

Sustainable Rural Tourism Strategies: A Tool for Development and Conservation

Bernard Lane¹

ABSTRACT. This paper reviews how the principles of sustainable tourism have special relevance to the development of rural tourism, and examines how those principles can be translated into practice by the writing and implementing of regional sustainable tourism strategies. It considers the advantages of this approach, and offers guide-lines for future practitioners. A case study is given of the development of a strategy for an area in northern England, Berwick-upon-Tweed.

RESUMEN: Este trabajo revisa como los principios de sustentabilidad del turismo tienen especial relevancia para el desarrollo del turismo rural, y examina como aquellos principios pueden ser trasladados a la práctica por medio de escribir e implementar estrategias regionales de turismo sustentable. El artículo considera las ventajas de éste método, y ofrece guías para futuros implementadores de estrategias en el sector turístico. Un caso de estudio se presenta para el desarrollo de una estrategia para un área en el norte de Inglaterra, Berwick-upon-Tweed.

(This article is a reprint from the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, Vol 2, Nos. 1 & 2, 1994)

Travel and Tourism is the world's largest industry and the major contributor to global economic development. One in 15 employees — 112 million world wide — is involved in this sector. The World Travel and Tourism Council, 1991.

If we continue to treat nature as we have so far, we will undermine the foundations of our own life.., we live in a postsocialist, and, I believe, a postcapitalist age. A social and ecological market economy is something quite different. Professor Hans Kueng, Catholic Theologian, University of Tuebingen, 1991.

¹Rural Tourism Unit, Department for Continuing Education, University of Bristol, Bristol BS8 1HH, UK.
Co-Editor: Journal of Sustainable Tourism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last 20 years the concept of sustainable tourism has been developed to counter the threats which unmanaged tourism can bring. Sustainable tourism sees tourism within destination areas as a triangular relationship between host areas and their habitats and peoples, holidaymakers, and the tourism industry. In the past, the tourism industry dominated the triangle. Sustainable tourism aims to reconcile the tensions between the three partners in the triangle, and keep the equilibrium in the long term. Sustainable tourism aims to minimise environmental and cultural damage, optimise visitor satisfaction, and maximise long-term economic growth for the region. It is way of obtaining a balance between the growth potential of tourism and the conservation needs of the environment (see Krippendorf *et al.*, 1988; English Tourist Board, 1991; Hawkes & Williams, 1993; Bramwell & Lane, 1993).

Over a similar time-span, tourism in rural areas has grown, partly because of market forces, seeking different kinds of holiday, and partly as a result of government initiatives (Lane, 1991a; Weiler & Hall, 1992). This growth has been most noticeable in the countries of the developed world, where sophisticated economic diversification agencies have been hard at work promoting new uses for the countryside, influencing both potential providers of tourism facilities, and the markets for rural tourism through press and media contacts. Tourism is seen as an agent for rural economic re-generation and as a way of valorising conservation (Bramwell, 1990; Jamieson, 1990; Brown & Leblanc, 1992). The rural environment is, however, a very fragile one. It is easily either changed or damaged (or both) by rapid changes of any sort: tourism is a powerful agent for change. This is an important issue because of the role rural areas play in many nations as repositories of both natural and historical heritage. It is also important commercially. Surveys show that 'rurality' is a unique selling point for holidays in the countryside. Customers look for high quality and 'unspoiled' scenery, for peace, quiet, and, to some extent, solitude, and for the personal attention which small-scale tourism enterprises can offer to their guests (Krippendorf, 1987; P.A. Cambridge Economic Consultants, 1987). Tourism growth can be an urbanising influence, which by destroying rurality (or the illusion of rurality), can induce the onset of the destructive Resort Cycle much discussed in tourism circles (Butler, 1980).

The case for sustainable tourism in rural areas is,

therefore, a very strong one. The concept of sustainability in rural tourism must be a multi-purpose one if it is to succeed. It cannot be successfully based on a narrow pro-nature conservation ethic. It should aim to:

- Sustain the culture and character of host communities.
- Sustain landscape and habitats.
- Sustain the rural economy.
- Sustain a tourism industry which will be viable in the long term — and this in turn means the promotion of successful and satisfying holiday experiences.
- Develop sufficient understanding, leadership and vision amongst the decision-makers in an area that they realise the dangers of too much reliance on tourism, and continue to work towards a balanced and diversified rural economy.

There are, however, many difficulties in implementing the principles of sustainability discussed above in a free market economy. The very concept of sustainability is fraught with ambiguity. Implementation is equally problematic: it involves numerous interested parties, with diverse aims and beliefs. One practical way forward lies in the creation of Sustainable Management and Development Strategies. This paper discusses the reasons for writing these strategies, their main features, and how they can best be produced. It draws on the work of the Rural Tourism Unit in the University of Bristol, over the years 1987—1993. Over that period the Unit has worked with and has examined rural tourism initiatives throughout Europe and North America, and in Australia. It has assisted the development of a number of rural tourism strategies, in Britain and in Canada. Specific reference will be made in this paper to the Sustainable Tourism Strategy drawn up for the large rural district of Berwick-upon-Tweed, situated on the Anglo-Scottish border, with a population of 28,000 people spread over 1500 sq. kms.

2. WHY PRODUCE SUSTAINABLE TOURISM STRATEGIES?

Almost all successful businesses, and many successful regions, develop according to carefully worked out business plans and strategies. The plans seek to reconcile competing demands, to avoid wasteful investments and duplication of effort, and to research and seek out niche markets where special success can be achieved. Sustainable Tourism

Strategies should have all these attributes, but in addition, ten special features should be noted.

- The development of the strategy should be used to encourage an ongoing dialogue between government, tourism businesses, communities and other interests about the future of an area and tourism's role in that future.
- The strategy can be used to guide and encourage infrastructural investment in transport, public services, marketing, information and interpretation.
- Tourism businesses should gain in security and can invest for the long term because they can develop in a more stable environment.
- Nature Conservation, the Arts and Cultural Activities can be drawn into the strategy-making process. They will gain in stature from being recognised and valorised by being part of that process. The process should see conservation as a positive rather than a negative viewpoint. The human and political energies behind the Arts and Nature lobbies should be used to guide tourism, not simply to protect their position against tourism of any kind.
- The strategy can protect the special scenic, historic and cultural heritage of an area, thus preserving tourism's future seed corn. It should help to establish the financial and political interdependence between conservation and tourism.
- The strategy-making process can encourage new entrants into tourism. These can include farm diversification schemes, craft workshops, cycle hire, speciality food production, re-organised public transport marketed to visitors, new restaurants, etc. Often these can help retain, diversify or even increase employment opportunities. Notably, many new tourism enterprises are led by women: female activity rates have traditionally been low in rural areas (see Bouquet & Winter, 1987).
- Strategy-making can be used as a vehicle for new ideas and for the beginning of an ongoing educational process bringing new skills, and new flexibility into the business and political life of a region.
- Public dialogue and discussion can allow time for a consideration of the costs and benefits of alternative types of tourism, and alternative types of investments.

- Most rural tourism businesses are small and are unable to afford effective marketing or training. The strategy-making process can be used to encourage future co-operation in marketing and training between businesses and between communities, and to seek niche markets for an area where it can have an advantage over competing areas.
- The production of a well researched and carefully written plan, backed by the whole community, can be used as an effective lever to obtain public sector funding to begin the process of both development and the reconciliation of tourism and environmental issues through good management. The existence of a public sector investment programme should in turn encourage private sector investment.

3. BUT WHAT IS A SUSTAINABLE TOURISM STRATEGY? HOW DOES A SUSTAINABLE STRATEGY DIFFER FROM A CONVENTIONAL TOURISM PLAN?

Most conventional tourism plans are dominated by the growth requirements of the tourism industry. They are either marketing plans or capital investment plans. They are usually designed to increase traffic, visitor numbers, turnover, and job creation. The plans seek to exploit national and community resources and sweep away constraints. Other types of plan are often written purely in land use and physical planning terms; they may have little regard for community, culture or enterprise.

Sustainable tourism plans are based on a wider, more holistic, regional analysis. They follow the concepts first enunciated by Krippendorf, Jungk and others in the 1980s, and which since then have been refined and tested in practice in many places (see Krippendorf, 1988). Their hallmarks are:

- An analysis of an area's social, economic, ecological and cultural needs.
- An analysis of an area's tourism assets and the constraints on future tourism development.
- A discussion of how best tourism could be used as a tool for social, economic, ecological and cultural regeneration.
- A strong measure of local participation in both the plan-making process and in any ongoing decision-making.

- A careful consideration of the visitor carrying capacities, and the type and scale of developments suitable for each part of the region. This may include decisions to allocate some areas for intensive use, to make some areas less accessible on conservation grounds and to set overall limits to growth. Fragile ecosystems should receive special attention; this could mean that mechanised facilities, such as ski-lifts, are excluded from key zones.
- A market survey to establish opportunities and a marketing strategy. This strategy should both explain and use the Sustainable Tourism Strategy as part of its campaign.
- A training and career enhancement programme for both businesses and employees. Part of this programme should aim to encourage new local businesses in the tourism sector; without this special encouragement and help, there will be a danger that entrepreneurs from outside the area will dominate the tourism industry before local people can adapt to the new opportunities which are available.
- A quality assurance programme designed to develop visitor knowledge of the area, increase insight and satisfaction, improve customer care and help ensure repeat visits.
- The setting up of local groups to monitor, advise, and assist future management.
- Stress on the need to support farming (because farmers are the guardians of the rural landscape), and on the need to encourage discussion on ways to broaden the regional economy to avoid total reliance on the visitor industry.
- Strategies should be long term in their approach (five to ten years appears to be appropriate), but, to be effective, must list priorities and suggest an annualised work programme for at least three years. There must be quantifiable targets, an evaluation process and regular up-dating of objectives.

4. HOW CAN SUSTAINABLE TOURISM STRATEGIES BE PRODUCED?

There are four keys to success. Firstly, it is important that the person or team formulating the strategy is skilled not only in tourism development but also in economic, ecological and social analysis. While local knowledge is useful, impartiality is much more vital if trust is to be maintained amongst the many parties

taking part in the strategy-making process.

Secondly, wide consultations amongst all interest groups are essential. These consultations will include trade and business, transport, farmers, administrators, and the custodians of the natural and historic assets of the area.

Thirdly — glasnost — openness, has a very special role to play. Tourism relies more than any other industry on local goodwill — the ability to make holiday-makers feel welcome. The local population must be happy with their visitors, and secure in the knowledge that the visitor influx will not overwhelm their lives, increase their housing costs, and impose new and unwelcome value systems on them. Openness can be achieved by public discussions, by careful use of the press, radio and television, and by the development of a two-way dialogue with the community.

Fourthly, the strategy-making process should not be a once-only affair. It has to be an evolving long-term enterprise, able to cope with change, and able to admit to its own mistakes and shortcomings. It is the beginning of a partnership between business, government and cultural and conservation interests.

It can be claimed that these keys to success are counsels of perfection. Certainly, it is probably impossible to be totally impartial, or that openness can ever be complete. But these are the ideals for which the strategy maker should strive, and ideals which should be encouraged.

5. THE BERWICK SUSTAINABLE TOURISM STRATEGY: A CASE STUDY

Many areas in many parts of the world have experimented with the writing and implementation of tourism strategy plans which are both environmentally and community friendly. Although the origins of sustainable tourism as a concept seem to lie in Alpine Europe in the 1970s, ideas of alternative forms of tourism in a rural milieu were tried over much of the developed world throughout the 1980s. Canada was especially active, with extensive programmes of community driven rural tourism programmes in the western parts of the country (see Murphy, 1985; Alberta Tourism, 1988, 1991; Saskatchewan Tourism, 1988). The United States of America was also involved in rural tourism development, often using University or Agricultural Extension classes as a catalyst (see Blank, 1989; Sem, 1989). Keane & Quinn's 'Rural

Development and Rural Tourism' (1990) provides a detailed review of Irish developments, as well as an overview of work in continental Europe. A full bibliography of rural tourism in the developed world has been prepared for the OECD (Lane, 1993).

The case study given here typifies and exemplifies many of the ideas and problems in the development of rural tourism strategies commonly found within the developed world. The Berwick district is one of the largest and most sparsely populated administrative areas of England. Over 500 kms north of London, it contains the mountain landscape of the Cheviot range, the rolling Kyloe Hills, the wide valley of the River Tweed, and 50 kms of sandy coast line. There is an interesting historic heritage, an important element of which reflects medieval conflicts between England and Scotland. The economy is dominated by farming and rural services. Between 1851 and 1981, Berwick's rural area lost 53% of its population; over the same period, the total population of England and Wales rose by 188%. Job opportunities in the area remain poor, and out-migration continues. As a result, the percentage of people of pensionable age, 23%, is above the national average of 17%; some parishes have over 35% of their populations over 65 years old.

Tourism has been slow to develop, except to a limited extent along the coastline. The local council has now appointed a Tourism Officer and begun to market the area. In 1989 the University of Bristol was asked to advise the council about setting up a heritage centre in its second largest town, Wooler. After discussions, it was agreed that this idea would be best considered by developing a Sustainable Tourism Strategy for the whole Berwick Borough Council area.

The work began in early 1990, and was completed in July 1991. A series of desk studies assessed the economic, social and ecological issues in the area in some depth. This was followed by a visual inspection of the entire region, and discussions with all interested parties — over 50 in all. In May and June, 1990, a series of public meetings was held in each of the nine main communities. They were widely advertised, and timed to secure maximum attendance. The meetings were open — but carefully structured to:

- Explain the strategy-making process.
- Ask participants how they saw the future of their communities: they were asked to discuss both the best and worse scenarios they could envisage in ten years time.
- Ask the participants how they viewed the possibility of tourism development.

- Outline to the communities the different types of rural tourism development which were possible in their communities.

These meetings were often long, sometimes noisy, but always useful. They were open but carefully structured to help communities begin to consider in detail where their futures lay. They were the beginning of a dialogue. They were also the beginning of a learning curve for many of the participants — about tourism, and about decision-making in general. Crucially, they revealed which communities had the human energy and drive to cope with change and with visitor management. Each meeting was reported at length in the press and on local radio.

A draft plan was produced for comment over the winter of 1990/91, and a further series of structured public meetings were held in the main communities in Spring 1991. Again there was press, radio and television coverage. Amendments and improvements were then made to the strategy which was approved by the Berwick Borough Council in September 1991 (for the full strategy document, see Lane, 1991b).

What did the strategy say?

In summary, it recommended that:

- The area had neither the resources, nor the wish, to be developed as a mass tourism area: it should therefore capitalise on this situation and develop small-scale markets seeking heritage and closeness to nature.
- Conservation and tourism management should be the first priority, followed by job retention and creation and the encouragement of business, especially locally based businesses.
- One area, Glendale, should be zoned for relatively intensive development. It was ecologically strong, and its service centre, Wooler, the second largest in the area, needed economic support if it was to retain a full range of shopping and other facilities.
- The Cheviot mountain wilderness should be a zone where access was made more difficult because of its fragile ecosystems. Alternative walking routes should be developed along the edge of the area to satisfy visitor demand while safeguarding the central dome of the Cheviot. An attractive interpretation centre in Wooler would explain this policy and help redistribute visitors to Glendale, the Tweed Valley and the Kyloe Hifis. Measures should,

- however, be taken to assist hill sheep farms to undertake limited and care-fully controlled diversification into tourism; without this help there is a danger that the Cheviots will be sold for forestry purposes. This would change its character completely, to the detriment of existing ecosystems, and to the marketing image of the whole region.
- The Tweed Valley should see bicycle tourism and river walks developed for a family market and for older people. These activities should be focused on the viflage of Norham, in order to support its shopping and other services. Special provision should be made here for the better use of public transport; the use of cars should be discouraged on some roads.
 - The Kyloe Hills should be developed for walking and farm tourism, because they are ecologically strong, and their sheep/beef cattle farming communities need economic support and diversification. The hills need a comprehensive footpath and parking policy, and a marketing initiative.
 - The coastal area should be a zone of restraint on new development. But efforts should be made to build a series of small landscaped car parks to encourage birdwatching and short circular walks. Measures should also be developed to guide visitors towards the small fishing harbour at Seahouses. The fishing industry is suffering economic decline in most parts of Britain. Seahouses should, therefore, be the subject of a co-ordinated regeneration plan to improve its housing stock, its amenities, and its economic base. An improved contribution from the tourism sector will help, but other initiatives are also needed.
 - Local development groups should be formed to ensure grassroots involvement. The first of these could be in the small towns of Belford and Wooler, and in the village of Norham.
 - A comprehensive footpath, signpost, information and interpretation policy should be implemented, designed to help visitors get to know the area, understand its wildlife and its historical heritage, stay longer and spend more money.
 - A new more closely focused marketing plan should replace the current broad approach. Marketing would be targeted towards special interest groups and specific geographical areas.
 - A series of training and education courses should be offered to encourage new entrants

- to tourism and to help existing businesses. A major investment in infrastructure and staff should be made in order to fund both development and management. The investment should be phased over an initial three years, followed by a seven-year follow-up programme. Part of the investment should be made in an ongoing process of strategy monitoring and evaluation, adapting the strategy to changing conditions.

Funding totalling £450,000 over the first three years was sought by Berwick Borough Council on behalf of the communities and businesses of the area during the latter part of 1991 and early 1992. A joint public sector/private sector partnership was sought: the public sector was to contribute the majority of the funding in the early stages of infrastructure development, until there was sufficient progress for private sector funding to be brought into play.

Funding negotiations proved to be slow-moving. It was necessary to assemble a partnership of public sector bodies: this process was difficult because of the differing aims and requirements of the bodies involved. The private sector was unhappy about investment plans at the onset of the major recession which overtook Britain in this period. Berwick Borough Council is one of the smallest English local authorities in terms of population size and, therefore, has limited staff resources. It found the negotiations extremely demanding in terms of special skills and staff time; problems were exacerbated when the Chief Executive, who had been leading the funding bid, left to take up a more senior post elsewhere. It took until April 1994 for the major funding breakthrough to take place, and the resources then secured were less than originally requested. The lesson to be learnt from this is that strategy funding can be a task as difficult and time consuming as the writing and implementation of the strategy itself.

6. CONCLUSION

The processes outlined in this paper are long and complex. They require detailed and painstaking work. The ideas behind Sustainable Tourism Strategies are frequently denigrated by people in a hurry. They are sometimes attacked by developers seeking rapid, short-term returns on their investments. Other regions may follow conventional short-term plans, and gain more jobs and more visitors and more investment. But pause. If the people of an area love their landscape, their way of life, their language, their dialect, their cuisine and their heritage — they will

pause. They will reflect that the creation of the great palimpsest that is the countryside has taken many years of human effort. They will remember the toil of those first settlers who cleared the woodlands, those who built farms, villages, roadways, labouring to add churches, schools and gardens, founding families and traditions. What are perhaps 18 months of thought and discussion, followed by probably 10 years of carefully managed change, in that long history? Organic change, reconciling tensions between conflicting motives, needs time. Managed change need not be obtrusive: strategy makers would do well to remember the words of Sir Joshua Reynolds, the first President of the Royal Academy, 'Art is to conceal art' (Reynolds, 1797). Perhaps that could be a watchword for practitioners of sustainable tourism generally, unless they work in the marketing department.

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Dirección Postal: ProDUS, Escuela de Ingeniería Civil,
Ciudad Universitaria Rodrigo Facio, Apartado Postal
2060, San Pedro, Costa Rica.

Teléfono: (506) 283-49 27 / 283-48 15

Correo electrónico: mituramb@cariari.ucr.ac.cr ,
mituramb@produs.ucr.ac.cr

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