

# ***Sustainable Tourism: The Welsh Experience***

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## **Introduction**

We have, in Wales, been seeking to translate the theory of sustainable tourism into practical reality with varying degrees of success over the last 15 years. I will, in this paper, describe what our experiences have been and what we hope to achieve in the future. First, however, it is necessary to set the context for our work.

For those who are unfamiliar with Wales, we are a small country with a 2.8m population on the western seaboard of Britain, a country which until the late 13<sup>th</sup> century was an independent principedom. We have our own language which has its origins in the pre-Roman Celtic Britain, and as such is claimed to be one of the oldest living languages in Europe, spoken by over 20% of our people. Associated with our language is a distinctive culture, the focus of which is our Eisteddfodau tradition, which culminates in the annual National Eisteddfod held annually every year in a different location in Wales.

Tourism is a long established industry in Wales whose origins go back to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the aristocrats and gentry denied access to Europe by the French Revolution and subsequent Napoleonic wars, were forced to explore their own island and were attracted to Wales by its rugged mountainous landscape. In the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century a number of seaside resorts developed, such as Llandudno in North Wales, which was created when the railway was able to facilitate access.

In 2003 Wales attracted some 11.6m staying visitors from within the UK and a further 890,000 overseas visitors. Traditionally our tourism was dominated by the family holiday by the seaside but growing competition from overseas destinations with guaranteed sunshine has led to a decline in this market although even today people holidaying by the seaside account for nearly 50% of expenditure by UK holiday staying visitors. In recent years we have further developed activity tourism based on our outstanding natural environment and cultural tourism based on our ancient heritage and culture. Tourism today generates a contribution to our economy of €2.9billion and supports directly and indirectly some 100,000 jobs.

## **Policy Context**

In 1999 a National Assembly for Wales was elected which had devolved powers from Westminster in respect of health, education and economic development, including tourism. Written into the Act of Parliament which established the National Assembly was the duty of the Welsh Assembly Government to promote sustainable development in the exercise of its functions. Under the act the Welsh Assembly Government is required to publish a Sustainable Development Scheme which sets how they propose to implement the duty, and the for scheme to be evaluated every four years. This has resulted in an increased emphasis on Sustainable Tourism.

Wales Tourist Board (WTB) was established in 1969 to promote and market Wales as a tourism destination and to develop tourism facilities within Wales. Currently we are an Assembly Sponsored Public Body funded by the Welsh Assembly Government, but in 2006 we will be absorbed into the Welsh Assembly Government. Our National Strategy 'Achieving Our Potential' identified sustainability as a key principle, which applies to all parts of the strategy and one of its 4 strategic objectives is

“to embrace a sustainable approach to tourism development which benefits society, involves local communities and enhances Wales’ unique environmental and cultural assets.”

The WTB has subsequently developed a set of principles for sustainable tourism, which govern our work. These are that:-

- (i) The scale, pace and character of tourism development and activities must be carefully controlled to safeguard Wales environmental, historical and cultural assets, including the Welsh language. Respect for the characteristics of the location and the aspirations of the host community must be considered a high priority.
- (ii) Tourism should be seen as a positive activity which can help to sustain communities and offer a range of economic opportunities. The benefits of tourism should be more widely spread geographically, seasonally and economically.

- (iii) The sourcing of local goods and services should be a priority as should the involvement of the local community, and employment of local people.
- (iv) The adverse impacts of tourism should be minimised through effective visitor management and the promotion of environmentally sound practices by tourism operators. Appropriate management measures should be adopted to achieve this and to ensure a balance between the needs of the visitor and the needs of the host community.
- (v) Tourism is dependent on the environment. However, the intrinsic value of the environment is far greater than its value as a tourism asset. Sensitive planning must be undertaken to ensure that tourism does not compromise the long term survival of the environment and the enjoyment of future generations.

It is clear from this approach that we consider that sustainable tourism has an economic, social, cultural as well as an environmental dimension. The Network of Regional Governments for Sustainable Development have defined sustainable tourism as a form of tourism which:

- ♦ Is economically viable, with direct economic benefits for local people;
- ♦ Is socially and culturally responsible;
- ♦ Is ecologically sound; and
- ♦ Offers a high quality end product and visitor experience.

This definition encompasses all the essential aspects of sustainable tourism.

### **What have we achieved?**

Fine words are all very well but at the end of the day we will be judged by our actions in translating these words in practical reality. So what have we done to 'walk the talk' in Wales.

### **Making Our Business More Sustainable in their Operating Practices**

In 1998 we worked with the Countryside Council for Wales to produce a guide to 'Greening Your Business'. This was designed to be a practical guide to how a tourism business can become more environmentally friendly in their operating practices whilst also saving running costs. Advice was provided on energy and water conservation, recycling, local sourcing etc. It was an attractive publication which made us all feel good at the time, the problem was apart from the provision of advisory visits to those applying for grants to WTB there was no follow up to assess how useful it was, and whether businesses were using it. A further drawback was that there was no recognition for those businesses, which were following the guide.

In 2001 we decided that we needed a revised guide linked to a green accreditation scheme, which provided public recognition to those businesses, which were putting it into practice. We started working with Green Globe because they had international recognition as operating an environmental accreditation system for the hospitality industry. The problem we found was that Green Globe was geared to the needs of the larger tourism business but most of our tourism businesses were small or micro businesses. To be accredited with Green Globe a business had to be a member of Green Globe, which was relatively expensive for the micro business. We worked with Green Globe to try and devise a scheme for micro businesses but it was still not ideal. A report to the then English Tourism Council recommending that England utilise the Scottish Sustainable Tourism Business Scheme led us to reconsider our approach and decide if possible to help develop a uniform scheme for the UK based on the Scottish scheme. Within a year it became evident that England was no longer proposing to introduce a version of the Scottish scheme, and we had been unable to reach an agreement with the operators of the Scottish scheme to operate it in Wales under a licence. We then developed our own home grown scheme Green Dragon based on a Welsh Environmental Management scheme that had been designed for general Welsh businesses. We worked with the operator of the scheme to adapt it to the needs of small tourism businesses, and then piloted with some 40 tourism business in Wales to test out its suitability.

The Guide and toolkit to Greening Your Business was rewritten to link it to the Green Dragon Scheme, and published in both hard copy and placed on the web in 2003. The new guide provides practical advice on:

- ♦ Saving energy
- ♦ Saving water
- ♦ Reduce, re-use and recycle waste

- ♦ Taking care with hazardous substances
- ♦ Greener transport, cleaner air
- ♦ Plan and build sympathetically
- ♦ Protect nature
- ♦ Support cultural heritage and the local community
- ♦ Complying with legislation
- ♦ Taking action

It is now a condition of a capital grant from WTB that a business becomes Green Dragon accredited.

### **Improving Our Beaches**

In 1995 we only had two blue flag award beaches yet seaside tourism was very important to us. There was a growing concern by our visitors about bathing water quality, encouraged by scare articles in the press. The decision by the Water Company operating in Wales to upgrade all their sewage treatment works and discharges to meet the higher guideline standard rather than mandatory standard, which the other UK water companies were doing at that time, provided us with the opportunity to work in partnership to secure a dramatic increase in blue flag award beaches.

In May 1996 we launched the Green Sea Partnership of over 40 organisations from the public, private and voluntary sectors to achieve co-ordinated action to improve the coastal environment. The key members of the partnership were Welsh Water, a private company; the Environment Agency, a government organisation responsible for monitoring the environment and taking action against pollution; the coastal local authorities, who were responsible for managing the beaches; Keep Wales Tidy, an NGO responsible for operating the blue flag award in Wales; and WTB, which chaired the partnership.

An Action Plan was agreed by the Partnership with a central target of achieving 50 beaches with either a blue flag or a rural beach award based on guideline water quality by 2000. This was an extremely challenging target given that we only had 2 blue flag award beaches in 1995. A key action was to develop a new beach award for remote rural beaches where the infrastructure and facilities associated with the blue flag award were inappropriate, but which had guideline water quality. The new award, the Green Coast Award, was piloted in Wales, central to the award was the requirement for a management plan to be in place for the beach and adjacent area, which addressed both visitor and conservation aspects. A further initiative, Coastcare, encouraged local communities to take responsibility for looking after their beaches.

The Partnership also produced a beach management guide to assist beach managers in obtaining blue flag award for their beaches. By 2000 we had achieved a very significant increase in the number of blue flag award beaches with a total of 22, plus some 25 Green Coast award beaches, but had not achieved the target of 50 beaches.

In 2000 the Green Sea Partnership agreed a new 5 year development plan with the target of achieving 40 blue flag award beaches and 25 Green Coast award beaches by 2005. A key element of this new development plan was the provision of a capital investment programme to assist the funding of the provision of infrastructure and facilities required to meet blue flag criteria. A partnership of the coastal local authorities and WTB submitted a successful application for Objective 1 funding. A further action of the current development plan is the investigation into the sources of diffuse pollution by the Environment Agency working with the relevant local authority's Environmental Health Department.

The Partnership's work is co-ordinated by a Working Party chaired by WTB who meet 4/5 times a year, and an annual forum of all the partners, which determines policy and priorities.

Today we have 35 blue flag award beaches, and 40 Green Coast award beaches, and the Green Sea Partnership is recognised as best practice throughout the UK with similar partnerships established in England and Scotland modelled on the Green Sea Partnership.

### **Improving the Management of our Visitor Destinations**

WTB has been working with Welsh local authorities to introduce Integrated Quality Management (IQM) approach to our visitor destinations. IQM is designed to progressively improve the quality of the visitor experience whilst securing economic, social and environmental benefits for the host

community. It addresses all aspects of the visitor experience from the marketing literature, to the visitor's arrival in the destination, experience whilst there and the departure.

IQM has been promoted by the European Commission, as a more sustainable approach to the management of visitor destinations. WTB made it a condition of funding for its 15 geographically targeted Tourism Growth Areas that they adopted the IQM approach to the management of the destination, and offered to fund jointly a project officer within each of the 15 programme areas to encourage the development of the IQM approach, involving both the local community and businesses.

To date we have had mixed results. IQM to be successful requires a radical change in culture by local authorities with inter departmental working and active involvement of the community and businesses in the planning and management of the visitor experience. There has been a clear need for more practical guidance as to how to adopt IQM. Some of our local authority partnerships, however, have put some considerable effort into making IQM work. To facilitate an exchange of experience and the development of practical guidance, WTB is organising a workshop of its Tourism Growth Officer to discuss putting IQM into practice..

Recently, our three national park authorities have agreed in principle to introduce the IQM approach to the management of the parks as part of a wider sustainable tourism initiative for the national parks.

### **Strengthening Regional Identity**

Being a distinctive country with our own language within Britain, the strengthening of regional identity is very important in differentiating us from the rest of Britain.

In the Spring of 2003 we published a Cultural Tourism Strategy with the following vision:

“Wales becomes recognised internationally as a destination offering a quality cultural tourism experience based on its unique culture which forms an essential part of the overall tourism experience.”

This vision was to be delivered by four thematic programmes:

- ♦ Improving visitor accessibility to Welsh culture;
- ♦ Improving the quality of the visitor experience;
- ♦ Raising the profile of Wales as a cultural tourism destination;
- ♦ Understanding the characteristics and needs of the cultural tourist.

To co-ordinate the delivery of the Cultural Tourism Strategy we established a national partnership with the major heritage, cultural, and arts bodies plus the industry represented. A Cultural Tourism Coordinator was appointed to support the partnership and facilitate delivery of the strategy. The national partnership was then replicated at the regional level to co-ordinate delivery of the strategy at the regional and local level.

These are still early days, but one of the early actions that has been delivered, is a 'Sense of Place Toolkit'. This toolkit was designed to encourage tourism businesses to think about the many ways that incorporating a Sense of Place can improve their business. A Sense of Place embraces the distinctive sights, sounds and experiences that are rooted in a country, those special and memorable qualities that resonate with local people and visitors alike.

The toolkit provides advice on:

- ♦ Wales and its people
- ♦ Working with the Welsh language
- ♦ Working with buildings inside and out
- ♦ Food and drink
- ♦ Using creativity and the arts
- ♦ The Great Outdoor
- ♦ A Fact File on sources of specialist advice

The toolkit is supported by a specialist advisor; who is a businessman who has successfully incorporated strong sense of place into his own tourism business.

The other early outcome of the Cultural Tourism Partnership has been a much closer working relationship between the tourism, cultural and heritage sectors.

### **Seasonality**

Welsh tourism has traditionally been very seasonal in nature, with visitors being focused in the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of the year (July, August and September). The impact of this has been to reduce business profitability, to encourage a high proportion of low paid seasonal jobs, to cause some communities to have negative perceptions of tourism, and to create pressure on the infrastructure and services of our resorts and popular visitor destinations. Extending the season has therefore been a priority of successive tourism strategies including Achieving Our Potential, which set a target of 30% of trips and 25% of spend would take place in the shoulder months October to March by 2010. As demonstrated in the table below, these targets have already been exceeded.

WTB has undertaken more shoulder season marketing campaigns aimed at the less seasonal business and activity tourism markets. Extending the season has become a key consideration for investment support and event promotion. WTB has developed Events and Sports Tourism Frameworks and a Cultural Tourism Strategy, all of which contain measures, which address seasonality. A variety of activities have therefore contributed to improving the distribution of the benefits of tourism throughout the year. However, despite the early progress made, further work is required to ensure that the benefits of tourism are more evenly spread throughout the year.

Shoulder season	1998	2003	2010 target
<b>Trips</b>	25%	35%	30%
<b>spend</b>	17%	33%	25%

### **Sustainable Transport**

WTB's role has been principally to improve the accessibility of information regarding travelling around Wales by public transport. Our VisitWales website the main source of web based information for visitors to Wales has links with both National Rail Enquiries and Pti Cymru web sites, which together provide comprehensive information on public transport in Wales. We have also supported the most sustainable form of transport by helping fund the original feasibility study for a national cycle route network in Wales and continuing to support this initiative.

Currently some 83% of all domestic trips to Wales were made by car, compared to an average of 73% for the UK. In the late 1990's we became a member of a new partnership, Sustainable Transport and Tourism Partnership, established to bring public transport operators and tourist interests together to work to encourage more tourists to use public transport. The partnership initially had a project officer funded by a European Structural Funds programme (Objective 5b) and its projects included provision of discounts for visitors arriving at attractions by public transport or bike, the development of a template for visitor friendly interchanges, the development of a Welsh flexi pass and marketing campaigns encouraging visitors to use public transport.

### **USE OF STRUCTURAL FUNDS**

The current Objective 1 and 2 programmes in Wales have been a driver to improve sustainability which is a cross cutting theme of current programmes. All projects seeking European Funding have to have regard to their environmental impacts.

WTB has used structural funds to help fund our toolkits such as Greening Your Business and Sense of Place, and the development of the Green Dragon accreditation scheme, as part of our Integrated Business Support Scheme.

Structural funds were also used to help fund the Green Sea capital programme to provide infrastructure and facilities at beaches to meet Blue Flag requirements.

### **THE FUTURE**

#### **Sustainable Tourism Framework**

Currently WTB is preparing a Sustainable Tourism Framework designed to help the tourism industry become more sustainable and assist WTB to mainstream sustainability into our work.

To date, most of our initiatives and projects in respect of sustainable tourism have tended to be independent addressing a particular aspect. The Framework is designed to integrate these initiatives into a coherent strategy for the future.

To help deliver the Framework we intend to create a national partnership for Sustainable Tourism as an umbrella group for the range of existing partnerships and to address the current gaps in provision. This new partnership will include industry representatives, the environmental bodies, the heritage and cultural bodies etc.

It will set new specific targets for 2010 for the industry to become more sustainable.

### **Key Challenges To Be Addressed**

In the years ahead we face a number of key challenges to make our industry more sustainable.

#### ♦ **Transport**

The ability to travel easily and cheaply is fundamental to the future of the global tourism industry, yet this poses a major challenge if we are to make our industry become more sustainable. The trends are for people to travel greater distances, more often for shorter periods, yet this is unsustainable in environmental terms if we are to tackle global warming and the emission of greenhouse gases.

A study undertaken recently for the European Commission aiming to identify a means of uncoupling the economic growth of the tourism and its negative environmental impacts, has confirmed that air travel both long haul and short haul is the most damaging form of transport. A further factor is that air travel, because aviation fuel is not subject to tax, has a competitive advantage over more sustainable forms of transport.

It is, for instance, far cheaper to fly from the UK to Italy using a low-cost airline than to travel to Scotland from Cardiff by train. It would not be possible for individual countries to tackle this without putting their airlines at a severe competitive disadvantage. Only through international agreement could an environment tax be imposed on aviation fuel. This, however, would not be popular with either the tourism industry or travelling public and could severely damage our industry..

At some stage in the future, unless the environmental problems caused by aviation can be solved through technology, we are going to face some very hard and difficult decisions if we are serious about making tourism more sustainable.

#### ♦ **Mainstreaming**

A key challenge for us in Wales is to mainstream sustainable tourism into everything we do. We are shortly to introduce within our business planning processes, the use of a policy integration tool, which addresses sustainable development, to assess whether new programmes or major projects are contributing to the objective of sustainable development.

In the medium-term rather than having separate green accreditation schemes for tourism businesses these could become mainstreamed into our quality grading schemes. This will require a UK-wide agreement as we are only just reaching an agreement on a UK-wide quality grading scheme.

#### ♦ **National Parks As Icons Of Sustainable Tourism**

We believe that working with the three National Park Authorities in Wales we could develop the Parks as Sustainable Tourism icons to show the way for the rest of Wales, and to pilot the techniques and ideas for putting sustainable tourism into practice. Where better to put sustainable tourism ideas into practice so that the quality of the tourism product matches that of the landscape. This would encourage the tourist to equate sustainable tourism products with quality tourism. Currently we are in discussions with our three national park authorities to translate this idea into a reality.

### **Conclusions**

Wales has made some considerable progress in progressing the cause of sustainable tourism but much remains to be done. We, with the rest of the world, face some fundamental challenges ahead not least with transport, and mainstreaming. We believe, however, that working with our national park authorities we can pilot a new vision for the future in which visitor begins to equate sustainable tourism with quality tourism.