

FOUNDATION FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

ISLANDS AND SMALL STATES INSTITUTE

Occasional Papers on Islands and Small States

**WALES AS A TEST-BED
FOR SUSTAINABLE
TOURISM PRACTICE**

Arwel Jones*

No. 6 - November 1994

* Arwel Jones is Director of the Mid-Wales Festival of the Countryside and an independent consultant on tourism, recreation and the environment. He is also a research consultant with the European Centre for Traditional and Regional Cultures (ECTARC).

"Wales as a test-bed for sustainable tourism practice"

Introduction

Tourism in Wales is worth £1.3 billion to its economy, accounting for almost 5% of gross domestic product, and employing 95,000 people, which equals 9% of the workforce. As a small peripheral European maritime region, the landscape and culture of Wales are increasingly being recognised for their intrinsic value and as corner-stones for future tourism. This recognition calls for a reappraisal of the resource base, its conservation and potential for development, and for new approaches to this significant industry. The Wales Tourist Board, in its current draft strategy document, Tourism 2000 (WTB, 1993), acknowledges these facts and sets out a number of policies and proposals which it feels will best serve the Principality into the next century.

It is now recognised that certain forms and scales of tourism can irreversibly damage or destroy important parts of the environment, including fragile ecosystems and human socio-cultural structures. Thus the notion of sustainable tourism. Sustainable development implies the wise use of existing resources such that they are not exhausted or otherwise rendered unusable by future generations (see, for example, the Brundtland Report (Brundtland Commission, 1987) or the British Government's White Paper on the Environment (HMSO, 1990). The concept of sustainable tourism accords with this broad principle. The challenge is making it work in practice. This paper draws upon two specific case studies to identify and discuss some of the issues and choices available to the managers and developers of rural tourism areas with high scenic and nature conservation and cultural significance.

The first case study is a small island off the North Wales coast called Bardsey, a National Nature Reserve with strong historical and religious associations. The second is an innovative regional programme of environmental and cultural activities, the Mid Wales Festival of the Countryside.

Bardsey

Bardsey (or, in Welsh, Ynys Enlli) is a 178 ha island, 2.3 km long and up to 1 km across. It lies approximately 3 km off the south west tip of the Llŷn peninsula in North Wales. The island is owned by the Bardsey Island Trust Ltd, a charitable body set up specifically to purchase and manage the site. It was designated by the Nature Conservancy Council for its wildlife interest as a Site of Special Scientific Interest in 1953 and a National Nature Reserve in 1986. Bardsey also lies within the Llŷn Heritage Coast and Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. In addition, it has been declared a Special Protection Area, in recognition of its important nesting seabird population.

Most of the island is currently farmed under the terms of an agricultural tenancy, the main stock being sheep and ponies. Although the island is divided into 121 small enclosed fields, it is now used mainly for open grazing. At one time Bardsey supported a number of agricultural tenancies, a school and a chapel. It has long been associated with pilgrimage and religious retreat, as evidenced by the remains of a thirteenth century abbey at its eastern end. The Trust has renovated most of the island properties, some of which are now let for holiday purposes. In 1987 it commissioned the writer to undertake a review of its operations and prepare an integrated future plan for the island. The plan would look at and advise on:

- anticipated income and expenditure over the next five, ten and 20 years;

- present and future agricultural use;
- conservation of the natural and built heritage;
- interpretation and education;
- recreational land use;
- visitor management;
- appropriate marketing.

The study, conducted over a period of 18 months, included a desk study of the island's history and tenure, detailed consultations with key individuals (both from within and outside the Trust), and a mainland survey of potential visitors.

The main findings revealed the complexity of administration that had sprung up during the Trust's ten years of existence, the need for a land use reappraisal, and a 'soft', non-intrusive approach to interpretation. It identified the heavy workload of Trust staff and volunteers in relation to the limited return from holiday letting and visitor management. A number of suggestions were made as possible means of alleviating this problem. These included:

- increasing the rents on holiday lets significantly, whilst still maintaining a social tourism dimension through bursaries or the provision of alternative cheap bunkhouse accommodation;
- developing special interest courses in photography, ornithology, painting, sea watching and so on, with resident guides and experts;
- establishing a mainland visitor centre which would both yield revenue and deflect some of the visitor pressure. This idea emerged from the survey of potential visitors, where it emerged

that of the 109 respondents, 38% of those who answered favoured a visitor centre on the island, but a surprising 68% wished to see one on the mainland. This indicated the perceived need to keep the island as unspoilt and authentic as possible, whilst still meeting a public demand for information. There may also have been the need for a 'surrogate' Bardsey experience, one of connecting with the place without necessarily having to negotiate an often difficult sea crossing.

- increasing day visitor access by offering regular boat trips, generating greater income from crossing and landing fees;
- significantly reducing staying visitor provision and thus minimising the demand on staff time and other resources.
- developing other revenue generating options such as specialist and virus-free plants, appropriate merchandise, and exploring potential sources of grant-aid for conservation and other purposes.

The key significance of the study was that it considered holiday and tourism use of a small island alongside other factors such as agriculture, nature conservation, education and spiritual aspects. It then put forward a number of options, ranging from intensified and more specialised tourism development to a significant reduction in tourism activity.

Since the study's completion in May 1990, a number of its recommendations have been implemented, including a partial rationalisation of its committee structure and the formation of specific sub-groups to focus on future farming practice and the dissemination of information. The establishment of a mainland visitor centre has moved a step nearer, with the joint acquisition of a redundant coastguard station on the adjacent headland.

The Mid Wales Festival of the Countryside

The Festival of the Countryside, now in its ninth year, is a comprehensive programme of some 600 rural events and activities - many of a very modest and local nature - taking place in the 7,000 sq km region of mid-Wales. It was developed as a working example of how environmental education, recreation and tourism and socio-economic development can progress to mutual benefit. The initiative arose as a response to the World Conservation Strategy and is directed by CYNEFIN, A Welsh Conservation Foundation. Its key operating principles include the following:

CONSERVATION OF NATURAL AND HUMAN RESOURCES - of landscape, wildlife and cultural aspects, including ways of life.

INDIGENOUS DEVELOPMENT - working with local resources and attractions, enhancing them, and, where appropriate, making these more accessible.

LOCAL INVOLVEMENT - through dialogue, 'grass roots' development, self-appraisal and review.

NON-INTERFERENCE - applying the principle of self-determination and of allowing for the zero tourism option (i.e. no tourism or tourism growth in certain cases).

CENTRAL PROFESSIONAL BACKUP - available when necessary, in the form of marketing, public relations, design and event management.

PROVISION OF AN OVERALL CORPORATE UMBRELLA - linking the programme together into a single identifiable whole, the synergistic approach.

The Festival is run by a small team with a large network of contacts and access to a range of grant-aid and specialist support. The team has a largely catalytic role, stimulating initiatives, helping them to 'take root' within the community and handing them on to local organisers.

The Festival involves a wide range of different types of organisations. These include:

- A regional development agency (the Development Board for Rural Wales) which has a mainly socio-economic remit;
- Wildlife and landscape conservation agencies (such as the Countryside Council for Wales and county wildlife trusts);
- Tourism agencies (the Wales Tourist Board and Mid Wales Tourism Ltd); and
- Community groups (such as town councils, village associations and local committees).

CYNEFIN has published a guide book to complement the diverse events and attractions programme. Written by Moira K Stone, the Mid Wales Companion (Anthony Nelson Ltd, 1989) provides an introduction to the region's history and natural history, its archaeology, geology and other features. It represents the Festival's commitment to a more knowledge-based tourism. At present, the same author is working on a European Commission funded handbook of good practice based on the Festival's experience.

In conclusion

Both case studies indicate the need for a more sensitive and integrated approach to tourism development, taking account of the valuable and finite characteristics of the natural, physical and

cultural resources of their respective areas. A better informed, knowledge-based approach to both tourism development and its subsequent marketing is therefore advocated.

Recognition must also be given to the right of communities to a rôle in determining the level and type of tourism most appropriate to them and their locality. This requires the establishment of adequate mechanisms for local involvement and indigenous development, supported by appropriate professional back-up services such as that provided by 'animateurs' and other skilled advisors. Sustainable tourism, after all, has to be a tourism which operates within the tolerance of the environment its people.