmark, which analyses the concept of leisure life modes and their influence on rural tourism development, focuses on the importance of socio-cultural aspects of sustainability. The convergence of local and visitor lifestyles is proposed as an essential element of sustainable development, ensuring local participation and resulting in 'a change-resistant tourists-locals' alliance.

As pointed out by Hall, well-integrated, rural tourism can provide an important complement and counterbalance to coastal mass tourism that has characterised many countries with warm climates such as in south and

southeastern Europe. However, the fact that rural tourism was pioneered in northern Spain, where tourism activity was relatively low, before its importance was recognised in the south might suggest that it is seen as a development substitute rather than an alternative, demonstrating a lack of understanding of its potential.

Views of sustainability as the luxury of idealism remain, and these are, of course, to be found in countries grappling with political, economic and social crises. De Villiers, cited in Briedehhann, eloquently and simply puts the case: 'how can someone whose children are without food be expected to care about elephants?'

Issues of sustainability, therefore, although still prominent in the rural tourism literature, have expanded to incorporate a wider range of issues that appear to draw tourism into widening policy concerns, and the achievement of 'sustainable' rural tourism becomes ever more elusive.

RURAL TOURISM AS AN AGENT OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT

The third and, perhaps, central theme within the 1994 issue is that of the potential roles of tourism in rural development. Reflecting a broader recognition of the relationships between tourism and development, a number of papers addressed strategies for developing sustainable rural tourism, although those by Greffe (1994) and Gannon (1994) consider most explicitly tourism's role in economic and social development. According to Greffe (1994), there are five reasons why 'the authorities' should intervene in the development of rural tourism, these being the protection of potentially attractive areas, the modernisation of supply structures, marketing, training, and the widening of opportunities for participation in rural tourism. The latter appears to be a dominant and recurring theme in the contemporary papers.

Barke's study of Spain suggests that even where public sector capacity and experience exist, the outcomes of intervention, although positive in a number of ways, do not always benefit local people, and he cites networking as an inclusive practice that has the effect of

drawing more stakeholders into development processes.

Briedehhann and Wickens's paper is a study of rural tourism within a context of social, political and economic transition in South Africa, and suggests a development pattern not unlike that experienced in former CEE countries in the 1990s. The tourism industry has been seen as a central support for the Reconstruction and Development Programme, although, as the authors point out, its manifesto is not yet being implemented in any meaningful way at municipality level. The focus of this paper is rural tourism's potential as a development tool, and a number of constraints are identified that will be familiar to many involved in rural development. In citing Greffe (1994), amongst others, the authors point to the lack of experience and training amongst the industry's providers as one of a number of constraints to the achievement of development potential. As they point out, this is not unique to South Africa. Also more widely recognised is the existence of a 'dependency mindset' where rural (agricultural?) development funding traditionally has been forthcoming from the state. That funding sources reflect fundamental development rationales may not be well understood by potential providers — another issue familiar to rural developers in a number of countries. Despite such challenges, however, the rural tourism industry in South Africa is already recognised as an important factor in an attitudinal shift that recognises the validity of African history and culture and sees these as democratising features as rural tourism becomes more accessible to previously disenfranchised groups.

From a different perspective, the issue of state involvement is raised in Hjalager's account of development in Denmark. However, because the study area is one of low population (and tourism) density, public sector involvement distorts the economy so that business operators do not need to behave as profit maximisers, relying on the existence of public provision, subsidy and transfer payments.

As pointed out by Gartner, however, public and private sector activities in the rural spheres of many economies are inextricably linked because declining agricultural incomes

and the resulting diversification have created supply-led industries that, working within fundamentally restructuring world economies, require and achieve continued state and super-state support. Briedenhann and Wickens suggest that this is unsustainable in the South African context, leading to a high level of business failure. Early experiences in the European LEADER programme showed this to be the case.

It has long been recognised that, although an intrinsic feature of sustainable rural tourism is small-scale business, the fragmented nature of diversifying businesses reveals a number of weaknesses. Hall cites these as limited market knowledge, low quality products/services, lack of finance, low levels of knowledge of tourism and tourists, and inadequate supporting infrastructures. His list, although applied to the southeast European context, is a familiar one and a recurring theme in contemporary rural tourism literature. As suggested by Barke, an essential ingredient for the successful development of rural tourism is the establishment of networks — amongst both similar suppliers (e.g. accommodation providers) and other businesses that may combine to provide the total rural tourism experience (Embacher, 1994). Equally, to encourage sustainable development, networks or backward linkages should be established to ensure local supplies of goods and services that support the rural tourism sector.

CONCLUSIONS

The papers in JoST's seminal edition identified a great deal of potential for rural tourism as a phenomenon and as an integral part of rural restructuring, and it is fair to say that expectations of its potential achievements were, therefore, high. As far as any small and selective sample of papers is able to do, this collection shows that the issues raised in 1994 remain valid in 2004 despite theoretical development and the well-documented empirical accounts of development that now populate the world's library shelves. Common themes are evident: the role(s) of state, regional and local government; capacity — particularly social and human — and its inculcation and transfer; stakeholder involvement; knowledge and

expertise — understanding of the roles that can be played by an integrated rural tourism sector; and a lack of business and marketing skills. Most of the recurring themes pose questions that remain unanswered. Why, even within the European Union (EU), where integrated rural development is well understood and policy emerging, has rural tourism no overt role (Roberts and Hall, 2001b)? Why is it so difficult to translate the worthy rhetoric of policy and strategy into action at the local level when benefits of doing so are well documented and understood in principle?

As a collection, the papers reflect a diversity that is not explained by their geography alone. Political heritage dominates development in South Africa and in southeastern Europe. Economics, both national and European, influence the Randers case, and in Spain, new forms of 'active' rural pursuits are reflective of broader social and economic changes in the country. Perhaps what distinguishes European perspectives from those of Australia or the USA is the sense of interdependence that arises from being part of a larger whole. Changes in borders or in the status of neighbouring countries or in regional alliances have the potential to impact on the periphery as well as the core. Hall's paper, for example, explores the changing status of southeastern Europe as the countries of central Europe accede to the EU. Outwith its protection, the southeast of Europe may become what Hall labels a non-EU 'other' with implications for development. Indeed, from a European perspective, the forthcoming expansion of the Union has considerable ramifications for tourism in general, an issue explored in a forthcoming special edition of this journal.

Because this editorial has approached the contributions from a comparative perspective, it has fragmented their content and presented selected abstracts of their accounts. Severally, however, each provides an interesting and comprehensive view of 'rural tourism' 10 years on, and the editors are grateful to all authors for their contributions. Thanks must also go to the oft-unsung heroes of the reviewing process — Sean Gammon, Adele Ladkin, Bernard Lane, Peter Mason, Rory McLellan, Chris Ryan, Dallen Timothy, Fiona Williams and Roz Wornell.

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