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19 Likely future trends in countryside recreation in upland areas of Britain

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INTRODUCTION

This is a paper of ideas rather than numerical forecasts. A timescale of nearly 25 years (to the year 2000) is too great for sensible forecasting; and, as we shall show, demand for countryside recreation will be heavily influenced by the nation's economic state (which is unpredictable) and by attitudes and policies affecting the uplands (to assume which would beg the questions posed to the symposium).

Recreation — and, even more markedly, recreational demand — is no independent variable: rather does it mesh most closely with other aspects of land use, life, economic activity and politics in the uplands. While sticking to our subject, we shall try to show some of these links.

A word of definition — we take 'countryside recreation' to be recreational activity, mainly outdoors, in the countryside, villages or country towns of the upland areas, pursued both by those who live in those areas and by those who visit them. These visitors from outside the uplands will include many who are merely there on a day trip, but also many 'tourists' who are away from home for a night or more. Thus the subject is closely meshed to that of tourism.

In this paper, we look in turn at two aspects of 'likely future trends' namely:

- (i) trends of demand and factors affecting demand;
- (ii) attitudes, policies and other factors affecting supply.

TRENDS OF DEMAND

Much has been written (eg Patmore, 1970; Tanner, 1973 & 1974; Davidson &

Wibberley, 1977) about the enormous growth in many aspects of countryside recreation from about 1950 to the energy/economic crisis of 1973 — a growth in numbers of people walking, rambling, riding, sailing, canoeing, pursuing manifold other activities and (above all) going on car-borne pleasure trips into the countryside which prompted the passing of the Countryside Acts, the creation of many country parks and much other action by public and private bodies.

This growth in countryside recreation was made possible primarily by the rise in average disposable incomes and in car ownership. The significance of these factors has been confirmed by the slowing down or even halting of growth in many aspects of countryside recreation during the last four years of faltering economy and higher energy prices as recorded, for example, by Duffell (1975) in relation to recreational motoring, and by Dartington Amenity Research Trust (1977a) in relation to second home numbers in Scotland.

The future scale of demand for countryside recreation by visitors to the uplands may thus depend substantially on the state of the economy, the rate of change in disposable incomes, and the price of petrol. The Countryside Commission for Scotland and others (1976) attempted to assess the forward prospects in these and related factors, and their possible effect upon trends in countryside recreation; and concluded that further growth could be expected but might well be accompanied by a shift in emphasis towards shorter average recreational journeys, greater use of public transport (which remains available) and lower cost activities.

Even before the rise in petrol prices, it was very noticeable how most city-dwellers wishing to visit the uplands (whether on day trips or longer visits) would choose those uplands which were nearest to them. Thus the Highlands are visited mainly by Scottish residents, the Yorkshire Dales by Yorkshire people and Mid-Wales by people from the West Midlands. This pattern gives a strongly regional flavour to the participants in recreation in many areas, and may lead to marked patterns of repeat visiting. This, in turn, is related to an evolution in the relations between townsman and countryside which we believe may have growing significance over the next quarter-century.

Since before the campaigns of a century ago to secure 'access to the mountains', there has been a strong minority of town-dwellers who sought recreation, often of strenuous kind, in the hills, and who made their way to the hills by train, bus or on foot. It was largely for them that access provisions finally became law in the 1949 National Parks Act.

Within a year or two of the passing of that Act began the flow of that very different tide of visitors, arriving in their tens and (within a few years) their thousands of cars into the uplands. Many of them were wholly unfamiliar with the countryside separated from its traditions by five or more generations of urban life, eager to see it, but timid. Therefore, they tended to keep to the main roads shown on

their small-scale motoring maps, to venture off the road only where land was clearly open to them, and to gain little serious contact with the countryside or the country-dweller...

...until, that is, they gained a measure of confidence. Looking over the hedge, reading the AA Book of the Countryside, listening to the Archers, visiting a nature trail or a farm open day, many such townsmen become familiar with the countryside. They buy larger-scale maps, they explore the side roads, they seek out the footpaths and the country pubs, they talk to farmers, they launch into active pursuits such as fishing, canoeing, sailing and pony-trekking. As tourists, they may forsake the familiar coastal resorts and bring their caravan into the hills; they may partake of farmhouse holidays; they may even buy a country cottage as a second home.

The National Household Survey of Countryside Recreation, currently in hand for the Countryside Commission, should throw some light on how far this evolution of the townsman's awareness of the countryside has yet reached. Clearly, there are many still unfamiliar with the countryside and limited in their activity after years of visiting it: more people are joining their ranks as car ownership gradually expands. But a single post-war generation of mass motoring has produced a growing army of people who are not only visiting the uplands but penetrating it in their recreation and increasingly identifying themselves with it.

This has formidable implications for many upland areas. On the debit side lie the physical impact of traffic, trespass and witting, or unwitting, damage to crops and stock; the inflated prices in popular tourist areas; the competition by second-home purchasers on the local housing market; the cultural impact of outside language and customs. On the credit side lie the injections of visitors' money into the local economy; the support given to local bus and other services; the income and employment for local people; and, less easily measured but of possibly high significance for the future of the uplands, a new constituency sympathetic to political support of their well-being.

FACTORS AFFECTING SUPPLY

Upon the balance between such debits and such credits, as perceived by the residents of the uplands and their political spokesmen, may depend much of the attitude and policy which affects the supply of countryside recreation in the uplands.

The last few years have seen a welcome emphasis upon the need to reconcile the demands of recreation (and of that other purpose of the National Parks Act, the protection of upland landscapes) with the social and economic needs of those who live and work in the uplands. This emphasis was expressed in the Sandford report (DoE, 1974); the Government's response to it (DoE, 1976; Countryside

Review Committee, 1977 a & b); several of the new generation of National Park Plans; and is indeed already reflected in a range of policies and actions in the uplands.

In places, these policies will have the effect of dampening or diverting demand. Examples are the measures of traffic control proposed in the Dartmoor National Park Plan; the Lake District National Park's new policies designed to restrict new housing to local people; and three of the four optional strategies for outdoor recreation in the Hadrian's Wall area proposed by Dartington Amenity Research Trust (1977 b). Such measures, of course — where they are successful in dampening demand in one upland area — are likely simply to divert it to another (possibly upland) area.

Many other policies, however, are aimed directly to meet recreational demand in ways compatible with the interests of local people. These include provision of facilities on land not in other productive use, or as secondary use of suitable resources; means of easing the movement of visitors through the countryside; development of recreation and tourism enterprises on farms; and measures of information and interpretation of the countryside to the visitor. We comment briefly below on each of these four kinds of action.

Many upland areas already have quite a range of recreation facilities — caravan and camp sites, chalets, walks, scenic drives, nature trails, picnic sites, car parks, visitor centres and so on — established in places where they are unobtrusive and do not much impinge upon productive land. The Forestry Commission has done much in this field, as have some water authorities, thus securing not only some extra use, but also some extra financial return and political justification, for the resources they have invested; and recreational use could well help to justify future investment by these bodies in the uplands. Some disused and derelict land in the uplands has been put to new use for recreation, thus sometimes generating new employment to replace that lost: examples are the disused railways of the Peak District (now laid out as trails), the Llechwedd slate quarry at Blaenau Ffestiniog (now a visitor centre), and the army camp near Trawsfynydd (now a holiday chalet centre). Such facilities permit recreation to take place in the uplands without impact on productive land.

Some much-visited upland areas, however, have few resources suited to such segregated use for tourism. In these areas, visitors are bound to penetrate hill farming land and may well have adverse impact upon the farming community. The Lake District is one such area: and in that National Park has been pioneered, through the Upland Management Experiment, a set of techniques for reconciling the visitor and the farmer. By the creation of small lay-bys, the provision of stiles, the repair of walls, the building of footbridges and the like, it has been shown possible to take the visitor through the uplands without damage to farms. In the

process, the physical works have provided employment for local people, and the landscape has been improved (Countryside Commission, 1977).

But the farmer and the visitor do not everywhere need or want to stay at arm's length. Farming families in many upland areas have chosen to cater for visitors by providing farmhouse accommodation, caravan or camping sites, farm teas, sales of farm produce, pony-trekking or other facilities — and thereby to gain extra income or to permit a son or daughter to find work in the area (Davies, 1971 & 1973; Dartington Amenity Research Trust, 1974). Since the uplands are generally areas of marginal farming, in which farm incomes are precarious and the EC's socio-economic directives may be of high relevance, the economic benefit offered by recreation may be of real significance over the next 20 years. The extent to which farm-based recreation develops may depend, however, on the attitudes of farmers (which vary greatly, on this subject, from area to area), on the evolving nature of agricultural support and advisory systems, and on the reaction of planning authorities to recreational development on farms.

The last decade has seen the provision, on quite a wide scale, of facilities to inform the visitor about the countryside and to interpret it to him. These include National Park (and other) information centres, wayside signs, a variety of interpreted trails, farm (and other) open days, guided walks, visitor centres, leaflets, booklets, books, films, radio and television programmes. The townsman has the opportunity to learn a great deal about the countryside. Our impression (from research by the Dartington Amenity Research Trust for the Countryside Commission and others) is that people are progressively taking advantage of that opportunity, though there is clearly a lumpen mass who are content to regard the countryside simply as a place to find 'peace and quiet and a bit of scenery'. Despite the distortions and romanticism in some of the interpretation, this increasing knowledge of the countryside is bound to give a strong extra twist to the process of identifying the townsman with the uplands, and even of integrating the visitor to a degree into the upland community. It is now common, for example, to see urban visitors taking a competitive part in annual shows and fairs in the uplands, or helping the hill farmer as part of regular holidays there.

Thus the strong impression is of upland communities who have reconciled themselves to acting as hosts to visiting townspeople, and who are rapidly developing a set of facilities and techniques to cope with those visitors and to turn this invasion into a benefit to the hill community. This process seems certain to continue over the next two decades, with countryside recreation becoming a part of what might be called the multi-purpose management not merely of hill land, but of the upland society and economy. It is not by chance coincidence that we see National Park authorities (with a brief to provide for countryside recreation in their upland areas) searching for ways to assist the social and economic

well-being of hill communities, while the Development Commission (with a brief related to that well-being) moves towards the production of 'action plans' which incorporate elements of tourism and recreation.

This coming together of different arms of public concern and action is of high significance for the future of the uplands, and echoes the wide scope of the present symposium. Our hope and expectation is that, within the present century, we shall see multi-purpose management and support for hill lands, societies and economies, with countryside recreation — for hill resident and visitor alike — as an integral element.

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