

# The Economy behind Rural Tourism

The term rural tourism may sound quite simplistic at first but it is actually quite complicated to pin down to a simple definition and must be separated from other non-urban aspects like agri-tourism and industrial heritage tourism. Rural tourism can have urban elements, such as the style and management of the complexes but the location and pursuits are generally centered within the countryside and the holidays must represent the culture, history and landscape of that particular area. Rural tourism is a vital part of tourism sector as a whole but while there are some definite economic and social benefits to the area when rural tourism is managed well, there can also be a negative impact.

The statistics speak for themselves: rural tourism in Europe in 2014 provides around 6 million bed spaces in 500,000 establishments, representing around 15% of the total accommodation capacity of Europe. Together with related services, the sector generates more than €100 billion in direct spending – mostly in the local economy – and is a critical element for the survival and revitalization of many rural areas.



Successful ventures have shown that counter-urbanization and well-managed rural tourism sites can have a positive effect on the area's economic stability and growth.

There is a belief that for tourism to be truly rural, it must live up to the sense of perceived rurality that holidaymakers hold on to when thinking about country retreats. Rural tourism draws people into the country with certain ideals and this means that the problem of rural depopulation can be addressed more effectively and beneficial in-migration can be encouraged further. This counter-urbanization has aided growth by bringing skilled, understanding entrepreneurs to these rural areas and allowing them to use their ideas and capital and develop the area as a viable tourism site with benefits for locals and visitors. An important element of this is socio-cultural development, something that is seen in those regional areas that embrace this rural heritage and promote local pride made the perceived rurality more of a reality.

Once rural tourism is established in a community, the positive results can be quite far reaching. A great starting point is rural service retention. Facilities within these locations can be improved with new developments that cater for incoming tourists and transport links are often enhanced to meet the greater demand, meaning these remote communities are no longer so remote. Sometimes these businesses

and cultural facilities will renovate run-down rural properties but these resources are also ideal for accommodation for tourists and are even used for better housing for the local community.



On a related note, the new staff employed in these new businesses are given new skills and training in industries that may not have been in the area before – notably IT and hospitality – and this progression is enhanced even further by the fact that more women are being employed in areas where traditional male roles were more dominant. Not only has this addressed inequality, it can also stem the flow of female outmigration. These positive changes then contribute to the creation of a better image for the area and regeneration initiatives that can lead to better marketing and attract even more investment into the area – all of which should mean a positive cycle of progression and growth. Last, but not least, there is the potential for environmental benefits, such as the preservation of the countryside for hiking or conservation areas for wildlife enthusiasts.

The biggest benefit seen in these rural areas is, of course, economic. As recently as 2010, figures for this industry in England alone showed that it was worth more than €34 billion and was responsible for 10% of rural businesses and 12% of employment in those areas. It is a big business with a lot of potential and some see this as being the result of micro-business activity – individual entrepreneurs tapping into the spirit of the area rather than big urban developers and chains – because of the focus on local control and the impact on the area. As a result, successful rural practices have meant that this form of tourism has increased local income and prospects significantly; however, there is also the potential for losses and damage when the schemes are mismanaged.



Rural tourism is a delicate balancing act and when the rural aspect is neglected in favor of the facility's growth and urban edge, there can be negative consequences for the region.

Again we must look at the economic angle to rural tourism to see the other side of the picture. It is easy to focus on the likely gains in revenue and employment for the area but many warn these rural communities about the dangers of relying too heavily on this one industry alone and the risks they are

taking in these companies. The micro-business approach has its advantages but how well can these ventures compete with a large-scale company that may wish to move in, those that could well be more focused on short-term gains rather than aiding the local area through their current connections?

Other issues to be addressed regard environmental damage and the likelihood of increased urbanization – two unfortunate but sadly common factors in rural tourism developments. The physical impact has been noted for decades, such as via erosion from construction on the delicate landscape and the damage to vegetation underfoot, but the effects continue in wider-reaching ways with water and air pollution, litter, noise disturbances and disruption to wildlife. The more people that enjoy this “perceived rurality” the greater the pollution produced, the feet on the ground and the redevelopment of the landscape. Furthermore, the closer these formerly remote countryside resorts get to the urban cities, the more tainted they can get. Urbanization easily seeps into these areas putting cultural heritage at risk.

Rural tourism is clearly an important sector in terms of revenue and employment, especially for that local community, and it can help to ensure economic stability; however, doing so in a way that benefits the area and the landscape is not so straightforward. There are potential problems in increased urbanization and damaging the area if schemes are mismanaged but, when they are managed well, they can tap into a desirable part of tourism while helping that rural region.

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