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Executive summary

- Rural tourism is an important part of a global economy for England. Despite this, the ‘opening up’ of the English countryside to national and global populations is also seen as a detrimental factor to rural areas. These detrimental factors include population diversification, changes to rural environments and character, and local people’s attitudes towards tourism growth which produce heightened levels of group identification based on collective vested interests between the dominant social group (i.e. those ‘born & bred’ and long-term rural residents) that use levers of local power (given to rural communities under the Localism Act 2010) to maintain and protect local rural identity from such socio-spatial change. These issues are not being addressed in the recent rural tourism literature (see for example, Fernandez-Morales et al 2016; Hoppen et al 2014).

- In this submission, my aim is to highlight the opinions, attitudes, concerns and fears of tourism growth for those ‘born & bred’ and long-term residents in a small rural town in the south of England, and the ways they used the Localism Act (2010) to protect and maintain the rural identity and character of the place. This work is based on the theories of Anthony Giddens (1991) and Zygmont Bauman (2001) around threatened identities, globalisation and socio-spatial change, informal social relations and in-group vested interests. The submission also draws upon and extends research (i.e. Neal 2009) which has found that as rural identities become perilously threatened by globalised change and opportunities to diversify the rural economy, the idea of ‘rural identity’ becomes mobilised to protect the English countryside against ‘perceived’ threats. In particular, I report on relevant findings taken from the interviews conducted with 20 rural residents who mentioned feelings of concern or fear about the growth of tourism in their specific local area.

- My research concludes that while rural tourism is necessary to promote the beauty and heritage of the English countryside as well as creating economically viable communities, better balance is needed. Policies need to encourage more people from the UK and abroad to visit England’s rural areas while, at the same time, they need to alleviate the concerns and fears of local rural residents who are frightened that tourism growth is going to be imposed ‘top-down’, leading to the erosion of rural identity, environment and character. The conclusion which I draw is that, although the government’s flagship ‘Big Society’ policy gives local rural communities power to mitigate fears of loss of rural identity against tourism growth by allowing communities to protect certain aspects of their community residents deem important, the policy initiative fails to acknowledge that communities are not just people who share a geographical location (Gilchrist et al 2010). Communities are places where multiple identities are being produced, created and consumed, and because it is the dominant social group with the greatest attachment and vested interest in the local area that look for
ways to protect and maintain local rural identity, ‘Big Society’ is creating a paradox whereby on the one hand, the government are telling rural communities to diversify and grow while, at the same time giving local rural communities the power and opportunity to do what they want with their community. Consequentially, because rural communities do not want or are fearful of diversity and growth those ‘born & bred’ or long-term residents will use local power to protect their own interests and identity and character of their area. Policy recommendations are suggested.

Introduction
1. Nathan Kerrigan is a Research Assistant in the research theme Identities and Resilience in Communities and Organisations (IRCO) for CRPBA, Coventry University. I have conducted research on rural communities’ perception of eroding local rural identities and character from a wide range of antecedents including housing development, neoliberal expansion, population diversity, and the fears and concerns rural communities have regarding local identity, environment and character in relation to tourism growth. My research is prominently undertaken using ethnography and ethnographic methods such as interviews, observations and participant observations within local rural towns and villages. The purpose of my research is to elicit information from residents about their attitudes towards the impact of diversification, expansion, in-migration, and tourism in their local rural area. I am submitting findings taken from in-depth interviews conducted with residents from a small, but developing rural town in the south of England because the data indicates one of the potential challenges to tourism growth: that is, in a world of increased interconnectivity rural communities are fearful of tourism as it brings with it diversity, development and in-migrations which are perceived to be threatening to local rural identity, environment and character. I also discuss implications for government policy in terms of problems of the Localism agenda and the need for better cooperation between government and local residents to facilitate tourism growth while mitigating concerns and fears about loss of rural identity and character.

Social change, insecurity, and fear of loss of rural identity/character to rural tourism growth
2. Antithetically of previous research (i.e. Fernandez-Morales et al 2016; Hoppen et al 2014) on rural tourism in England in which a majority of residents stated tourism growth as beneficial to the local economy, a large proportion of people (15 out of 20 rural residents) who I interviewed in my research mentioned feelings of insecurity. As the interviews were semi-structured, I frequently followed-up such responses by questioning why these certain residents expressed feelings of insecurity. The purpose of the follow-up question was to explore participants feelings towards tourism growth in their local rural community. Responses provided illustrated that such feelings of insecurity were the result of wider patterns of social change in which it was not so much the creation of opportunities that would arise as a result of tourism, but rather the social and spatial changes that tourism would bring (i.e. greater diversity in
population, continuous in-migrations, building of new infrastructure to meet tourist demand/satisfaction).

3. In comparing those (15 residents) who felt insecure and those (5 residents) who did not, I found a clear difference between those who were against tourism growth, and those who were not. The 15 residents who had expressed an insecurity about change also asserted an ardent stance against tourism, while the remaining 5 who were open to change were also open to the prospect of tourism. The degree to which a resident aligned themselves for or against tourism growth was contingent on the longevity of their residency in the area. For instance, those residents who were longer-standing in the area often the negative consequences of tourism on the town (i.e. erosion of local character), while those residents who had moved into the rural community ten, fifteen, twenty tears prior to my research mentioned the booming economy as a result of tourism which brought with it greater investment opportunities for national businesses (i.e. Costa and Waitrose arriving in the town).

4. Returning to the concerns of social change that rural tourism would bring to the community where I conducted my interviews, there is a suggestion that if rural tourism continued to grow in the town this would result in an erosion of local rural identity and character. These concerns were reflected in the way the long-term rural residents talked about fear of the loss of their rural identity and character where one particular participant said: ‘Brickington’s population has increased no end....Whereas, before we had a few settlements in the town, we have now got hundreds of people coming into Brickington as they want their West Country fudge and the rest of it.. It’s chaos, it’s a constant turnover and we are losing our small rural town identity’.

5. My interpretation of these findings is that negative attitudes towards rural tourism growth were conflated with increased diversity and the corresponding loss of local rural identity. By implication then, as social change alters rural environments through compression of the spatial environment as well as social relations, rural residents with the greatest attachment and emotional investment in their local area will look for ways to maintain and protect the identity of the place. At the moment the government’s ‘Big Society’ agenda allows rural communities to do this by giving them greater control over their local community. Instead of creating more involved communities, such policies under the umbrella of ‘Big Society’ have produced communities where vested interests are played out, and identities and local characters are protected, maintained; where ‘external threats’ such as those mentioned above brought in my tourism growth are seen as – albeit subjectively -dangerous to the rural identity and character. Thus - as the next section evidences – rural communities are using policy imitative such the Localism Act (2010) to actively control their rural identity from tourism growth.
Protecting local rural identities

6. As noted above, perceived fears of rural tourism are becoming increasingly connected with local rural community discourses around protecting rural identities. Traditionally, rural areas have tended to be seen as backwards in comparison to urban areas in creating opportunities for tourism growth. Consequentially, their development was stated in terms of a catch-up process, with the foci on promoting the English countryside as a desirable place to visit for both national and international tourists. Changes in focus led to the formation of organisations such as English Heritage who, as part of their broader remit, sought to protect rural sites by making them consumerable places in which people could come and explore. However, this marketisation approach of attracting visitors to rural areas has led to the creation of ‘identity-based policies’ where there is a current emphasis placed on strengthening the regional or local identity of rural areas amidst a backdrop of wider global social change.

7. The election of the UK coalition government in 2010 saw the introduction of their concept ‘Big Society’, greater civic engagement through increased localism. ‘Big Society’ anticipated that civic engagement would create more involved individuals with a greater sense of local identity. One of the policies of ‘Big Society’ was The Localism Act (2010) which promoted wider citizenship engagement through local residents securing their own rural communities. By devolving power, the government envisioned communities having greater control over their local area; thus, allowing them to produce their own securities in a world where tourism is necessitated in order to make rural England a global competitor.

8. According to my study the ‘Big Society’ agenda has been successful to a certain degree in producing a rural community with a strong local identity. For example, in the rural context of my research local residents, despite resisting tourism expansion, came to terms with the necessity of rural tourism in a globalised future and instead used the Localism Act to create a Neighbourhood Plan. Its purpose was to provide ‘guidelines for strengthening identity along with expanding opportunities for tourism, with the expression to include a vision for the sort of place Brickington aims to be by 2026, together with an appropriate range of locally applicable development management policies to maintain the local identity of the area’. Such redevelopments included restoring the traditional ‘Brickington red brick’ buildings in the area to have a coherent theme and identity and work with the town’s historical society and English heritage to discuss protecting local landmarks and create a display of the town’s agricultural and manufacturing history in the local Museum.
9. However, one of the failings of the ‘Big Society’ approach to policy, especially rural policy, is that rural communities are not just places made up of people who share the same geographical location, but rather places which have multiple facets of identities, including tourists who come in and out of rural spaces and who are seen as ‘threatening’ to local identity by longer-term residents. One implication my study found, therefore, is the contradictory tendency of the ‘Big Society’ push. On the hand, the government are telling rural areas to diversify and grow, which as denoted above rural communities do not necessary want; while on the other hand, they are allowing rural communities to take control of their own identities in an globalised world. The ‘Big Society’ agenda, therefore, does not foster strong rural identity and strong rural development. Instead, it allows the dominant social group – those of longer-standing – of rural communities to look to their immediate surroundings to provide an anchor and secure a stable sense of identity in order to protect the rural traditions inherent in the social and spatial landscape of their area and maintain the dominance of rural character. As a result, the rhetoric of increased localism that aims to promote more involved communities, becomes used to resist change, which has consequences of constructing a social identity that attempts to reinforce the notion of a rural idyll to the exclusion of processes and people seen as representing diverse values and ideals.

Conclusions and recommendations

10. While promoting tourism in rural England is necessary for the UK to be a global competitor and to create economically viable communities, especially at a time of agricultural instability and declining rural businesses and services, government policy should not be blind to the apprehension of rural residents. Rural residents are threatened by tourism as the continuous turnout of people coming in and out of rural areas may lead to dimunute social networks and create disorganisation in such communities. Local people feel let down by government policy which advocates the expansion of a global, corporate multiculture while, although unwittingly, ignoring the local/regional identities of rural communities. Devolving power to local communities has only helped balance growing tourism and the protection of local rural identity/character so far. Ultimately though, such an approach to policy has encouraged rural communities where those longer-term resident with greatest attachment to their area will actively look for ways to maintain and protect their identity at the risk of creating exclusive and exclusionary communities of vested interests, rather than finding local solutions to strengthen local rural identity while also recognising the value of tourism growth.

11. My recommendation is that debates around expanding tourism in rural England need to include explicit discussions about better ways to balance the protection of local rural identity and promoting tourism. At the moment, increased localism under the ‘Big Society’ agenda is not working as well as it should in creating
balance. There needs to be a stronger centre ground between top-down government policy and local/regional power. To do this social research should be encouraged to explore the possible ways in which to achieve a) better policy agenda that encourages integration of national and local/regional governance (i.e. an updated version of communitarianism) and b) a central compatibility between endorsing tourism growth in a global market and alleviating local fears about loss of rural identity by strengthening rural English identity which, in turn, may boost national and international tourism to rural England.

References


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