



Social Contribution of Land-based Industries to Rural Communities

Research Summary No. 1

Profound changes have occurred in recent decades with regard both to England's land-based industries and to the nature of its rural communities. A CCRI project funded by the Commission for Rural Communities in 2006 explored the social interactions between land-based industries and rural communities.

There is evidence to suggest that the amount of land managed by land-based industries (LBIs) such as forestry, conservation, equine and recreation is growing, relative to agriculture. In parallel, it is often suggested that the role of farmers and other landowners in rural local governance is now largely diminished. Likewise, it is assumed that the rural population has much weaker ties to the land as most communities are host to a diverse range of inhabitants including commuters, retired people and service sector workers.

To enable an in-depth exploration of these issues, the research employed an ethnographic approach in five case study communities, selected to ensure variations in terms of unemployment, deprivation, age structure, land use and sparsity:

- Clun, Shropshire
- Harting, West Sussex
- East Hatley and Hatley St George, Cambridgeshire
- Horton and Rudyard, Staffordshire
- Rookhope and Eastgate, Co. Durham

The nature and scale of interactions between LBIs and rural communities were shown to vary considerably from place to place, reflecting a range of factors including the nature of LBIs, local social structures, and the influence of key individuals.

Farming and forestry were shown to retain importance as employers in some communities and new employment had often been created through farm diversification and the growth of 'consumption activities' such as equine businesses. The increased provision of tourism and recreation facilities, the restoration of redundant buildings, the creation of small business units in farm locations and the adding of value to local raw materials had all served to offset, to some degree, the typical decline of land-based employment.

The findings suggested that relationships between LBIs and rural communities may be reinvigorated by the wider forces of demand and supply (associated with sustainable consumption and environment agendas) which encourage more local selling and buying of agricultural produce. Many examples were found of modest sales of farm produce, often linked to a growing tourism industry and to the general vibrancy of the community.

The reduced time available to land managers and the growing role played by newcomers in local governance did appear to have caused a decline in the influence of land managers as community leaders.

Nevertheless, the extent of this decline was shown to be rather less, and more geographically variable, than thought at the outset.

The research encountered many examples of farmers and other land-based personnel making substantial contributions to social, cultural and educational activity in and around their parish, generally in an informal capacity.

Rural residents continued to place expectations on land managers in relation to countryside access, conservation, protection and freedom from excessive farm traffic, noise and smells. Those running B&Bs, pubs and other services expected LBIs to continue to manage the landscape in a way that was sympathetic to the needs of tourism. Indeed, appropriate land management for tourism was itself a source of mutual benefit for land-managers and rural communities.

Overall, it appeared that any 'fault-line' between LBIs and their local communities was often less real or significant than were divisions within those communities – most notably those between newcomers and established residents long exposed to the needs and activities of the land-based sector. The following policy suggestions are put forward to address some of the issues uncovered in this research:

- The need for devolution of decision-making powers to the local community (but not necessarily parish) level.
- The advantage of LEADER style 'community chests', providing small pump-priming grants to develop projects, involving land-managers and the community.
- The need for education in rural communities about land-based industries and their future development.
- The need for policy support to encourage local buying and selling of local produce.

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