

# Stakeholders in Rural Tourism Policy and Planning: Local Access Forums

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**Abstract** | Rural tourism policy and planning in the UK takes place in a fragmented manner through a number of separate sectors, but the method of funding local authorities means that they are in control of implementation at local level. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 was responsible for the creation of Local Access Forums before August 2003, each of which is now required to advise the access authorities regarding the implementation of the legislation. Through participant observation of 4 recently formed Local Access Forums and comparison of the findings with previous research, this paper examines the continuing contribution of stakeholders involved in decision making processes and the lessons that have been learned in the first year of existence. The research contributes to the debate over the nature, outcomes and extent of stakeholder participation that is generated through this process.

**Keywords** | Stakeholder Participation, Rural Tourism Policy, Local Governance.

**Resumo** | A política e o planeamento do turismo rural no Reino Unido ocorrem de um modo fragmentado, através de um conjunto de sectores individualizados. Contudo, o método de financiamento das autoridades locais significa que elas controlam a implementação a nível local. O *Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000* foi responsável pela criação de Fóruns de Acesso Locais antes de Agosto de 2003, cada um dos quais está agora encarregue de aconselhar as autoridades a respeito da implementação da legislação. Através da observação participante de 4 recentemente formados Fóruns de Acesso Locais e da comparação dos resultados com pesquisa realizada anteriormente, este artigo examina a contribuição contínua dos *stakeholders* envolvidos no processo de tomada de decisão e as lições que foram apreendidas no primeiro ano de existência. A pesquisa contribui para o debate sobre a natureza, os resultados e a extensão da participação dos *stakeholders* que é gerada por este processo.

**Palavras-chave** | Participação dos *Stakeholders*, Política de Turismo Rural, Governância Local.

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## 1. Introduction

In accordance with the manifesto of the Labour party, when elected to government it proceeded to update earlier legislation relating to the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 (Parker and Ravescroft, 1999). This culminated in the passage of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (Defra, 2000b), that was directed initially, at increasing the proportion of land available for access; in addition to improving the Rights of Way network. Implicit in the legislation is the aim of inclusivity, both in the decision making process and the use of the countryside for recreation and exercise.

The Rural White Paper: Our Countryside (Defra, 2000a), was published in the same year as the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CROW) became law. Due to the declining importance of agriculture within rural economies, it has been recognised that tourism plays an increasingly important role and the Rural White Paper acknowledges this explicitly:

“Tourism is an important rural business. Day visitors spend around £8 billion a year in the English countryside.” (Defra, 2000a)

In the case of tourism, policymaking takes place in several different economic sectors due to its fragmented nature and it is not, therefore, a well-organised sub-sector (Tyler and Dinan, 2001). The lack of co-ordination is being addressed in principle by government policy but at local government level, any spending that takes place is in accordance with the local allocation of resources. This can reduce the effectiveness of overall policymaking as policies may or may not be implemented as intended (Tyler and Dinan, 2001).

From the late 1960s governments have been required to achieve increasingly sophisticated outcomes but without the corresponding increases in funding (Siehl, 2000:95). Public/private partnerships and utilising the efforts of volunteers have been some ways that governments have attempted to

reduce the financial burden. The adaptation of stakeholder involvement, previously used in business management, has become increasingly valued by governments as a tool to achieve democratic renewal and active citizenship through participation (Selman, 2001). The connection between sustainability and stakeholder participation has been made explicit by the United Nations (UNEP, 1992), and clearly sustainability is an important factor in efforts towards rural regeneration.

CROW legislated for the creation of Local Access Forums that are intended to advise their access authorities on matters relating to the Act and access relevant to their areas. Access authorities can be either Highway departments of local councils or National Parks authorities (Defra, 2000b), if the forum relates to a national park. A forum in this instance will be composed of no more than 22 individuals who represent landowners, users of the countryside, and other interests relevant to a particular area. They usually meet 4 times each year and members of the public may attend and observe the meetings. The forums were initially organized by the access authorities, having followed a process of advertising and selection for members.

## 2. Stakeholder theory

Stakeholder theory had its origins in business and has been concerned with focusing on organizations and the contribution of stakeholders to management decision making. Although the theory is still evolving, it is primarily based around the belief that it is ultimately in the best interests of an organization to involve stakeholders in the decision making process (Scholl, 2001). The reduction of conflict between the business and its stakeholders assists the organization in avoiding costs associated with conflict and to function more smoothly. It is considered that shareholders ultimately benefit from these outcomes.

Where stakeholders are brought into collaboration for a specific project, the collaboration will have a life cycle relative to the project. Potential stakeholders will be identified and included in the collaboration at appropriate stages of the cycle (McManus, 2005:34). The participation of stakeholders is considered to have value both during and after the life of the project, empowering the participants as they increase their knowledge and abilities (McManus, 2005:46). Identification of stakeholders is an aspect of the theory that causes concern since Freeman (1984:46) defined a stakeholder as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisation's objectives".

Nonetheless, the questionable legitimacy of a claim to be a stakeholder has led to a number of models designed to assist in their identification (Friedman and Miles, 2002; Mitchell *et al.*, 1997).

There are examples of stakeholders preferring to stay outside the collaborative process. The Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society remains outside the possibilities of partnership so that it can follow its own agenda without being suppressed by the perceived majority. It does not consider the issue of environmental sustainability has been adequately addressed in Canada and is in direct opposition to tourism organizations that impinge on the ecological integrity of the parks. Nonetheless it is seen as one of the many stakeholders involved in the national parks, albeit with a polarized and narrow stance and a limited input (Lovelock, 2002).

During the 1980s Greenpeace had confrontational relationships with large corporations, but altered its alliances as its popularity fluctuated. In an effort to achieve sustainable solutions, Greenpeace began to work with organizations such as Calor and Renault to improve the efficiency and environmental friendliness of the products they manufacture (Friedman and Miles, 2002). In both of these cases, the NGOs have a clear focus on their goals and in the case of project based collaboration, the focus is provided by the specific nature of the project.

It has been argued that issues relating to unbalanced power relations tend to be disregarded in studies relating to collaboration. They suggest that unequal distributions of power as well as differences in beliefs and values may lead to collaboration being disadvantageous to some stakeholders in addition to those stakeholders who remain outside the collaborative process (Hardy and Phillips, 1998).

In their examination of the collaboration in the Peak District's Hope Valley visitor management plan, Bramwell and Sharman (1998) considered that the power distribution favoured the authorities. Although several aspects of the collaboration were considered to be successful, the authors expressed reservations about the level of inclusiveness and the limitations on consultation techniques that could be due to restricted resources available to the group. Although the collaboration improved the legitimacy of the visitor management plan, it was noted that only partial consensus was achieved (Bramwell and Sharman, 1998).

There have been a number of case studies carried out in Canada where rural access and development have been proposed and stakeholder involvement has been encouraged. The Banff Bow Valley study was organized in an effort to reach a consensus between the interests of the environmentalist lobby and "developers" within the Banff National Park, with a specific instruction to involve the public in the debates (Brent Ritchie, 1999). Not all stakeholders interpreted the discussions at the Round Table meetings in the same way and despite superficial politeness, there was an undercurrent of discord as business and environmental interests worked to make their views understood. It was clear, however, that the parks' administration had difficulty in juggling the requirements of the major stakeholders alone, without accounting for local interest groups (Jamal and Eyre, 2003). It was suggested that "process related recommendations are thus offered to help separate the important aspect of meaning making and shared understandings from the more instrumentally focused negotiation of strategies and solutions" (Brent Ritchie, 1999).

Process based participation in the UK has been examined through analysis of the informal Access Liaison Groups that preceded Local Access Forums (Ravenscroft *et al.*, 2002). There is concern that the political adoption of stakeholder involvement will weaken stakeholder theory as it may become too broad in its application (Phillips *et al.*, 2003), and the attempts to involve stakeholders in a political sphere have led to issues being raised regarding the effectiveness of the process. Particular concerns highlighted through the examination of the Access Liaison Groups have been:

- The risk of superficial debates in order to avoid conflict;
- The risk of small groups dominating the process;
- The risk of advisory groups becoming less committed if they feel unproductive.

(Ravenscroft *et al.*, 2002)

The political desire to include the community in decision making is believed to be valuable in establishing a deeper level of commitment, as active citizenship is seen as a necessary feature of the stakeholder relationship with government (Ravenscroft *et al.*, 2002). However, the main concerns appear to lie with the possibility that government, at both national and local levels, may have found a mechanism for deflecting responsibility without transfer of power (Ravenscroft *et al.*, 2002).

### 3. Current research into implementation in local access forums

In carrying out research into the decision making processes of the recently formed Local Access Forums it has been decided to undertake qualitative studies in selected areas. Those that have been selected for in-depth study are the counties of Nottinghamshire

and Suffolk, in addition to the national parks of the Lake District and the Yorkshire Dales. The Local Access Forums of the two counties and the two national parks that have been chosen will be the subject of separate comparative case studies carried out over a period of twelve months. The methods include observation of the public meetings and semi structured interviews with members of the forums and attending members of the public.

The counties that have been chosen were selected for their differences. Nottinghamshire has an historical connection with outdoor recreation and tourism through its association with the Robin Hood legend and it is well served by road, rail and air travel. Suffolk is more recently becoming involved in tourism and has an undeveloped transport network without motorways or airports. However, the county has recently developed new structures for policy making that should enable it to take account of and respond to rural issues (Caffyn *et al.*, 2002).

The national parks that were chosen were selected for their similarity in the sense that both have multiplicity of users that require strategic approaches. The Lake District has developed responses to government initiatives that are intended to promote use by all groups in a sustainable manner, as evidenced by the 4B and Mosaic schemes (Lake District National Park Authority, 2004). The Yorkshire Dales is traversed by major walks due to its central geographical position and also experiences interaction between users due to its popularity with cyclists and users of motor vehicles.

From July 2004, a total of 16 Local Access Forum meetings in 4 locations have been observed with the explicit intention of examining the implementation of the legislation and the underlying processes. Semi-formal interviews have been carried out with 18 members of the forums and the initial findings broadly support those highlighted by Ravenscroft *et al.* (2002) regarding Access Liaison Groups:

- In an effort to reach consensus, it is acknowledged by several of the members interviewed, that

superficial debates are essential in order to avoid the process breaking down, as polarized views are often inflexible;

- Certain groups view themselves as intrinsically more valuable to the process and try to dominate proceedings, leading to the continued legitimization of traditional interest groups, rather than the inclusion of minority groups;
- In 3 of the locations observed it has been noted that 25% of members fail to speak during any of the meetings;
- In one particular case it has been observed that the access authority has taken advantage of the right to veto and approve proposed members regardless of the views of the forum;
- Several members report disenchantment with the process as they see themselves simply ratifying decisions made by the authorities;
- Observation of meetings have indicated that in all cases, the access authorities tend to overwhelm the members through reproduction of detailed information that does not require decision making or action;
- The loss of goodwill, where members feel their input has little value, is expected to lead to withdrawal from the process at the end of their term, in 50% of members interviewed.

#### 4. Conclusion

The continued development of participative democracy has led to the adoption of stakeholder involvement in political agendas. As a vehicle for rural regeneration, tourism and recreation have become involved in the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 as it offers increased access to popular resources. However, the adaptation of a business focused theory, so that it could become more process

based and less project based, has led to a hybrid that may not always achieve the desired results. It can be seen that some organizations prefer to remain outside the collaborative processes but for those that have chosen to become involved, the desire for consensus can be seen to have a limiting effect on the quality of debate. Where this is combined with a restricted agenda and limited power, the process can be seen to have a negative effect on members in the collaboration. This can be identified as the potential for loss of goodwill, leading to long term withdrawal from the process by those citizens who had been initially willing to participate. Despite government rhetoric of inclusivity, there is evidence that the selection process as carried out by the access authorities has been manipulated, thus legitimising the activity of the access authorities and the status quo. This raises the possibility that, like many other “devices”, Local Access Forums may serve the interests of those with political and symbolic “power”, rather than necessarily serving economic or social need. It could be argued that the constitution of the Local Access Forums reflects a traditional view (ideology) of the countryside, and that there is still reluctance to reform attitudes to access, in the light of the changed economic realities of the countryside. The nature of CROW may have been “radical” but it has been distorted by traditionalists during implementation.

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