

NATIONAL PARKS WALES
Britain's breathing spaces

Mr Rhodri Glyn Thomas AM
Chairman
Rural Development Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff CF99 1NA

Sent via email: ruraldev.comm@wales.gov.uk

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Dear Mr Glyn Thomas,

Inquiry into Rural Tourism

Thank you for this opportunity to contribute to the inquiry you are undertaking that examines rural tourism within Wales.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Brecon Beacons National Park Authority (BBNPA); the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority (PCNPA) and Snowdonia National Park Authority (SNPA) manage the three National Parks in Wales, which cover approximately 20% of the land area.
- 1.2 National Parks have two statutory purposes set out within Section 61 of the 1995 Environment Act:
 - conserving and enhancing the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the areas;
 - promoting opportunities for the public understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of those areas by the public.
- 1.3 In carrying out these responsibilities the National Park Authorities (NPAs) shall to seek to foster the economic and social well-being of their local communities. They are independent local authorities operating within the local government framework.
- 1.4 The Welsh Association of National Park Authorities (WANPA) is the partnership of the three NPAs that raises the profile of issues affecting National Parks and co-ordinates the dissemination of NPA expertise to applicable policy.

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- 1.5 We welcome the opportunity to comment on this important area of strategic work and congratulate the Committee on addressing it. We believe that tourism has developed into one of the most important components of the rural economy, the reach of which extends far beyond the immediately visible visitor economy. In an era in which income from agriculture is in significant decline, rural Wales has few other economic drivers and it is essential that the country manages its tourism economy with a view to gaining maximum public benefit from it. It is unclear where else the rural income will come from in future.

2. The Role of Tourism in the Rural Economy

- 2.1 When planned with sustainability in mind, few industries purchase so much of their raw materials from their local area; few customers of any other industry purchase so much from so many local businesses; few industries can contribute as much to their local culture and environment.
- 2.2 A tourism business will purchase from local food producers, will hire local laundry services, local publicity designers, local web designers, etc and will use local shops to fulfill many of their needs. Indeed, the more remote the community in which they trade, the more likely it is that they will rely upon local trade.
- 2.3 Equally visitors welcomed into a community will spread their business amongst village shops and pubs, local garages, post offices and may even use local bus services. If there is an agricultural show, an eisteddfod, or a theatre production they may patronise these too – indeed the increasing emphasis on *Sense of Place* in Welsh tourism makes this all the more likely. All these resources are essential to the continued quality of life of local people. It is hard to see how many of these can survive financially without the support of tourism.
- 2.4 Environmentally, Rural Wales has much to offer visitors in terms of high quality experiences. If the income that flows from these is fed back into conservation management, if local people value their birds of prey or clean rivers more, if visitors leave with a heightened appreciation of the needs of the countryside, then tourism is capable of contributing.
- 2.5 Sensitive, sustainably managed tourism can protect and enhance the nation's special qualities; notably the special qualities of landscape, culture and language exemplified within our National Parks. Tourism's symbiotic relationship with our high quality environment, cultural heritage and identity contributes strongly towards their protection and management.
- 2.6 Clearly tourism is not without its drawbacks and these must be dealt with at a community and a regional level. However the management of visitors and the impact they create is a core role and responsibility of National Park Authorities. We have increasingly involved ourselves in this process, using opportunities that the relatively new concept of destination management has given us to engage with tourism partners and take forward a broader agenda that focuses on the medium-long term sustainability of tourism.

2.8 Because of the relatively low GDP contribution of rural areas, it often appears that they are overlooked as the 'bigger bang' is sought elsewhere. However the rural areas of Wales are what makes up the country's core identity and they are neglected at its peril. It is essential that the role tourism plays in supporting high quality of life objectives in our rural communities is acknowledged by policy makers at local, regional and most importantly at national levels.

2.7 Tourism is an essential component in the economic, social and environmental framework of Rural Wales. We believe that this role has been historically under-recognised and under-valued. Tourism often supplements other economic activities such as agriculture, whilst receiving very little tax-payer subsidy in comparison. Whilst it may appear as if it has lower GDP impact at a pan-Wales level, in terms of rural communities it is difficult to see what other form of economic development is capable of having as great an impact.

3. Is support for rural tourism is being effectively co-ordinated by the Welsh Government?

3.1 All three NPAs work very closely with Visit Wales and their Regional Tourism Partnerships. We consider ourselves an essential component of the tourism delivery work of Wales and as key partners of the Welsh Government.

3.2 We were considerably concerned when major cuts in Visit Wales' budgets were announced several years ago and regret consequential curtailment of significant parts of their work. Rural Tourism has suffered especially since there was pressure to direct cuts at rural areas due to the lower volume of visitor spend.

3.3 We regard this approach as short-sighted since it cut across other public policy objectives like social cohesion, quality of life, environmental conservation, in/out-migration etc. We would argue for greater attention to be given to rural tourism development where it can be done in a way that promotes sustainability in its broadest sense – such as, where it is shown to benefit communities, environment and economy together.

3.4 National Park Authorities are key partners in the ensuring the coordination and development of a sustainable tourism sector. Around 20% of Wales is located within National Park boundaries and the sheer concentration of recreation linked tourism makes them key stakeholders in delivering national and regional tourism objectives.

4. How could the Welsh Government improve the way it delivers support for rural tourism?

4.1 The Central Wales Spatial Plan Tourism Action Plan produced in 2007 (as well as the South West Wales Plan TOAP) still has major relevance to the improved delivery of tourism and its products in rural Wales as a whole. In addition to these, major improvements in the structures supporting and deliver have been recommended in the Destination Management paper (2009) produced by Visit Wales. Coordinating and funding the delivery of these two strategic interventions would go a long way to ensure that rural tourism is not neglected.

- 4.2 In general this work is less about significant capital interventions and more about capacity building, empowerment and engagement – none of which are necessarily expensive, but all of which involve long term commitment to the support and development of local businesses and their communities.
- 4.3 The funding that is critically important is that which supports the maintenance and development of the public realm visitors use for free during their stay here. In the case of National Parks case this refers to the landscape and the means of access. Therefore, the funding of Rights of Way Improvement Plans and the Coastal Access Grants has contributed to the delivery of a high quality visitor experience.
- 4.4 It is a bitter irony that the more successful we are in attracting visitors, the more pressure is put on the rural environment and the organisations responsible for management. Some sort of mechanism that is capable of providing a positive financial feedback into the management of the tourism resource from increased visitor spend is perhaps fanciful at present, but it is becoming increasingly necessary at a time when public sector budgets are getting tighter while visitor numbers continue to rise.
- 4.5 In addition, very little research or investment has been focused on reducing the negative impacts of tourism upon the natural environment – one of Wales’ main tourism generators – especially within the National Parks; unintentional degradation of our natural environment will negatively impact upon tourism. We also believe that additional research is also required that considers how we may reduce the traffic and transport impacts of tourism.
- 4.6 We believe the key delivery mechanisms are the destination management partnerships working closely with the Regional Tourism Partnerships. That way the strategic and local efforts can be combined to best effect. We also welcome the re-introduction of targeted tourism capital grants from the Assembly Government.
- 5. What progress has been made on the actions contained within the various Welsh Government strategies relevant to rural tourism?**
- 5.1 Rural tourism has linkages to a huge variety of Welsh Assembly Government strategies. These obviously include those directly pertinent to tourism but also rural economic development (incorporating agriculture interests); land-use planning; transport; culture and heritage; and, health and wellbeing. A broader analysis suggests that there has been progress against stated actions, although the list is so diverse and wide-ranging that an in-depth analysis would require better industry-specific indicators; several relevant documents contain actions but omit indicators – easily collated and measured indicators are vital for modelling the future of rural tourism. To this end the National Park Authorities may be able to assist by way of their State of Park Reports which contain such data.
- 5.2 In examining the relevant strategies, it is evident that the strategic framework needs to be updated to take into consideration the emergence of more recent sectoral and regional strategies. An overarching strategy need not be too detailed, but should bring together all relevant sectoral layers. For example, better integration between transport and tourism strategies would lead to a reduction in

environmental impacts and without a doubt, improve the quality of the visitor experience by reducing congestion and supporting sustainable transport.

5.3 The major concern is that less priority is often given to tourism in rural areas as they are perceived to be lower generators of economic wealth. Whilst this may be true at a national level, in terms of the proportion of their local economy, tourism has an extremely high impact and this needs to be recognised at a strategic level. Perhaps the key message is that rural economies are different and need to be treated as such.

6. Have these strategies been sufficiently updated in light of a number of organisational and policy changes over recent years?

6.1 There is an urgent need for a review of the 2007 Action Plan for Central Wales. We are currently involved in discussions around a new Mid Wales Tourism Strategy which should achieve much of this and we welcome and will support this initiative.

6.2 One notable area which requires an updated strategy is outdoor activity tourism. Compared to its size, this sub-sector can result in significant impacts within the National Parks – both positive, economically and negative, environmentally. Assisting operators in delivering a sustainable outdoor activity tourism sector is vital given its prominence and projected growth. One example of best practice can be found within Pembrokeshire which contains *the Pembrokeshire Outdoor Charter/Marine Code* this has received funding from Visit Wales in the past. However, it is continually under threat because of uncertain financial support year on year. Proven initiatives of this type and quality require reliable, stable core funding since a great deal of effort is expended chasing funding on an annual basis.

6.3 As champions of rural causes, National Park Authorities are eager to assist the development and delivery of relevant strategies; for example, both the Snowdonia National Park Authority and the Pembrokeshire Coast NPA have recently embarked on the production of Recreation Strategy/Plans which will provide the strategic framework for future development within the sector. They will aim to maximise economic output, whilst delivering environmental protection and enhancement and supporting local involvement. They will deal with recreation opportunities both for visitors and local people and focus both on health and economic benefits.

6.4 Updated strategies should provide indicators to demonstrate their effectiveness.

6.5 The support of rural tourism is a partnership based activity and we need to ensure that as many stakeholders as possible are engaged in the development of this work. Some public sector agencies may fail to see how rural tourism is relevant to their own work, effort has to be made to modify this mindset.

7. Have the organisational changes of recent years assisted in delivering the objectives of the various strategies?

7.1 Visit Wales' location within the Welsh Assembly Government has both assisted and hampered delivery. Being closer to the Minister has demonstrably proved an

advantage and in theory being part of the civil service should have led to policies that are more coordinated, though this has not always been the case. Incorporation has however led to more bureaucratic inertia and to the organisation being more constrained in its actions. . Equally its incorporation into the WAG coincided with major budget cuts, which impacted its ability to deliver swiftly and decisively.

7.2 As far as Rural Wales is concerned however the regional structure has meant that many of these structural changes have had less negative impact on the ground and the experience has truly shown the effectiveness of the Regional Tourism Partnership structure, as evidenced by the 2008 review of RTPs and the outcome of the Destination Management Review. The continuity that the RTPs represent has been extremely helpful.

8. What contribution has the *Cultural Tourism Strategy* made to developing rural tourism?

8.1 Culture is a key component of Wales' USP and nowhere is this more evident than within rural communities. The Strategy made a strong contribution, particularly in the development of the concept of *Sense of Place*. Generally we have found that local businesses are very keen to take advantage of the *Sense of Place* concept. In the Brecon Beacons an Interreg IVB NWE project, *COLLABOR8*, has the concept of Sense of Place deep within the project design. It also funds the Ambassador scheme in which businesses are trained to communicate the Sense of Place of the National Park, including its special qualities, across to visitors. *Sense of Place* is very much what NPAs express through all of their interpretive and conservation work and are natural partners in the development of this tourism concept.

8.2 More broadly, the NPAs welcomed the creation of the Strategy as a means of expressing Wales' uniqueness to a wider audience. There is no doubt it is due for renewal, not least because so many actions have been achieved. This is an evolving sub-sector within tourism and new and emerging concepts need to be considered along with the lessons we have learnt from the past 5 years of implementation.

8.3 We believe that Cultural Tourism sits side by side the outdoor activity sector as key components of rural tourism.

9. What is your opinion of the proposal contained within the *Farming, Food and Countryside* strategy for a reinvigoration of the *Adfwyio* type of approach to rural tourism?

9.1 *Adfwyio* constituted a new approach, and a very welcome one when it was launched in 2003. It was both easy to access and highly relevant to the micro-businesses that make up so much of rural tourism along with those that create recreational opportunities. It was important that this was a small scale revenue fund which until then had been rare, unfortunately that remains the case today.

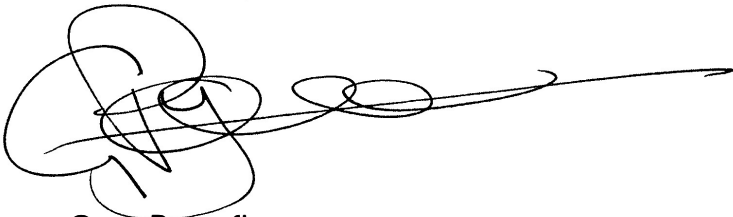
9.2 Rural tourism is not focused on the major capital developments that programmes such as convergence promote. These tend to benefit the public sector or large

urban companies, and omit small operators for whom large scale developments are often not appropriate. In the days of the Section 4 capital grants, it was frequently the case that businesses lost interest when the threshold of £10,000 grant was explained and as a result, development opportunities were lost.

- 9.3 *Adfywio* was not without its problems and attention would have to be paid to the benefits gained across the sustainability mix from such grants.
- 9.4 The National Parks of Wales broadly support the tourism recommendations in the Farming, Food and Countryside Strategy and strongly support the proposal for an *Adfywio* type fund.

Once again, may we thank you for the opportunity to comment. This response was agreed between the relevant Officers within the three Welsh National Park Authorities; however should you wish to follow up or discuss any of the points raised in further detail please contact me in the first instance.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Greg Pycroft
Welsh Policy Officer

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