Intro: Since the inquiry is seeking opinions regarding the development of the rural economy with a view to expanding the economic security of tourism as an industry, I hope that my opinions as a resident of a rural UK village and a potential tourist myself can be given some weight. I hope also that many other people like me will offer their views undaunted by the idea that only people with big projects to manage and big bank accounts can have influence.

1. About expanding tourism:

1.1 Visiting UK locations for holidays makes sound financial sense for UK families with little spare money to spend on holidays, and a growing proportion of UK families face financial pressures and need to limit holiday spending. We can’t simply discount the possibility of poorer families having a holiday at all, although it may be viewed as a luxury, because it is well known that access to time away from stressful (for that read work and school in a disadvantage-loaded environment) situations is a powerful factor in the wellbeing of individuals and of family units. It also makes sense for UK residents who choose to limit their carbon footprint by avoiding unnecessary air travel. A thriving internal tourism industry has the potential to build links between communities and foster pride in the actual visit-worthiness of tourism venues throughout the country, promoting social cohesion in a way that no project could do. Therefore promoting homegrown tourism will have beneficial effects on the health of our people.

1.2 It is also my belief that it is when we maintain our countryside for the betterment of all our citizens that visitors would be drawn naturally from other countries. If and when they experience the kind of welcome that is only possible when we have confidence in our own management systems, and have largely stopped squabbling over how things ought to be done, there is a chance of repeat visits and longer stays in the future. What I am describing is an ideal however and we are some distance from that at the present time. My theory is tidy up the house before inviting the neighbours in. How about reviving the spirit of Tidy Towns and focusing on a new target each year: Best B&B in the land; Friendliest Farmer; Butterfly Census Award; Open Gardens; Village Festivals Calendar; National Wildlife Photo Competition… the point is these things happen in a random or piecemeal fashion but if the government wants to help it could use national resources to co-ordinate them and make them into an attractive campaign informing the public what there is on offer.

1.3 It should be possible to support the tourism industry so that families taking holidays outside of term time are able to do so at a reasonable cost – this may require a higher level of involvement from authorities in regard to the certification of quality accommodation than at present, or perhaps mandatory membership of a national database complete with reviews. It should also be possible to support those families who for a variety of reasons simply can’t do so during that period, enabling them to take term time holidays that are utilised as an educational opportunity with the use of links and materials appropriate for their usual educational setting.

2. Existing Businesses Diversifying:
2.1 Tourism promotion needs to recognise what the existing benefits of the countryside are, rather than attempt to create artificial attractions where there is no natural move towards their creation in the community. For example, if a farmer develops part of the land as a butterfly reserve, that is a natural way the business could expand, and it would be prudent to consider a parallel tourism impact, like where a visitors’ parking area might need to be set up, the development of a cycle hub next to the farm shop from where visitors could hire cycles and buy local path maps, as well as learning about the countryside code and the species to look out for, and importantly how the conservation process works for key species and the ways in which human activity impacts upon it. Of course all these are theoretical options but the farmer would need support to help decide how to proceed. There is also nothing wrong in offering incentives for people who may need financial support during the expansion process. However for a butterfly farm to be imposed on that same farmer by a government agency forcing the sale of land would be illogical and would have less chance of success.

2.2 It is unfortunate that the systematic character of education now leaves many native citizens relatively uneducated about their own local area’s history, geology, economy, biodiversity and cultural wealth. Truly sustainable tourism relies heavily on local expertise to ensure developments do not damage the very environment in which they are set, as well as advising and guiding those visitors who want to make the most of their experience, a role which feeds directly into repeat business through the cohesion mentioned above. Therefore a holistic tourism strategy will fix the subject of local studies solidly in our educational systems and ensure it is valued as much at secondary level as at primary.


3.1 Study the local environment’s character for what it already is. This is a task that needs to be undertaken with the assistance of local expertise and the independent oversight of a non-compromised body. The business connections of members of DEFRA should be a matter of public record, so that it might attain an independent status if it is responsible for such investigations and the reports therefrom. Rural regions’ positive qualities towards attracting tourists (clean air, spring water, organic local produce, quiet spaces, views of forest/sea/lakes, birdsong, friendly towns, etc) have to be properly recognised as attributes and this information kept up to date and available for public use.

3.2 Following the assessment of local character in 3.1, when a proposal for, say, a larger supermarket to cater for buyers of shovels and spades comes up the impact on these attractive qualities is incorporated from the beginning and not left only to local campaigners/protestors dissenters to push for balanced consideration. In this way local populations can become key drivers for sustainable development since the overlooking of their views and needs will become more difficult to do in the first place, so the animosity characteristic of populations on whom unwanted development has been imposed will be avoided.

3.3 A particular case of threat to the countryside nationally, and a very clear example of this animosity described in 3.2 is the fracking debate where vast numbers of residents of (and potential visitors to) rural areas have expressed serious concern over the very real dangers
that technology poses for communities and ecosystems to which it is exposed. Sadly, those who need to protect themselves from destruction at the hands of corporate interests must face government opposition to do so. Contrastingly, where communities have developed energy sufficiency and climate resilience strategies they have often done so without direct help from central government. The investment pattern currently in operation needs to be turned in the opposite direction, and together government and people would be an unstoppable force protecting our nation from oil dependency and blazing a trail in energy independence for nations worldwide. The relevance to tourism here is that the visual and health-giving character of the countryside would, according to the government’s own most recent report, and those of others including the British Medical Association, be irreversibly damaged by allowing fracking, and in my opinion would most definitely undermine rural tourism as a direct result.

3.4 Further, the development of fracking in any part of the UK has the potential to affect huge rural areas through water contamination, making it difficult to live there or farm there never mind attract visitors. The only envisagable future for a fracked area in terms of destination quality is as an educational site showing people the abandoned towns which once contained healthy communities, or for students of pollution who will be able to tabulate the demise of aquatic diversity or the incidence of birth defects in mammals. It therefore makes sound financial sense for DEFRA to invest in protecting communities from those commercial interests that continue to promote fracking by enabling cleaner energy technology and taking advantage of the massive progress in energy storage technologies such as home batteries in the last few years.

Conclusion: Seek out local information and accord it high respect in the balance with strategic development proposals. Value existing local resources and highlight them in educational programmes. Develop annually reimagined inventive schemes to use rural resources to bring real happiness into citizens’ lives – this isn’t frivolous but would have a powerful impact on health. Look seriously at improving the affordability of family holidays (they needn’t be annual) at least for those that need it the most. Celebrate achievements in rural locations that capitalise on green technologies and show us to be leading the way. And when we are enjoying our own countryside we have a ready-made advert to tell the rest of the world to come and see it themselves.

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