



Rural tourism in Wales: a model programme

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Abstract

The recently developed "Landsker Borderlands" rural tourism programme in the southwestern peninsula of Wales combines historical, cultural and recreational attractions. This comprehensive project of the South Pembrokeshire Partnership for Action with Rural Communities (SPARC) is one component of a broader initiative to improve the economic and social life of the local people and to enhance the environment. Following a description of both the process involved in developing the programme and the tourist product itself, significant features of SPARC's approach that are crucial to long-term success and sustainability are identified. These include encouraging maximum community involvement at all stages of development; the use of expert "partners" to provide needed technical and financial resources to rural communities; complementary strategies addressing tourism, agriculture and the environment; and a clear strategic planning and implementation framework. These elements of a successful project could be adapted and applied in a variety of locations.

Résumé

Le programme de tourisme rural « Landsker Borderlands » mis sur pied récemment dans le sud-ouest du Pays de Galles, en Grande Bretagne, combine des attractions à caractère historique, culturel et récréatif. Ce projet de la South Pembrokeshire Partnership for Action with Rural Communities (SPARC) fait partie d'une initiative plus large pour l'amélioration de la vie économique et sociale des habitants de la région et la protection de l'environnement. L'article décrit la mise sur pied du programme, le produit lui-même et les critères retenus par la SPARC pour assurer le succès du programme à long terme, notamment la participation de la communauté à toutes les étapes du développement du programme, le recours à des partenaires spécialisés pour fournir les ressources techniques et financières que n'ont pas les communautés rurales, les stratégies dans les domaines du tourisme, de l'agriculture et de l'environnement, et enfin le cadre de planification et de mise en oeuvre du programme. Ces éléments pourraient être adaptés et appliqués dans d'autres régions.

Resumen

El reciente programa rural de turismo "Landsker Borderlands" en la península suroeste de Gales en Gran Bretaña, tiene una mezcla histórica, cultural y recreativa. Este proyecto global con la South Pembrokeshire Partnership for Action with Rural Communities (SPARC) es uno de los componentes con mayor iniciativa para mejorar la vida social y económica de la gente local y para la protección ambiental. Siguiendo la descripción de ambos procesos involucrados en el desarrollo del programa, y del producto mismo, los criterios retenidos por la SPARC son cruciales para asegurar el éxito del programa a largo plazo. Esto incluye fomentar al máximo el involucramiento de la comunidad en todas las etapas de su desarrollo; recurrir a socios expertos para suministrar recursos técnicos y financieros a las comunidades rurales; complementar estrategias en el medio del turismo, la agricultura y el ambiente; y por último, una clara estrategia de planificación y una estructura de implementación. Estos elementos podrían adaptarse y aplicarse en diversos lugares.

Introduction

The challenge of securing the economic benefits of tourism development while ensuring the protection of the environment and local culture is one that confronts governments, NGOs and citizens throughout the world. Long an issue for cosmopolitan capitals and popular tourist destinations, it has become a concern for small, relatively obscure communities as well. Many small towns and villages where agricultural incomes have been declining for decades, with concomitant decreases in employment opportunities, population and services, look to rural tourism as a means of economic revitalization. Governments of both "developed" and "developing" nations often include a form of rural tourism in their national tourism plans, seeing it as a means of alleviating stagnant or deteriorating economic conditions. At the same time, there appears to be a growing market for rural tourism, with an increased number of independent travellers seeking an "individual" experience in the "unspoiled" countryside. Yet the challenge remains: to develop a rural tourism programme that will attract visitors, and enhance the economic welfare of the host community, while promoting environmental protection and respecting the local heritage and culture.

Rural tourism programmes are most successful at achieving economic, environmental,

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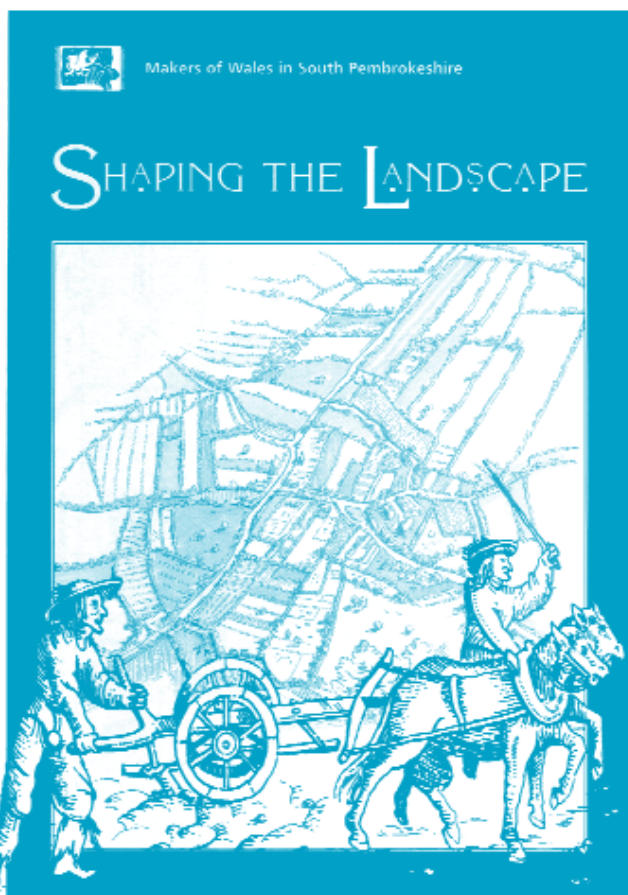


and cultural benefits when they are sensitively tailored to meet the needs of the affected community. Programmes have been developed in Tuscany as part of Italy's "Agri-turismo" project, by France's Association of Tourism in Rural Spaces, by Austria's Association for Regional Self-Reliant Development, in Ballyhoura and Fermanagh, Ireland, and in Fiji, Senegal, and Tyrrell County, North Carolina, in the United States. Financial and technical assistance for localities ranging from the Akamas Peninsula of Cyprus to Mongolia has been provided by such institutions as the World Bank, the European Union, and the World Tourism Organization.

With the enormous cultural and environmental diversity represented in rural tourism today, a programme that is appropriate to one community may well be unsuitable to another. Nonetheless, by analysing a successful case of rural tourism development, it may be possible to identify strategies and processes that could be effective if adapted to the specific needs of other communities. Of the many existing programmes, one particularly impressive effort that merits scrutiny is the "Landsker Borderlands" project of the South Pembrokeshire Partnership for Action with Rural Communities, Ltd. ("SPARC"), an NGO located in Southwestern Wales in the United Kingdom.

The SPARC rural tourism programme

South Pembrokeshire is located in the southwestern peninsula of Wales. It is a rural area comprising roughly 40 villages and towns and 400 sq km of land. The landscape is varied, including coastal and estuarine areas that are part of the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park and rolling countryside and river valleys leading to the foothills of the Preseli Hills to the north. The "Landsker", a historic frontier line of castles and strongholds dating to the 11th century Norman invasion, divides the area into two culturally distinct parts: to the north the Welsh culture and language predominate, while the area to the south has been anglicized. The surrounding countryside, whose villages and towns are interconnected by footpaths, bridle ways and narrow lanes, is picturesquely called the "Landsker Borderlands".



In 1992, SPARC received European Union LEADER I funding to extend a pilot project of its predecessor organization throughout the disadvantaged rural communities of South Pembrokeshire. Its goal was to develop an integrated programme to improve the economic and social life of the local people and enhance the environment. The SPARC effort is not focused solely on tourism, but also includes interrelated environmental and agricultural strategies not directly addressed in this article. All three strategies have interlinkages and are seen as complementary components of the programme. The tourism strategy, as described by SPARC coordinator Joan Asby,

(is) aimed at the discerning visitor, who is environmentally conscious, and is looking for a quality experience, and aims to promote opportunities which are seen to have positive economic multiplier effects on other local sectors, but which complement the environment and heritage of the area, thus reinforcing and facilitating the key rural development objective of agricultural diversification.

Central to SPARC's approach is the encouragement of maximum community involvement at all stages of development: planning, implementation and monitoring. First, local people in all 37 villages that have taken part in

the SPARC programme to date participated in an appraisal to identify the problems and opportunities of their own community. Next, they helped produce a local Action Plan based on the appraisal. Most communities identified rural tourism in their Action Plans as a potential source of economic growth. They also, however, wanted a form of tourism "that was non-intrusive and which was based on the natural resources of the area, its landscape, heritage and culture." This translated into the SPARC goal of promoting environmentally sensitive rural tourism which would respect the local culture and bring maximum local economic benefit.

Equally important to the SPARC approach is the assistance of a variety of "partners", experts and organizations in relevant fields (e.g. the Institute of Rural Studies of the University College of Wales, the Dyfed Archeological Trust and the Swansea Institute) which produced valuable data and assessments that they shared with the community and supportive public and private organizations (e.g. the Pembrokeshire County Council, Welsh Development Agency, Wales Tourist Board, West Wales Training and Enterprise Council and the Countryside Council for Wales) that provided technical and financial assistance. SPARC, local communities and these partners joined forces to determine a "product identity" for the rural tourism programme: the theme of the "Landsker Borderlands". This offered a unified historic interpretation to the South Pembrokeshire district, taking into account the linguistic split between the Welsh speakers to the north and the English speakers to the south, and respected the cultural distinction of the area.

As the tourism programme developed, local citizens, "partners" and SPARC cooperated on virtually all aspects. Local citizens from the villages and towns were encouraged, again with the assistance of specialist "partners", to create leaflets providing information about their local heritage. Villages established or improved "amenity centres" which provide car parking and interpretative panels in the heart of the community and from which local footpath networks can be accessed. These footpaths were identified by local communities in conjunction with SPARC personnel, joining villages, providing access to historic sites when

ossible, and offering walks through the varied countryside. Walking, cycling and fishing leaflets were also developed in several languages. Local people identified special infrastructure projects that have become part of the rural tourism experience (e.g. transforming the medieval Hospice at Llawhaden into a local interpretative centre). SPARC works with individual property owners to promote the provision of overnight accommodations, gives advice to individuals and groups that have identified an opportunity for business creation, and provides small grants for training small businesses. Finally, local citizens and organizations also work together in a Landsker Borderlands Tourism Association.

In 1994, SPARC established the Landsker Countryside Holidays Bureau to organize, promote and market the Landsker Borderlands area. It has created visually appealing and highly informational brochures, including large, interpretative fold-out brochures with maps and suggested itineraries. These cover a variety of recreational opportunities available to the tourist in South Pembrokeshire: walking, cycling, fishing, bird-watching, horseback riding, exploring local history and historic sites. One of the newest offerings is the "Makers of Wales" heritage trails. This is a Wales-wide theme which has been extended at the local level by SPARC with funding from the European Union LEADER II project. There are seven thematic itineraries in South Pembrokeshire that visitors can follow (by car, cycling or walking), each of which highlights a particular aspect of Welsh heritage, such as "Chieftains and Princes", "Arts and Literature" or "Makers of Wales". This region-tourism programme has a number of objectives, including attracting more year-round visitors to South Pembrokeshire, interpreting and promoting Welsh heritage, restoring heritage sites, improving the local economy (especially through a need for increased accommodations and potential for more local shop purchases), and training local building workers in heritage restoration skills that can then be showcased to visitors.

The Bureau also provides a booking service for visitors seeking overnight accommodations. This was designed in large part to minimize economic "leakage" of benefits outside the South Pembrokeshire district. Accommodations include hotels, guest houses/farmhouses, bed and breakfasts, self-catering cottages/flats, static caravans, and sites for touring caravans and tents. Additionally, specially designed package holidays have been developed around walking, cycling, fishing and painting holidays. One example is an eight-day coast and countryside cycle tour with daily overnights at guest houses, country inns and farm houses for UK £299, all inclusive.

The final service offered by the Landsker Countryside Holidays Bureau is information on the Greenways "environmentally friendly



transport initiative." This programme, developed in partnership with the Countryside Council for Wales, is designed to develop additional opportunities for walking and cycling and to protect the environment by minimizing traffic. SPARC materials clearly identify "walk and ride" opportunities, because:

The increasing use of cars in the countryside is leading to problems of pollution, congestion, and noise, in just those areas where people go to enjoy peace and quiet. These leaflets show how walkers can enjoy the varied countryside of the area without using their cars. Travelling by train, bus or postbus into the countryside can add to the interest of a day out, while at the same time saving fuel and reducing environmental damage.

The leaflets separately address "walk and ride" routes, road cycling routes, off-road cycling routes, and a "Hidden Heritage Miners Walk".

Noteworthy features of the SPARC programme

The main objective of the SPARC rural tourism programme is, in the words of Coordinator Joan Asby, "(to develop) a quality tourism product based on local people, their heritage and (their) environment." Designed according to the needs and desires of the affected communities, it has achieved remarkable success for such a young programme. Some of the characteristics of the SPARC approach that are noteworthy, and merit consideration for replication in other locations, include the following:

1. Extensive citizen involvement: The SPARC initiative involves local people in all aspects of rural tourism development, from the initial assessment of the community through the planning process and implementation to ongoing monitoring. This results in a tourism programme that reflects what is sometimes called a "shared community vision", thus increasing local support and the likelihood of sustainability.

2. Partnership with experts: SPARC has secured the assistance of educational institutions and scholars to do research, businesses to pro-

vide training to improve local skills, governmental units to provide funding, and a consortium of private and public agencies to cooperate with SPARC and local communities in all aspects of the planning and implementation of the tourism programme. These partnerships have brought a level of sophistication to the tourism programme that would otherwise be lacking.

3. Complementary strategies: The SPARC initiative involves strategies addressing three distinct elements: tourism, environment and agriculture. Because of the integrated approach, there is not undue emphasis on tourism as the sole economic saviour of the region. Rural tourism development is approached as one component of a larger effort to improve the economic and social life in South Pembrokeshire. An additional benefit of the complementary strategies is that SPARC has created, in the other components of its initiative, ongoing mechanisms for developing leadership skills within the local community. SPARC has any number of training programmes to ensure that the local capacity will exist for meaningful participation and real "empowerment" of the affected communities.

4. Clear strategic planning and implementation framework: SPARC has developed effective planning and implementation methods that ensure that goals and objectives are set and are then translated into action, using clear, appealing explanatory materials. While the local community and relevant partners are involved in every stage of the process, it is the clarity and effectiveness of the *process* itself, which was developed by SPARC, that does much to ensure the quality of the outcome.

5. The pivotal role of SPARC: The role of SPARC, an NGO with an agenda broader than rural tourism alone, has been crucial to the success of the initiative. SPARC played a role that neither a local community, business or governmental unit could meet.

6. Regional approach: No single village in South Pembrokeshire would be able to attract a sufficient number of visitors to bring any

significant economic benefit. However, working together to form a regional attraction, the villages and towns have developed into a successful rural tourism destination.

7. Comprehensiveness of the product: The Landsker Borderlands theme has been organized and marketed to have a fairly broad appeal to tourists with diverse interests (such as distance hiking, bird-watching, cycling, history, Welsh culture). Accommodations are similarly varied, including small guest houses, self-catering cottages, farmhouses, caravans and hotels scattered throughout South Pembrokeshire.

8. Sensitivity to environment and culture: Local people have decided that they do not want tourism development that will either damage their environment or negatively impact on their rural quality of life. They are developing a programme that is sensitive to those concerns. At the same time, their tourism product is based on the local natural and cultural assets (beauty and variety of the countryside and unique Landsker history), which

promotes the long-term sustainability of the programme.

9. Limits of "leakage": Efforts have been made to retain the economic benefits of the tourism programme within the affected communities, rather than having them "leak out" to absentee owners of touristic businesses. SPARC has also secured funding for grants to small business owners for training to increase their skills, so that new business opportunities can be addressed at the local level rather than by entrepreneurs from outside South Pembrokeshire. Additionally, training in restoration skills is offered to local craftsmen, ensuring that most of the restoration work on historic sites and buildings can be performed by local artisans.

10. Diversification of the tourist product: The tourism product has been developed to extend both the timing and location of visits. The Heritage Trails programme effectively extends the visitor season beyond the traditional "warm weather season". Similarly, the creation of the network of footpaths and cycling routes

has reduced tourist pressure on the popular coastal paths and directed more visitors to the interior countryside, spreading the economic benefit of tourism throughout the area.

Conclusions

No single example of rural tourism is likely to be suitable in total for duplication in any other location. After all, local settings – environmental, cultural, social, political and economic – vary so significantly that a "cookie cutter" approach of cloning even a highly successful programme should not be attempted. That said, the SPARC model is characterized by numerous noteworthy features that could be adapted and applied effectively in a variety of locations. SPARC's methods have been successful for South Pembrokeshire, and for that reason should be commended and studied by those concerned with securing the potential benefits of tourism for rural communities while ensuring the protection of the environment and culture of the local people. ♦

TOURISM NEWS

The Tourism Programme on the Web

The UNEP IE web site has been redesigned. Now, under the Tourism Programme, you will find the complete version of this newsletter and other interesting information and links. Our address is <http://www.unepie.org/tourism>.

The Caribbean Environmental Network (CEN)

This project, a joint venture between the UNEP Regional Co-ordinating Unit for the Caribbean Environment Programme and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), aims at improving the

environmental quality and conservation of coastal areas, in particular reducing the impacts of coastal tourism. The project is divided in three main activity areas: baseline information collection, training courses (water and solid waste management, tourist facilities siting and design, and integrated coastal area management) and pilot demonstration projects. UNEP IE's Tourism Programme contributed to the training courses presenting voluntary sustainable tourism practices.

For more information, contact:
UNEP Caribbean Environment Programme – Regional Co-ordinating Unit
14-20 Port Royal Street
Kingston, Jamaica
Fax: 1-876-922-9292
Email: unepcruja@toj.co

Conference on Sustainable Tourism in Small Island Developing States

UNEP and WTO are organizing a Conference on Sustainable Tourism in Small Island Developing States, to be held in Mauritius 25-28 October 1998. The Conference will focus on transport, maritime tourism, and the different tools which can be implemented to prevent environmental impacts of tourism.

For more information, contact:
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28020 Madrid, Spain
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Industry and Environment Centre
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UNEP IE made a contribution at the international conference on Environmental Technology and Tourism organized by the German government in Berlin on 5-6 March 1998.

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