

Leisure landscapes: exploring the role of forestry in tourism

Using woodlands for tourism includes a wide range of leisure activities, such as mountain biking, walking and nature watching. As one of the largest and fastest growing industries in the world, and with the emergence of specialist markets for cultural, adventure and wildlife leisure breaks, tourism provides an opportunity to diversify the rural economy. As a result, tourism is now an important element of forestry strategies in Great Britain. This research, which explored the role of forestry for tourism, found that woodlands support the success of tourism enterprises as well as the social and environmental sustainability of the tourism sector. Key challenges to the further development of this role relate to taking an integrated landscape-scale approach to woodland tourism provision, promoting and enabling innovation in the use of woodlands for tourism and increasing awareness of the ways in which forestry may contribute to the tourism sector.



"We tell them about which woodlands they can walk in, then they decide they are going to stay two or three nights, therefore it's essential to have good woodland around"

Accommodation owner

Background

With the newly emerging emphasis on tourism in forestry strategies, there is a need for forest managers to integrate leisure issues into their decision making processes. Knowledge about both the current and potential roles of forestry in the tourism sector is still lacking, as is research about relationships between managers and providers in the two sectors. Some research has been carried out to establish how tourists use woodlands, but there has been little research with tourism providers, particularly local enterprises, to understand how they value and use woodlands, and how woods may be better managed so as to contribute to tourism. As a result, from 2003 to 2005, the Forestry Commission funded the Leisure Landscapes research project.

Objectives

The project aimed to understand:

- the ways in which tourism providers value and use woodlands
- tourism providers' experiences of and aspirations for forest management processes

Methods

- Study areas used for fieldwork were in the Scottish Highlands (Great Glen), the East of England (Suffolk Coasts and Heaths) and mid-Wales (Dyfi Valley), each containing a diversity of natural environments (including woodland type), socio-economic structures and stage/nature of woodland tourism development.
- In each study area, in-depth interviews were conducted with planners and managers from a range of policy sectors, and discussion groups were held with tourism enterprises. Interviews were analysed using a qualitative software analysis package.
- A consultancy firm was used to recruit the discussion group participants and to conduct the Great Glen discussion groups. The remainder of the work was completed by Forest Research.

Findings

The research demonstrated how tourism providers make direct and indirect use of woodlands to:

- create positive imagery of tourist areas and tourism enterprises
- increase the diversity and depth of visitor experiences
- increase the accessibility of their products and services

In this way, woodlands form an integral part of the products and services offered by the rural tourism sector and play a role in enabling enterprises to attract visitors, encouraging people to stay longer and extending the length of the tourism season. The research also found that forestry policy and practices have knock-on effects on the success of tourism enterprises and the competitiveness of the leisure sector, for example by affecting the quality of products and services tourism providers are able to offer.

As well as providing economic benefits, woodlands also have a positive contribution to make to the social and environmental sustainability of the tourism sector by providing places that can easily absorb relatively large numbers of visitors and a wide diversity of uses, including physically destructive, noisy and visually intrusive activities.

At a time when the tourism industry is growing and becoming increasingly competitive, rural communities are trying to find new ways of sustaining livelihoods. As a result there is a desire for greater collaboration between enterprises and land managers to develop, market and manage woodlands for tourism. The research therefore emphasised that the impacts of forestry on tourism have much to do with the social as well as physical integration of the two sectors.

Recommendations

We suggest that forest managers and policy advisors consider the following:

- **Taking a strategic and inclusive landscape-scale approach to woodland tourism provision**
Landscape-level approaches to spatial planning and natural land-use management are receiving increasing attention. This method requires a more holistic approach to forestry and tourism, bringing together a broad range of stakeholders' resources. Policies and practices of the forestry sector should facilitate such interaction, for example by developing processes for sharing knowledge and skills between local communities, businesses and land managers.
- **Promoting and enabling innovation in the use of woodlands for tourism**
There is a lack of processes and resources to encourage, identify and realise innovation and entrepreneurship in the woodland tourism sector. Given the importance placed by forestry policy on tourism as a means of rural economic diversification, new processes and resources to enable the forestry sector to promote innovation and tourism business development should be pursued.
- **Increasing awareness and use of woodland tourism values**
Some tourism providers and policy makers lacked an understanding of the role of the forestry sector in tourism. There is a need to develop clear and effective information on the values of and good practice in woodland tourism. This includes promoting the role of woodlands in supporting the social and environmental as well as economic sustainability of the tourism sector.

Funding / Support

Forestry Commission.

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Reports and publications

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