



Research Paper

Partnership working in enhancing the destination brand of rural areas: A case study of Made in Monmouthshire, Wales, UK



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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the challenges of destination development and branding in rural tourism destinations, for example a lack of coherent destination propositions, lack of iconic structures, lack of differentiation in their tourism product portfolio and a high incidence of micro-businesses. Such factors mean that the creation of a coherent destination brand is often difficult and yet, at the same time essential, for such destinations. This paper explores the role of collaboration and partnership amongst public, private, and voluntary sector agencies in formulating a product brand which is coherent, asset-based and community-led. Using a case study of the Made in Monmouthshire (MiM) brand, an Adventa-led initiative which serves as a quality benchmark for food, drink, arts and crafts produced within and around Monmouthshire, the article demonstrates the role of collaborative development in the creation and development of a destination brand.

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1. Introduction

Tourism is often adopted as a tool for local, regional and national development (Sharpley, 2002) indeed, in the United Kingdom (UK), there has been increased involvement in tourism at all levels of governance, as a growing number of agencies have sought to capture the economic benefits of tourism. These interventions are underpinned by the growing recognition that rural areas, as well as urban areas, play an important role in economic growth. Indeed, Phillipson et al. (2011) identified that rural areas in England now contribute 19% of Gross Value Added to the national economy, have more businesses and start-ups per head of population than urban areas (excluding London) and exhibit higher levels of entrepreneurial activity. A contributing factor to rural areas growing economic importance has been the shift away from agriculture to the service sector (Cochrane, 2009). As Shucksmith (2012, p. 4) observes 'an increasingly important element of economic development strategy for many rural communities is making money from the appeal of landscapes, rural environments and local cultural; heritage'.

In Wales, rural tourism makes more of a contribution to the rural economy, than it does in England and Scotland. The Welsh Assembly Government (now Welsh Government) (2010) for example estimates that rural tourism accounts for 49% of trips and 43%

of spend compared to only 42% of trips and 36% of spend in England. Indeed the nine predominantly rural counties of Wales (Denbighshire, Conwy, Gwynedd, Ynys Môn, Powys, Ceredigion, Pembrokeshire, Carmarthenshire and Monmouthshire) account for 68% of trips to Wales made by UK staying visitors. An annual total of £1075 million of staying visitor spend or 62% of total staying visitor expenditure in Wales takes place in these nine counties (Welsh Assembly Government, 2010). It is clear therefore, that tourism makes a vital contribution to the economy and communities of rural Wales in terms of exports, revenue, supporting local businesses, especially food, drink and arts and crafts.

However, despite the importance of tourism in rural areas, the industry faces a number of challenges if it is to remain competitive. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2006) for example warn that, as new destinations compete against entrenched tourism destinations, many regions face challenges to tourism growth. The OECD (1994, p. 13) also recognise that in relation to rural destinations, whilst they possess assets 'worthy of preservation' the 'global condition has become steadily more urban'. Thus rural destinations are competing in a difficult, crowded and competitive marketplace (Williams & MacLeod, 2005). In order to ensure that rural destinations can compete into the future, they will need to have 'stand out' differentiated products as destination distinctiveness is going to be critical (Hudson & Ritchie, 2009). Thus the challenge for rural destinations is to identify, develop and promote such differentiation through a coherent destination brand.

Such distinctiveness is particularly crucial for rural tourism in Wales where, despite its important economic contribution, the

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average spend per trip and per night is lower than the Welsh average, largely because of fewer spending opportunities. In addition, international visitor data indicates a lower proportion of overseas trips to the rural counties, accounting for 49% of trips, but fewer than 40% of nights and under 39% of spend (Welsh Assembly Government, 2010). Another challenge is that the rural tourism industry in Wales, like many other rural destinations, is dominated by small-scale businesses and there is often competition, rather than co-operation, in addition to:

low awareness amongst small-scale businesses and other destination stakeholders about the importance of developing and implementing local rural tourism strategies that positively, competitively and sustainably harness the attributes of the destination and which reflect the local nature and qualities of the landscape, arts and crafts, food, drink and traditional skills. (Haven-Tang & Jones, 2012, p. 28)

Against this backdrop, it is of no surprise that the Welsh Government is keen to strengthen rural tourism in Wales through the development of public–private–voluntary sector partnerships. The intention is that whilst tourism's contribution to economic growth will largely be achieved through private sector-led activity, the public sector will play a key role in facilitating such partnerships and thus maximising tourism's economic impact (Welsh Assembly Government, 2010). Thus product development, through public–private–voluntary partnerships has been identified as a way of creating competitive advantage for tourism destinations by ensuring that local communities are part of the process of deciding how destinations are managed, marketed and developed. In Wales, partnerships are seen as integral to the development of this competitive advantage by improving the quality of the tourism product, visitor experience, skill levels, local supply chains and business opportunities; as well as enhancing community involvement in tourism. Against this backdrop, this paper uses a case study approach to explore how partnership working has been utilised in rural Wales, specifically the role of a LEADER+ funded initiative (Adventa) to facilitate a partnership between local tourism businesses and acting as the catalyst behind the creation of a coherent destination brand. Its focus is the Made in Monmouthshire (MiM) partnership, an Adventa-led initiative, which has involved bringing together local food, drink, arts and crafts producers to develop MiM as a destination brand. The paper demonstrates the pivotal role of Adventa in instigating, co-ordinating and nurturing this asset-based community partnership.

2. Theory

2.1. Rural tourism

Rural tourism is not a new phenomenon, as rural areas have always attracted tourists (Alexander & McKenna, 1998; Edgell & Harbaugh, 1993; Lane, 2009; Sharpley, 2007); however, the escalation in rural destination consumption is more recent. Urry and Larsen (2011) assert that traditional rural life is being transformed by increases in rural tourism destination consumption, tourist preferences for real and natural experiences and changes in modern agriculture. The OECD (1994, p. 14) list the following characteristics of rural tourism:

located in rural areas; functionally rural – built upon the rural world's special features: small scale enterprise, open space, contact with nature and the natural world, heritage, “traditional” societies and “traditional” practices; rural in scale – both in terms of buildings and settlements – and, therefore, usually small-scale; traditional in character, growing slowly

and organically, and connected with local families....sustainable – in the sense that its development should help sustain the special rural character of an area, and in the sense that its development should be sustainable in its use of resources... of many different kinds, representing the complex pattern of rural environment, economy and history.

Rural tourism development in whatever its form, is often adopted as a tool for rural restructuring and improving rural economies (George & Reid, 2005; Mair, 2006; Lane, 2009; Scott, Christie, & Midmore, 2004; Sharpley, 2007; Sharpley & Craven, 2001; Sharpley & Vass, 2006; Williams & Ferguson, 2005; Williams & MacLeod, 2005; Wilson, Fesenmaier, Fesenmaier, & van Es, 2001). However, the inherent characteristics of rural destinations and the distinct lack of differentiation between rural destinations and rural tourism products is a challenge. Many such destinations have similar assets in terms of landscape, food, culture and heritage and tend to lack iconic structures. Therefore, it is difficult to create a strong sense of identity which has implications for destination branding. In addition, the topography of rural destinations reduces destination visibility and profile by exacerbating geographical dispersion and isolation, which can subsequently have a negative impact on destination branding. Dispersion and isolation might also have a detrimental effect on the way micro-businesses interact with each other, ultimately affecting the development of a coherent destination brand.

In an increasingly competitive marketplace, rural destinations are realising the need for sustainable competitive advantage to differentiate themselves from other destinations. Thus many rural areas are working hard to attract and retain visitors through innovative packaging of those aspects of their destination, which are difficult to replicate in other rural destinations. These are then reinforced with a strong destination brand. In achieving this, many rural areas have recognised that cultural distinctiveness, particularly in relation to arts, crafts and local food and drink assets is one way to differentiate their tourism offer (Bessière, 1998; Cole, 2006; Hjalager & Corigliano, 2000; Ignatov & Smith, 2006; Ilbery & Kneafsey, 1998; Richards, 2007) and to develop a destination brand (Kuznesof, Tregear, & Moxey, 1997; Spilková & Fialová, 2013).

2.2. Destination branding

Many authors have emphasised the crucial role of destination branding in rural areas. Spilková and Fialová (2013) for example recognise that regional branding can promote rural regions and products by creating links between small or medium sized enterprises. Furthermore, ‘branded products combined with the opportunity to meet the producers and visit their workshops or farms strengthen the attractiveness of a region for tourists’ (ARZ, 2011 cited Spilková & Fialová, 2013, p. 181). Indeed Morgan, Pritchard, and Pride (2011, p. 4) assert that destinations ‘exist only through the act of marketing’. In other words, ‘a “place” only becomes a “destination” through the narratives and images communicated by tourism promotional material’. Against this backdrop it is essential that rural tourism destinations, in the face of increasing competition from other tourism destinations (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2009), and their lack of differentiation, consider how their indigenous assets can be cohered into a destination brand. In the words of Morgan et al. (2011, p. 5), ‘having a strong brand is hugely important for any destination whatever its size in the fight to combat increasing product parity, substitutability, and competition’.

However, the challenge for many destinations is in developing distinctiveness and a brand, particularly in rural areas where the product can be offered by others (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2009). The

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