



Lessons for integrating tourism into sustainable rural development

Rural areas are changing, with tourism playing an ever greater part in a multifunctional countryside. A recent study has looked at the role that sustainable rural tourism can play in rural development in Europe and some of the challenges to be overcome if a truly integrated approach to rural development is to be realised.

Tourism can bring many benefits, including greater employment, increased social, economic and cultural prosperity and enhanced environmental conservation. However, increasing levels of tourism in rural areas can potentially harm the same environment which attracts tourists in the first place and conflicts can arise, especially between those primarily concerned with the environment and those focused on economic development. For tourism to truly contribute to sustainable rural development, its economic benefits must be used to protect the environment, social equity and cultural preservation and awareness of the area.

The current approach to rural development found in many parts of the world, including Europe, is to promote integration of different rural dimensions, including food production, maintaining rural landscapes, protecting biodiversity, providing employment and economic development, in a sustainable manner. Local partnerships are encouraged to implement locally developed policies. This study identified four major challenges that need to be addressed to allow rural tourism to contribute to the success of sustainable rural development.

- 1) National legislation should be in place to support sustainable rural diversification initiatives, such as the development of leisure and cultural activities, before such plans are promoted.
- 2) Local action groups and partnerships should have real power, including financial control. These groups should not merely legitimise central government decisions.
- 3) Different stakeholders typically have their own preferences for rural development, which they are keen to promote over the interests of other stakeholders, potentially creating conflict. An adaptive management approach can help different groups collaborate early on in decision making processes and development plans. An adaptive approach recognises different stakeholders' requirements, is flexible, learns from past problems and allows various policy options to be prioritised.
- 4) Recent initiatives to expand tourism in rural areas have focused on economic rather than the potential environmental impacts. New ways must be found to consider all challenges facing rural communities in a holistic manner.

As yet, in Europe, there are few national frameworks that have been developed to support rural tourism policies. However, such policies are able to provide strategic direction, especially in instances where conflicts are likely to occur. An essential part of this framework is for government to move away from the central control of rural development programmes and to allow sustainable rural tourism to become a genuinely integral part of local development.

The study analysed a UK case study to illustrate the challenges of integrating tourism into sustainable rural development plans - the proposed Mourne National Park in Northern Ireland. The legislation needed to establish a national park in the Mourne area was not in place to support the consultative process; the power of Local Action Groups to create local governance was questionable as they did not have sufficient financial authority; there were misunderstandings about the remit of a working party to consult with interested stakeholders about whether the area should become a National Park; and the good idea of sustainable tourism in the Mourne national park is challenged by contradictions between the different interest groups in the area.

Source: McAreavey, R. and McDonagh, J. (2011) Sustainable Rural Tourism: Lessons for Rural Development. *Sociologia Ruralis*. 51:175-194.

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