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## Putting place on the menu: The negotiation of locality in UK food tourism, from production to consumption

Rebecca Sims\*

Lancaster Environment Centre, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YQ, United Kingdom

### A B S T R A C T

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This paper uses a case study of tourism in the Lake District and Exmoor to explore the relationship between 'local food' and sustainable rural tourism in the UK. Drawing on qualitative interviews with tourists, food producers and café, pub and restaurant owners, I use an approach based upon the commodity chain to trace the shifts in the discursive and material understandings of the 'local' that take place throughout the tourist food chain. These shifts are shown to occur in response to the need to negotiate the tensions between the ideals and the practicalities of food production and consumption which occur as a result of the relationships that exist throughout the food chain. Such conclusions are shown to be important for our understanding of the links between 'local food' and sustainable rural tourism because they indicate that we must attend to the values, as well as the practicalities, that drive the contemporary food sector at all stages of the food chain, from production to consumption.

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### 1. Introduction

In recent years, attempts to boost the economic sustainability of rural areas have focused increasingly upon tourism as a possible means of achieving these goals (Clark and Chabrel, 2007; Eastham, 2003; Ilbery et al., 2007; Woodland and Acott, 2007). As Urry (1990, 1995) has noted, tourism is an activity that involves the consumption of place, with visual, cultural and historical aspects of destinations proving particularly important to visitors (Bessière, 1998; Hodges, 2001; McIntosh and Prentice, 1999). Rural landscapes, traditions and cultural practices can therefore be packaged and constructed for tourist consumption in the hope that increasing numbers of visitors will result in the generation of a multiplier effect that will benefit the local economy (Shaw and Williams, 2004; Torres, 2002).

However, while tourism may bring some form of economic prosperity to a rural region, there is a growing recognition that this must be balanced against some of the more negative changes that can take place when increasing visitor numbers place pressure on a destination (Picard, 1995; Shaw and Williams, 2002). Consequently, contemporary efforts to develop a 'sustainable' tourism industry in rural regions acknowledge that the concept of sustainability must include, not just economic considerations, but also a concern for the social, cultural and environmental facets of

a destination (Clark and Chabrel, 2007; Ilbery et al., 2003). This recognition has led to a renewed focus upon trying to promote consumption of the kinds of tourist products and services that will enhance, rather than detract, from the quality of the rural region in question.

One example of this process at work is the recent drive to promote locally-sourced food products to tourists, with many researchers claiming a host of benefits for such products, ranging from environmental advantages as a result of reduced food miles through to the social and economic gains that can result from boosting rural farm incomes and creating 'iconic' products that can be used to brand a region for further tourism development (Boniface, 2003; Clark and Chabrel, 2007; Enteleca Research and Consultancy, 2001; Ilbery et al., 2003; Torres, 2002; Woodland and Acott, 2007). Similar debates are also taking place in agriculture, where a focus upon local food and drink products sold through 'alternative' outlets such as farmers' markets and organic box schemes form part of a drive to improve the sustainability of "traditional" farming – and the landscapes and communities sustained by those activities – while also overcoming some of the difficulties faced by food producers in the 'conventional' sector, where falling incomes and a loss of consumer confidence are creating problems for farmers (Boniface, 2003; Ilbery and Kneafsey, 2000; Marsden, 2004; National Farmers' Retail and Markets Association, 2007; Parrot et al., 2002; Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food, 2002; Tregear et al., 2007).

In reality, however, the link between sustainable rural tourism and the 'local food' sector is problematic in a number of ways. Firstly,

\* Tel.: +44 1524 510261.

E-mail address: [r.sims@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:r.sims@lancaster.ac.uk)

there is debate about how sustainable 'local food' really is (Edwards-Jones et al., 2008). Attempts to conduct scientific studies to try and ascertain the 'carbon footprint' of any one particular food product are fraught with difficulty, not only because it is very hard to decide where the system boundaries should be drawn (some studies include factors such as the storage and transportation of particular products, while others neglect to include the emissions resulting from the production of fertilisers and pesticides used in the production process), but also because the carbon footprint of any one product can vary throughout the year – as well as between two different producers in the same area – on account of the different production techniques employed (Edwards-Jones et al., 2008).

Even if we take on board the many social and cultural arguments that are made in favour of local food products within tourism, there are numerous practical barriers to increasing their consumption, many of which stem from the ways in which the global food and tourism sectors are structured. For example, the importation of cheaper food stuffs from overseas combined with the continued dominance of the major café, restaurant and hotel chains (even within rural regions of the UK) can present problems for small producers who must compete with such actors in order to sell their products to tourists (Ilbery et al., 2004; Renting et al., 2003; Ritzer, 2000).

In addition to this, there are conceptual barriers to change which concern the meanings, values and goals of local food consumption. As previous studies have highlighted, 'sustainable tourism' and 'local food' are both contested concepts which relate, not just to particular agricultural and tourism practices, but also to value judgements about how the food and tourism sectors should operate (Hinrichs, 2003; Hobson, 2002; Maxey, 2007; Reynolds, 2000). Such judgements are intertwined with the ways in which we understand and value society, culture and place, and therefore any attempts to change food consumption habits must first address the more complex values which underlie our practices of growing, producing and shopping for food (Morgan et al., 2006; Warde, 1997).

This paper highlights these challenges for sustainable rural tourism by tracing the discourses and practices relating to 'local' food as they are negotiated and renegotiated throughout the tourist food chain, from the producers marketing the products, at one end, through the cafés and restaurants supplying them, and finally to the tourist consumers who buy and eat them, at the other. The empirical basis for this analysis comes from a study of the role that food plays within tourism in the United Kingdom. The research in this paper is based upon two case study regions of the Lake District and Exmoor and, using evidence from qualitative interviews with tourists, food producers and restaurateurs in these regions, I show how the concept of 'local food' is constantly reconfigured, both discursively and materially, in response to the need to negotiate the tensions between the ideals and the practicalities of food production and consumption which occur as a result of the relationships that exist throughout the food chain. Such transformations in the meaning and practice of 'local food' highlight the futility of simplistic approaches to promote sustainability within tourism which attempt to gloss over the conflicts that lie behind the term.

The following sections provide the foundations for this analysis by reviewing the policy context behind the development of the local food and sustainable tourism agenda before exploring what the literature has to say about local food and the use of commodity chains in social research. I then outline the methodology used for the study and highlight the relevance of food tourism for research in this area, before going on to discuss the results of the research.

## 2. Local food and sustainable tourism – the policy context

The current changes taking place within the agriculture and tourism sectors can be linked to a series of cultural and political

developments which reflect growing concerns over economic and environmental sustainability. Within agriculture, for example, farm incomes and practices have been affected by the continuing reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (Jackson et al., 2006). The CAP reforms have also formed a backdrop to an increasing awareness of agriculture's contribution to environmental problems, not only through the application of industrialized production techniques, such as the use of fertilisers and pesticides, but also through carbon emissions resulting from the transportation of food products around the world as part of an increasingly globalized food economy (Buller and Morris, 2004; Riley, 2008). At present, food is calculated to be the average household's primary impact on climate change, accounting for 31 per cent of our climate impact (Sustainable Consumption Roundtable, 2006). More recent food scares such as those concerning BSE, Foot and Mouth Disease and the safety of genetically modified foods have added further weight to the call for a safer, more sustainable food system (Blay-Palmer and Donald, 2007; Boniface, 2003; Kneafsey et al., 2004). This was reflected in a report from the government's Policy Commission on Farming and Food which concluded that: "One of the greatest opportunities for farmers to add value and retain a bigger slice of retail prices is to build on the public's enthusiasm for locally-produced food, or food with a clear regional provenance" (Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food, 2002, p. 43).

This report was followed by the publication of the Sustainable Farming and Food Strategy, in 2002 (Defra, 2002). The strategy sets out how industry, the government and consumers can work together to secure a sustainable future for our farming and food industries. It also includes a commitment to work with the food industry beyond the farm gate in order to develop a Food Industry Sustainability Strategy (Defra, 2006) which is designed to ensure that all stages of the food chain adhere to best practice standards in order "to ensure that improved economic performance is not at the expense of the exploitation of people or the environment and that they do not disadvantage future generations" (Defra, 2006, p. 7) This strategy, as well as the publications which precede it, is based firmly upon a discourse of sustainable development throughout the food chain – from production to consumption.

Similar developments have also been taking place in the tourism and rural development sectors. At the supranational level, the EU LEADER programme, which is funded by European Union structural funds, is about promoting sustainable development in rural areas of Europe in ways which address economic, social and environmental concerns (European Commission, 2009a). A key role of the programme has been to help add value to sustainable local craft and food products – for example, the Cumbria Fells and Dales LEADER + project, which operates in the North West of England, has supported initiatives linked to upland farming and the production of Herdwick sheep.<sup>1</sup>

Other policy initiatives to have made the link between food and drink and sustainable rural tourism include the SPRITE project – a European initiative designed to promote integrated tourism in Europe's lagging rural regions (European Commission, 2009b). 'Integrated Rural Tourism' (IRT), which has also been described by researchers as "all-round sustainable tourism" (Clark and Chabrel, 2007; Ilbery et al., 2007), is distinguished by the fact that it is not just concerned with the sustainability of the rural tourism industry *per se*. Instead, it aims to enhance the local economy, environment and culture in order to create a strong rural community in ways that can be enjoyed by hosts as well as guests. Local food and drink

<sup>1</sup> The Herdwick is a traditional breed of sheep which is renowned for its hardiness. It comes from the county of Cumbria and can be used for its meat or wool. <http://www.herdwick-sheep.com>.

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