1 Summary

- A clean and thriving natural environment is vital to rural tourism. Wildlife and environmental protection and funding are therefore vital to rural tourism. Funding and protection for the natural world is currently facing an uncertain future following the EU referendum.
- To protect the environment which underpins rural tourism following the European Union (EU) referendum we will need to maintain and improve upon existing EU based environmental regulations in order to sustain and promote rural tourism. These include but are not restricted to:
  - Habitats and Birds Directives
  - Environmental Impact Assessment and Strategic Environmental Assessment Directives
  - Water Framework Directive
  - Bathing Waters Directive
- Following the EU referendum we will also need to maintain and improve upon existing EU based environmental funding in order to sustain and promote rural tourism. Most notably funds currently provided by the Common Agricultural Policy.
- A rural environment fed by clean water and teeming with wildlife underpins rural tourism in the round; and direct engagement with wildlife forms a significant portion of rural tourism independently. ~14% of rural trips in England include wildlife watching.
- In remote communities wildlife tourism can have an even greater role. Wildlife tourists are often vital to remote communities where a small amount of investment can achieve a great deal.

2 Background

2.1 The RSPB

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) is the largest wildlife conservation organisation in Europe, with over one million members. In our efforts to protect and restore nature we manage one of the largest estates in the UK, covering c.143,000 hectares. That estate receives 1.5 million visits per year. The RSPB therefore has extensive experience of working with partners to develop strong rural tourism offers across local areas. This has been recently recognised as Sherwood Forest has been added to the over 200 nature reserves managed by the RSPB. Sherwood Forest is an underused natural asset in England and the RSPB is working to redevelop the site both for nature and to improve the rural tourism offer. The RSPB’s work is both a catalyst for and part of the rural tourism industry.
Rural tourism plays two main roles in wildlife conservation: funding and connecting people with the natural world. Wildlife conservation has never been fully funded and 60% of species have declined in recent years. Government will always form the main source of funds for this public good but a range of funding sources are necessary. Environmental tourism provides another much needed channel for funding. In addition it connects the public to the natural world and reinforces the desire to protect and restore wildlife.

2.2 Rural tourism & Wildlife

2.2.1 The Natural World is the Foundation of Rural Tourism

“oh! how oft—
In darkness and amid the many shapes
Of joyless daylight; when the fretful stir
Unprofitable, and the fever of the world,
Have hung upon the beatings of my heart—
How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee,
O sylvan Wye! thou wanderer thro’ the woods,
How often has my spirit turned to thee!”

An extract from, “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour.”

William Wordsworth

The British love affair with its countryside is founded in a sense of its wild beauty. The Romantic poets and the writers and artists that followed redefined, what were considered, its inhospitable margins as the rejuvenating heart of our island. Our cultural relationship with the countryside lives in its natural heritage and protecting and restoring that must lie at the heart of any rural tourism strategy. In addition the intuitive thoughts Wordsworth penned near Tintern Abbey are increasingly being shown to have clinical relevance as contact with nature supports our mental and physical health.

A plethora of decisions, resulting from the referendum on EU membership, now sit before government the results of which could save or savage our wilder spaces. At the centre sits the Common Agricultural Policy which provides 80% of all spending on wildlife conservation from government. That funding is in part directed by a range of regulatory protections which prevent damage and encourage restoration of natural processes.

2.2.2 The Economic Importance of a thriving natural world for tourism

Rural tourism spend in England stands at around £10 billion per year. In 2004 the consultancy GHK estimated that 60% of rural tourism is dependent on high quality

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3 http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-4251
landscape and wildlife yielding £5 billion in gross value added and supporting 192,000 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) jobs. Wildlife is a vital thread which weaves together the English landscape’s attractiveness even for those who are not directly engaging with it.

Wildlife engagement is also a significant part of the rural tourism offer in and of itself. SNH estimated that Scottish rural tourism is worth £1.4 billion per year and wildlife tourism makes up £127 million or 9% of that. English tourism figures show that ~14% of rural tourists engage directly in wildlife watching.

We last estimated the impact of the RSPB reserve network in 2009. Including all activities they brought £66 million to local communities and supported 1,872 FTEs. In all of this work it is important to remember context. As we show below in remote communities our intrepid wildlife tourists can play a very significant role in local economies. Wildlife tourism can even functionally hold communities together by, for instance, making transport infrastructure viable.

On Orkney 1/3 of all visitors will take part in bird and wildlife watching. Off the coast of Northern Ireland the RSPB seabird visitor centre on Rathlin Island is a major draw for visitors. When the centre was closed in 2014/15 for refurbishment it had a significant impact on the island’s tourism income. Estimated visits to another attraction, the Rathlin boat house, in the 5 years before the seabird centre was closed averaged at 13,252 per year. In 2014 and 2015 visitor numbers dropped to average 9,553. This is a drop of 28% in total visitor numbers. For an island population of 145 who rely not just on tourism but on use of the ferry to keep it running wildlife tourism maintains that community. The same could be said for public transport and use of local shops in remote English communities.

There is also significant room for growth following investment. Bempton Cliffs for instance was already a significant wildlife site providing visitors with opportunities to see species such as the Puffin. Between 2010 and 2014 there were 53,000 visits per year on average. With support from the Coastal Communities fund the RSPB introduced new visitor facilities offering, among other things, light refreshments. In 2015/16 visits rose to 80,686, a 50% increase.

Response to consultation questions

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4 [https://www.visitbritain.org/destination-types](https://www.visitbritain.org/destination-types) estimated by adding day trips to overnight stays from the rural data excel spreadsheet and rounding.
5 [https://www.cbd.int/financial/values/unitedkingdom-valueenviron.doc](https://www.cbd.int/financial/values/unitedkingdom-valueenviron.doc)
6 [http://www.snh.gov.uk/docs/B720765.pdf](http://www.snh.gov.uk/docs/B720765.pdf)
7 Data from [https://www.visitbritain.org/destination-types](https://www.visitbritain.org/destination-types) shows that 18% of all trips in England are rural. [https://www.visitbritain.org/archive-great-britain-tourism-survey-overnight-data](https://www.visitbritain.org/archive-great-britain-tourism-survey-overnight-data) Shows that in 2014 there were 92.61 million trips in England and so there were approximately 16.7 million rural trips in that year. 2.35 million trips were specifically for wildlife watching which is 14% of all rural visits.
10 Moyle District Council, “Rathlin Boat House Visitor Centre Visitor Numbers”
11 Caroline Carey – Pers Comm. Via Terry Goldsmith
**2.3 Funding and fiscal policies: How can public funding be best targeted to get new rural tourist businesses off the ground and keep them going? Are changes needed to tax levels and business rates?**

Following the EU referendum the vast majority of the funding which protects the natural environment is facing uncertainty. The UK as a whole will need to maintain and improve upon existing EU based environmental funding in order to sustain and promote rural tourism.

Around €2.5 billion are spent in England each year from the Common Agricultural Policy. €217 million of the CAP spending goes into pillar II which supports environmental protection and rural development. That policy has shaped the rural landscape for decades. Any change in CAP policy will have broad implications and presents both an opportunity and a threat to nature and in turn the rural tourism that relies upon it. With 60% of rural tourist visits relying on a high quality landscape it is clear that maintaining existing funding for rural landscape and wildlife protection is necessary to underpin future rural tourism.

This will also include funding from sources such as LIFE and Interreg which have provided important funds to rural communities. LIFE has an indicative budget for the UK of around €44 million per year. Interreg has, for instance, co-funded projects such as RESTORE. RESTORE helps to turn old quarry sites into rich wildlife habitats. The economic impact of 5 restored quarry sites in the Trent and Tame valleys including the RSPB Middleton Lakes. We found that they supported visitor spending of £14 million a year and 380 FTE jobs in that area.

In addition to European funding, UK based funds such as the Coastal Communities fund and the Landfill trust have been important sources of investment. For instance the visitor centre at Bempton mentioned above was part funded by the Coastal Communities fund. Landfill trust funding has been dropping in recent years as unrecyclable waste quantities have fallen as well as due to changes to the scheme. DEFRA and others could work with Treasury to ensure that hypothecated funds from behavioural taxes are not eroded as that tax successfully changes behaviour. Options to achieve this might be to raise the tax to maintain pressure to change behaviour or to investigate other useful behavioural taxes.

Spending on species reintroductions and support can also provide significant tourist draws. The White tailed Eagles on the Isle of Mull support £3 million a year in tourist spend. Investing in support for tourism around the beaver colony on the Otter for example could significantly boost business in that area.

Planning and regulation: What, if any, changes are needed to planning and other regulations covering rural areas of special character, such as National Parks, to encourage sustainable tourism?
This question is bound directly to this inquiry’s other question, “Local environment and character: How can national and local policies get the right balance between growing tourism and enhancing the local environment and character?”

The key regulations which underpin wildlife protection, and by extension the high quality environment offered to rural tourists, come from the European Union. To maintain and improve our natural environment we will need to ensure that we maintain or increase these protections following the EU referendum. We outline the directives most pertinent to rural tourism here. These directives cover wildlife and habitat protection as well as fresh and coastal water quality.

2.3.1 Habitats and Birds Directives
A recent review of the Habitats and Birds directives (The Nature Directives) for instance found them to be highly effective, good value for money and not to place undue burden on business. The Nature Directives have generated many important benefits for nature conservation and sustainable development overall. They provide a balanced and workable framework for addressing the varying interests of stakeholders while respecting nature conservation objectives. The costs of implementation are reasonable, and outweighed by the benefits. The Nature Directives evolved over time and so remain relevant, with no major suggestions for changes to the main texts arising during the stakeholder consultations. In addition the extensive review showed that any change would generate uncertainty and be counter-productive in both nature conservation and economic terms12. Transplanting these laws into UK law would provide stable continuity and protect the environment that supports rural tourism.

2.3.2 Environmental Impact Assessment and Strategic Environmental Assessment Directives
Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEA) and Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) are related tools whose purpose is to ensure that decisions to consent certain projects are made with full knowledge of that project’s environmental effects. SEAs are political assessments of policies and strategies while EIAs are technical assessments with specific geographic and technical specifications. They do not apply to all development, in England there are usually only a few hundred EIAs per year.

SEAs and EIAs do not prevent projects happening and instead identify likely negative environmental effects and how they should be prevented, reduced or offset, and any positive impacts. This reduces risk to the environment, can help improve the overall quality of development and reduce risk and cost to developers and decision makers by highlighting significant issues early in the consenting process. Of particular note for rural tourism development there is a requirement for public consultation, and for this to be taken into account by the decision-maker. This allows local rural businesses who would be affected to have a say on developments which might impact on their business thereby devolving some power locally.

2.3.3 Boating holidays and the Water Framework Directive
In 2014 there were 2.43 million trips to enjoy our rivers and lakes on canals, rafts, canoes and kayaks\(^{13}\). These activities rely upon clean water but only 17% of our freshwater bodies are considered to be in good status\(^{14}\). The poor status of our freshwater habitats is bad for wildlife and shows an opportunity to grow rural boating tourism by improving water quality.

The key regulation governing water quality restoration in England is currently the European Water Framework Directive (WFD). The WFD aims to bring together the various fragmented pieces of European water policy into one coherent package. Its main features are:

- A focus on river basins as the geographical units for water management
- Streamlining legislation
- Expanding the scope of legislation to include all surface and ground-waters, including estuaries and coast
- Achieving good status for all water bodies by a set deadline
- Setting ‘emission limits’ and quality standards
- Ensuring that the costs and benefits of action are understood
- Involving citizens in river basin planning

Following the EU referendum we must work to replace or improve upon these provisions to prevent any regression in terms of water quality. That in turn would likely have an impact on wider rural tourism and more directly on wildlife and boating tourism.

2.3.4 The Seaside and the Bathing Water Directives
In 2014 there were 10.48 million trips to the beach in England\(^{15}\) much of whose beaches are rural. Our coastal seas were once hazardous to swim in but by 2015 97% met minimum standards\(^{16}\). Those standards had been set in 1976 by the EU Bathing Water Directive (BWD). Like the WFD the standards and requirements of the BWD must be maintained or improved to support English beach goers and by extension rural tourism.

2.4 Defra role: What more should the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs do to ensure government departments (including Departments for Communities and Local Government, Business, Innovation and Skills, Culture Media and Sport and HM Treasury) support rural tourism?

Protecting and restoring the natural environment can only be done if all government departments take collective responsibility. DEFRA can take a leading role in ensuring that understanding of the needs and threats to the natural world are well understood across government. Furthermore DEFRA can use its expertise to help all departments to better

understand the roles they can play in supporting the natural world. By working collaboratively on all interconnected aspects of sustainable development rural tourism will in turn benefit.

Specifically to the issues outlined above maintaining or increasing the funding for wildlife conservation and environmental protection, following the EU referendum, will rely upon close work with Treasury and DCLG. Treasury will hold ultimate power over these new funds. DEFRA should prioritise making a case to hold on to much of this funding even if the schemes through which it is spent are new and improved. That case will rely in part on the necessity to protect the rural economy by maintaining and restoring the environment it relies upon.

DCLG is likely to receive some control of funds such as Intereg. Ultimate control might be devolved but overall rules governing those funds could heavily affect their future. A similar case might be put to DCLG for the ability to use local funds to protect and restore the rural environment.

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