

Ecotourism as a Coastal Regeneration Tool Case Study the Isle of Sheppey



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Ecotourism

- One of the fastest growing sectors of the tourism industry
- Can serve as a regeneration tool for coastal areas that have an abundance of, or unique, natural resources
- But what is ecotourism?



Ecotourism defined

A form of nature tourism that:

- Has low environmental and social impacts
- Involves education and interpretation of the natural environment
- Contributes to the long-term conservation of the area visited
- Delivers economic benefits to local communities sufficient for them to value the natural resources with which they live

'E' in ecotourism – environment,
education and economy



Isle of Sheppey ecotourism project

- Initiated by a partnership comprising the Elmley Conservation Trust, the Medway and Swale Estuary Partnership and Swale Borough Council
- Recognised the need to diversify the Isle of Sheppey's tourism base to safeguard the long-term economic benefit of tourism to the Island
 - Traditional, long-stay sea-side market in decline
 - Negative image
 - Unique, unexploited natural resources
 - Growth in ecotourism market



Aim

- To explore the potential of the marshland area to the south of Sheppey for ecotourism, with particular emphasis on Elmley NNR as a catalyst for development
- If the potential exists, formulate ecotourism development & marketing strategies for the Island



Step 1 - product audit

- Natural resources abound
- Limited facilities and services
- Jewel in the crown is Elmley NNR – but little known and largely unappreciated













Rich diversity of birds

Step 2 - external site visits

- North Norfolk Coast
- Baie de Somme



Step 3 - visitor survey

400 interviews

- Who are they / where are they from
- Motivations for visiting
- What do they do whilst here
- What is their impact on local economy
- What would enhance their visit



Current visitor profile

Majority are:

- RSPB members i.e. 'specialists'
- Male
- Over 55
- Kent residents (only 2% from Sheppey) or within 1.5 hours drive-time
- Fairly affluent
- Very frequent visitors to natural areas with all year round visitation



Motivations

- Birdwatching
- Relaxing environment
- Peace & quiet
- Attractive scenery
- Walking



Economic return

Majority spend no money in local economy

- Predominantly day visitors
- Non-RSPB members (recreational nature tourists), however, spend significantly more than RSPB members during their visit



Conclusion

Current nature tourism in area is not ecotourism. Challenge is to:

- stimulate spend from current specialist nature tourists by presenting them with opportunities to spend
- Attract more recreational type nature tourists



Step 4 - recreational mkt survey

On-line survey with 250 short breakers who had expressed an interest in visiting the Kentish countryside

- DINKS, Caring Parents and Empty Nesters
- London and the South East
- Frequent visitors to the countryside all year round



Motivations

- Attractive scenery
- Relaxation
- Escape stresses & strains of everyday life
- Peace & quiet



Activities

- Walking
- Cycling
- Birdwatching
- Countryside/nature events
- Horse-riding
- Sailing/watersports



Economic return

High

- Short break takers
- High disposable income
- Will use 'paid for' services and facilities



Conclusion

Recreational nature short break takers are potential ecotourists for Isle of Sheppey

- Market demand exists
- Need to enhance existing and develop new product to meet their needs



Development Strategy



Development strategy

- Consistent & focused effort to centre future tourism development around nature, landscape and the environment
- Particular emphasis on the bird as the 'champion' and 'lever' for economic development on the island through ecotourism



Elmley NNR

- Better signage ("sense of arrival")
- Improved interpretation
- Refreshment facilities
- Improved educational facilities
- Eco-loo on RSPB reserve
- Regular events programme
- Driving safaris
- Guided walking tours
- Weekend nature breaks
- Eco-friendly accommodation in natural setting



South east of Island

- Signed walking trails (named after birds)
- Signed cycling trails/ cycle hire facilities
- Guided seal viewing trips/ estuary walks
- Improved visitor facilities and access to Swale NNR (interpretation, new hides)
- Visitor facilities at Capel Fleet (car park, interpretation)
- Eco-friendly self-catering accommodation/ camping site
- Longer term re-instate passenger ferry service between Harty and Oare Marshes (Faversham)



Throughout Island

- New visitor centre focused on the bird
- Upgrade existing accommodation stock (minimum of 4 diamonds, Green Tourism Business accreditation, Walker's/ Cyclist's Welcome schemes, landscaping of caravan parks etc.)
- Bird imagery
- Promotion of local produce/ crafts
- Heritage/ cultural trails
- Annual Festival of Birds



Visitor Centre Concept



Visitor centre concept

- New world-class visitor centre focused on the bird
- Catalyst for development of ecotourism throughout the Island



Visitor centre

- Primary target audience - recreational nature tourists
- A fun, gentle, hand-held close encounter with the Island's birdlife for people who would not otherwise observe birds in their natural environment
- A multi-sensory learning experience of the highest order interpreting the relationship between the island's birds, marshland, coast and local people
- Services/ facilities also for specialist birders



Experiences & facilities

- Guided safari drives – general and specialist
- Guided walking safaris at Spitend for specialists
- Multi-sensory interpretation/ exhibition area
- Visitor Information Point
- Classroom and educational facilities for schools/ groups etc.
- Meeting facilities
- Café/ restaurant
- Gift shop selling 'all things bird'



Business model

- 95,000 visitors a year
- Free entry
- Paid for guiding services
- Income from café/restaurant, conference & educational market, gift shop
- Catalyst for ecotourism development throughout rest of Island



Eco-Friendly Accommodation



Eco lodge

- Self-catering accommodation in a natural setting with plenty of 'wow' factor
- Designed using eco-friendly principles
- Serves as an interpretation tool
- Low volume, high value



Camping barn

- In a natural setting
- Eco-friendly design
- Budget end of market
- Access for all



Marketing Strategy



Marketing strategy

- Aims to reposition the Isle of Sheppey as the nature tourism destination on the doorstep of London
- Target markets
 - Specialist birders
 - Recreational short breakers
- All within a 3-4 hr drive time (London & Home Counties, near Europe)



Marketing strategy

- Develop a motivating tourism brand strategy for the area centred on the bird and nature
- Position new tourism brand within a wider 'North Kent Marshes' brand for specialist markets





Rational values

- Unspoilt, wilderness landscape
- Abundance and diversity of bird life
- Nature tourism activities
- Natural, caring, sustainable destination
- Island/coastal position
- Location within 'Kent – The Garden of England'
- Accessibility – close to London, Canterbury and the Continent

Emotional values

- Escapism
- Relaxation
- Rejuvenation
- Rediscovery

Personality

Free-spirited & natural

Economic Impact



Economic impact within 10 yrs

- **Volume** – 150,000 ecotourists p.a. (10% staying visitors)
- **Value** – £4.1m p.a.
- **Employment** – 140 jobs created



Questions?

