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Tourism routes as a tool for the economic development of rural areas—vibrant hope or impossible dream?

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Abstract

Both eulogised and reviled as a development option, rural tourism is increasingly viewed as a panacea, increasing the economic viability of marginalised areas, stimulating social regeneration and improving the living conditions of rural communities. Less developed countries, afflicted by debilitating rural poverty, have considerable potential in attracting tourists in search of new, authentic experiences in areas of unexploited natural and cultural riches. This paper argues that the clustering of activities and attractions, and the development of rural tourism routes, stimulates co-operation and partnerships between local areas. Meaningful community participation, together with public sector support, presents opportunities for the development of small-scale indigenous tourism projects in less developed areas. This paper interrogates the development of rural tourism routes in South Africa and highlights factors critical to its success.

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1. Introduction

Declining economic activity, restructuring of the agricultural sector, dwindling rural industrialisation and out-migration of higher educated youth, has led to the adoption, in many western nations, of tourism as an alternative development strategy for the economic and social regeneration of rural areas (Pompl & Lavery, 1993; Williams & Shaw, 1991; Hannigan, 1994a; Derno, 1991; Wickens, 1999). In Eastern Europe, where events of the last decade have triggered a rapid rise in rural unemployment, tourism has been identified as a catalyst to stimulate economic growth, increase the viability of underdeveloped regions and improve the standard of living of local communities (Rátz & Pucz, 1998; Kombol, 1998; Simpson, Chapman, & Mahne, 1998).

In less developed countries of sub-Saharan Africa, afflicted by debilitating rural poverty, tourism is perceived to be one of the few feasible options for development. Compelled by the pressures of restructur-

ing, and driven by demands for economic growth and job creation, governments in developing countries however frequently fall prey to the dangers of random, ad hoc development, without due regard to the economic and cultural well-being of rural communities, the conservation of the environment or the inclusion of local residents in decision-making (Britton, 1991; Drake, 1991; Evans & Ibery, 1989; Getz, 1983; Long, Perdue, & Allen, 1990; Marsden, 1992; Prentice, 1993). Whilst governments are generally of the opinion that tourism development will generate new jobs, enhance community infrastructure and assist in revitalising the flagging economies of rural areas, tourism as a development option has come under increasing censure due to the alleged paucity of revenues, the inequity of benefit distribution and the perceived social costs to resident communities (Jud & Krause, 1976; Whelan, 1991, p. 9; Hitchcock, King, & Parnwell, 1993, p. 19; Din, 1993, p. 328), which belie the very objective for which the development is initiated. 'If social and economic development means anything at all, it must mean a clear improvement in the conditions of life and livelihood of ordinary people' (Friedmann, 1992, p. 9). Still, tourism frequently remains the preferred development option; especially in rural communities where

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people are so desperate that they will accept any proposal, which portends to offer economic growth, with little or no consideration of future detrimental impacts (Kinsley, 2000, p. 1).

This paper argues that the clustering of activities and attractions, in less developed areas, stimulates co-operation and partnerships between communities in local and neighbouring regions and serves as a vehicle for the stimulation of economic development through tourism. The paper further discusses the development of rural tourism routes in South Africa and highlights the factors critical to its success. A brief commentary on tourism routes in general, is followed by an interrogation of the proposed utilisation of tourism routes as a strategy through which to 'rapidly optimise the synergies between job creation, tourism and conservation in Africa' (Open Africa, 2002, p. 4).

Throughout the world, developing countries, with a rich resource base of pristine natural and cultural treasures, hold significant comparative advantage in their potential to attract tourists in search of authentic new experiences (Wahab, 1974, p. 15). The potential for tourism development in sub-Saharan Africa is however under threat given that the alleviation of rampant, debilitating rural poverty must perforce take priority over resource conservation thus 'precipitating a downward spiral in which both communities and their best chance of recovery, is steadily diminishing' (Open Africa, 2002, p. 13). Redclift (1992, p. 395) echoes this opinion, arguing that 'poor people often have no choice but to choose immediate economic benefits at the expense of the long term sustainability of their livelihoods. There is no point in appealing, under these circumstances, to idealism or altruism to protect the environment when the individual and household are forced to behave 'selfishly' in their struggle to survive'.

2. The literature—some generalisations

Evolving tourist trends have, over the last decade, led to a shift from standardised mass tourism to more individualistic patterns, in which greater flexibility and a more meaningful experience have gained prominence (Poon, 1989; Hummelbrunner & Miglbauer, 1994; Gilbert, 1989, p. 42; Pigram, 1993). It has been argued that rural tourists have varied motivations, which might include ecological uniqueness, special adventure opportunities, cultural attractions, or the peace and quiet of the countryside (Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997; Page & Getz, 1997). Greffe (1994, p. 30) suggests that this presents a unique opportunity for rural operators to manage in terms of 'economies of scope' by establishing networks of different service providers, organised in such a way as to maximise opportunity and offer a diverse range of activities. For suppliers of rural tourism

this emphasises the significance of the development of product, which attracts, satisfies and retains the market (Greffe, 1994; Hummelbrunner & Miglbauer, 1994). Clustering of activities and attractions, the erection of user-friendly signage, the establishment of easily accessible information offices, and the development of rural tourism routes, which stimulate entrepreneurial opportunity, the development of ancillary services and provide a diverse range of optional activities, has become decisive in securing business in less developed rural areas (Greffe, 1994; Chassagne, 1991; Gunn, 1979; Fagence, 1991; Lew, 1991; Miossec, 1977; Long et al., 1990; Getz & Page, 1997). Effort is focused on maximising individual spend, and providing products and experiences that act as an incentive to tourists to stay longer and return on repeat visits (Kinsley, 2000).

The potential of tourism routes has long been realised in developed countries. In 1964 a Council of Europe working group mooted the idea of a series of European Cultural Routes, with the prime objectives of raising awareness of European culture through travel, setting up networks for cultural tourism, and utilising European cultural heritage as a means of stimulating social, economic and cultural development, thus improving the quality of life of local people. The idea however only came to fruition in 1980 with the establishment of the Santiago de Compostela Pilgrim Ways (Council of Europe, 2002). The term Cultural Tourism Route was defined as 'a route crossing one or two more countries or regions, organised around themes whose historical, artistic or social interest is patently European...the route must be based on a number of highlights, with places particularly rich in historical associations' (Council of Europe, 2002, p. 2). Twenty years later the project is described as 'an instrument for understanding the European values arising from the complex cultures and societies that have formed Europe' (Council of Europe, 2002, p. 2). The program, with over 2000 partners, is based on multilateral co-operation involving a chain of projects and information sharing networks, monitored and coordinated by the European Institute of Cultural Routes (Council of Europe, 2002, p. 3).

In the United States heritage trails have been shown to provide the impetus for the development of a range of attractions and facilities along their routes (Hill & Gibbons, 1994). Hill and Gibbons point out that Western heritage trails, in particular, have served as a catalyst for the stimulation of theatrical productions, wagon trains, horseback trails and diverse other attractions and activities relished by tourists. Hill argues that since tourists are dispersed along the length of the trail, management of carrying capacity is facilitated, negative environmental impacts reduced, and economic benefits more evenly distributed (Hill & Gibbons, 1994). The initiation of co-operation and partnership between different local areas, regions, states and, as the

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