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Exploring cultural heritage tourism in rural Newfoundland through the lens of the evolutionary economic geographer



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ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine rural heritage tourism through the lens of the evolutionary economic geographer. We justify this perspective by arguing that cultural heritage tourism is a branching-innovating trajectory, and, as such, its evolution may be understood by analyzing the mechanisms (recombination, layering, and conversion) that drive path development. We demonstrate this in a study of Newfoundland, a resource-dependent region where heritage assets are being mobilized to facilitate economic diversification. Drawing on survey and interview data, we describe the entrepreneurial agents involved in path development; document the products emerging from their engagement; and assess their local employment impacts. Our analysis reveals that newcomer and returnee in-migrants, in particular, influence trajectory development; that their actions produce a variety of material goods and intangible experiences; and that their initiatives generate limited full-time employment opportunities, but provide sufficient hours to qualify workers for government assistance. We conceptualize these findings to illustrate how, in the presence of supportive institutional policy and innovative consumers, entrepreneurial actions influence heritage tourism path development, and local livelihoods, in transitioning resource-dependent regions.

1. Introduction

Over the course of the last fifteen years, evolutionary economic geographers (e.g. [Martin, 2010](#); [Steen and Karlsen, 2014](#)) have traced the contemporary structure of transitioning resource regions back to their historical roots. They present a variety of path-dependent, and path-emergent trajectories to describe this evolution ([Salamonsen, 2015](#)), and identify a variety of constraining, and enabling conditions to explain their emergence ([Isaksen and Jakobsen, 2017](#)). While most seek to understand the development of productivist corridors (e.g. [Steen and Karlsen, 2014](#)), a small number focus on consumption-oriented paths (e.g. [Brouder, 2017](#)). In this article, we contribute to this literature by using an evolutionary lens to understand rural heritage tourism - a particular type of consumption-focused pathway. We justify this perspective by arguing that tourism, which commodifies cultural heritage, is a branching-innovating trajectory, and, as such, its emergence, and transformation, may be understood by analyzing the mechanisms (recombination, conversion and layering) that drive path development ([Steen and Karlsen, 2014](#)). Newfoundland, Canada, is the site chosen for investigation.

Supporting a population of 528,817 residents ([Newfoundland and](#)

[Labrador Statistics Agency, 2017](#)), the province of Newfoundland and Labrador is situated along the country's eastern edge, far removed from its economic core (Ontario and Quebec; [Bone, 2018](#)). Sustained for centuries by its marine resources ([Norcliffe, 1999](#)), this dependency faltered in the latter half of the 20th century, as over-fishing decimated the northern cod stock¹ ([Overton, 2007](#); [Schrank and Roy, 2013](#)). In response, the Federal Minister of Fisheries and Oceans closed the fishery in 1992 (initially, temporarily), ending "an international industry that had endured for close to 500 years". ([Higgins, 2009](#)). This action precipitated "the largest single layoff in Canadian history" ([Dunne, 2003](#), p. 20), and forced stakeholders to consider alternative development paths. Although various economic trajectories are now co-evolving in the province (e.g. energy, manufacturing, shellfish harvesting, and aquaculture; [Bone, 2018](#)), we focus here on tourism, given our interest in consumption, rather than production-oriented pathways.

Tourism has been promoted in Newfoundland for more than a century. Introduced initially to attract outdoor adventurers, and recreational hunters and anglers ([Seymour, 1980](#)), the sector expanded after Confederation (in 1949) when infrastructure investments were allocated to improve the region's accessibility, and parks and heritage sites opened to enhance the tourism product ([Brake and Addo, 2014](#);

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¹ The spawning biomass of northern cod declined by 93% between 1962 and 1992 ([Higgins, 2009](#)).

Seymour, 1980)ⁱⁱ. Growth continued, following the moratorium, as visitor attraction was highlighted in a series of strategic plans. In 1992, for example, tourism was identified as one of three growth areas (along with manufacturing and energy), because “the combination of its scenic beauty, its long and colourful history, its pristine areas, its rich culture and the renowned talents of its people constitute a resource that is still underdeveloped and underestimated” (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 1992)ⁱⁱⁱ. These resources were later highlighted in the 2009 strategic plan (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2009), which described the province as an ‘exotic destination’, which:

Offers unique, compelling experiences that are differentiated from traditional travel destinations. Our rugged landscape comes with 20,000 miles of dramatic coastline, infused with rich icons of whales, icebergs, and wildlife. It's a place steeped in creativity with a vibrant spirit, engaging culture, and an ancient history. A place where you can, at the same time, lose yourself and find yourself.

In a more recent plan, tourism has again been touted as one of several strategies to strengthen the province's economic foundation (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2016). In this document, the promise of ongoing marketing, research co-ordination, visitor service upgrades, and product development, demonstrates the government's ongoing commitment to mobilize, and market, its varied heritage assets (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2016).

These efforts have contributed to both employment and income growth within the province. Data collected by the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador (2016), reveal that direct tourism jobs increased between 2009 and 2016, from 13,000 to 18,000. As visitor numbers have increased (from 382,557 in 1998 to 503,100 in 2015; Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Tourism, Culture, Industry and Innovation, 2016; Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Tourism, Culture and Recreation, 2011), tourist expenditures also have risen, from \$790 million in 2009, to nearly \$1 billion in 2016 (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2016)^{iv}. Tourism is thus clearly benefitting the province, and contributing to diversification of its economic base.

Despite this trend, few studies have been undertaken to identify the role of entrepreneurial agents in this development, and their impacts on local communities. Indeed, Rockett and Ramsey (2017, p. 299) recently surmised, that “there is little research on the effects that tourism development has on rural communities in Newfoundland”, and, “if tourism is increasingly being viewed as a viable option to diversify rural export economies, studies of this nature will be important”. In a recent paper (Mitchell and Shannon, 2017), we analyzed in-migrants' routes to tourism proprietorship to set the stage for closing this gap. In this article, we consider proprietors' impacts on rural Newfoundland's heritage tourism industry, and, in turn, how this industry impacts local employment. While a mobilities perspective guided our earlier study, an evolutionary economic geography lens informs the present analysis.

2. The evolutionary economic geography lens

The past decade has witnessed a proliferation of studies in economic

ⁱⁱ The province has four designated World Heritage sites: L'Anse aux Meadows, Mistaken Point, Gros Morne National Park and, Red Bay Basque Whaling Station; and, more than 20 places of national and provincial interest (Rockett and Ramsey, 2017; United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2017).

ⁱⁱⁱ To promote these assets, a 500-year anniversary celebration of Cabot's landing was mounted in 1997 (McCabe, 2017), and a highly successful advertising campaign initiated in 2006 (Rockett and Ramsey, 2017; Stoddart and Sodero, 2015). Newfoundland's global reputation was enhanced further by the outpouring of support shown during the terrorism incidents of September 11, 2001 (Dvorak, 2016).

^{iv} Annual fluctuations in visitation do occur, despite this overall trend. Non-resident visitation in 2015, for example, was slightly lower than in 2014 (507,900). Despite this small decrease (0.9%), spending by non-resident visitors increased slightly between 2014 and 2015 (0.3%) (Department of Tourism, Culture, Industry and Innovation, 2016).

geography that look to the past to understand present economic patterns (e.g. Boschma and Martin, 2007; Grabher, 2009). This burgeoning interest has given rise to the field of evolutionary economic geography, whose proponents recognize that:

The current state of affairs cannot be derived from current conditions only, since the current state of affairs has emerged from and has been constrained by previous states of affairs. Evolutionary theory deals with path dependent processes, in which previous events affect the probability of future events to occur (Boschma and Frenken, 2006, p. 280–81).

At its crux, then, is the notion of path dependence; a concept appropriated by geographers from economics (e.g. David, 1985, 1994), to help explain the structure of local and regional economies.

A defining characteristic of path-dependence is “non-ergodicity,” or, the inability of regions to “shake free of their history” (Martin and Sunley, 2006, p. 399). This situation typically has been viewed as a state of lock-in (David, 2005), or as Martin (2010, p. 8) describes, as “the self-reinforcing process of collective behavior by which an economic system converges to a history dependent equilibrium state from which it cannot escape”. Recently, however, scholars have realized that path-dependence does not always yield a steady, or equilibrium, condition (Martin, 2010). Rather, as Page (2006) purports, different outcomes may arise, which may continue to maintain dependency on events of the past. This alternative interpretation paves the way for alternative scenarios, with their emergence dictated by constraining and enabling influences.

In Fig. 1, we present five scenarios, drawn from evolutionary economic geography scholarship, which arise from (or in the absence of) different path-development mechanisms. Three emerge from a path-dependent trajectory. The first, path exhaustion, is evident when “the innovation potential of local firms has been severely reduced or innovations take place only along a restricted technological path” (Isaksen and Trippl, 2016, p. 69). The second, path extension, arises from the conversion mechanism (Brekke, 2015). In this scenario, innovative products or processes are incorporated incrementally into existing industry, increasing their competitiveness and, potentially, facilitating regional stability (Brekke, 2015; Gjelsvik and Aarstad, 2017; Zukauskaitė and Moodysson, 2016). Layering, an alternative mechanism, produces a third scenario: path renewal (Martin, 2010; Salamonsen, 2015; Steen and Karlsen, 2014). Here, inter-industry learning (Zukauskaitė and Moodysson, 2016) may encourage establishment of related firms (Steen and Karlsen, 2014), which subsequently contribute to regional cluster development (Asheim et al., 2006).

The final two scenarios deviate from the others in that each emerges from radically new innovation. The first, path-dependent, path-emergence, stems from the recombination of a territory's “vital heritage” (Steen and Karlsen, 2014, p. 134) with new capital assets. It may develop following an external shock (Tonts et al., 2014), and will give rise to what Steen and Karlsen (2014, p. 134) describe as a “branching-innovating trajectory.” In contrast, the last scenario is one of path-emergence. In this situation, entrepreneurs, with “competencies and critical resources” (Isaksen and Jakobsen, 2017, p. 358), engage in mindful deviation (Garud and Karnøe, 2001) by combining capital assets that are unrelated to the original development path. Thus, unlike other mechanisms, this process is truly “path-breaking” (Hedfeldt and Lundmark, 2015, p. 91), yielding an independent development trajectory. Although a desirable direction, it may be a pathway “of the impossible” (Wilson, 2014, p. 19), given the impediments that many rural spaces face (Isaksen and Jakobsen, 2017; Nilsen, 2016).

Evolutionary economic geographers identify a variety of factors that influence the trajectories we have described (Fig. 1). At least three are constraints, which may curtail path creation and/or development. The first, institutional thinness, describes a regional scarcity of individuals and organizations with the necessary resources to facilitate innovative activity (Blundel and Lockett, 2011). Industry fragmentation, the

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