

Concept, Application and Marketing of Rural Tourism

*Rajesh K Aithal**, *Anil R K ***

Introduction

The rural, a diminishing global resource, provides us with an increasingly important environment for tourism. Rural tourism has been receiving the much needed attention in the recent past due to the benefits it can give to rural areas in terms of alternative source of income, community development and nature preservation. Urban consumers are get benefited from rural tourism by the way of enriched experience and unique cultural experience. The paper makes an attempt at understanding the concept of rural tourism from both the community and local people involved and the tourists.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section after introduction makes an attempt at understanding various definitions and concepts involved in rural tourism. Next issues of development and the linkage with rural tourism are discussed. Third section looks at various benefits which are derived out of rural tourism, followed by a section which elaborates the various activities within rural tourism. Issues and challenges related to marketing of rural tourism and experiences from various countries across the world is touched upon next and in conclusion and attempt has been made to summarize and draw out implications for marketing from the experiences of other countries and literature.

Rural Tourism the Concept

Within tourism literature there are many concepts which overlap with that of rural tourism. Ecotourism, community based tourism, alternate tourism (Isaac Sindiga,1999) is defined as opposed to mass tourism and has been defined as Alternative tourism is seen as 'forms of tourism that are consistent with natural, social, and community values and which allow both hosts and guests to enjoy positive and worthwhile interaction and shared experiences' (Eadington & Smith, 1992: 3). The Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as 'responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and improves the welfare of the local people. Though it is not the objective of the paper to debate on the varying definitions, they been touched upon to show the varying ways perspectives which exist.

Role of Tourism in Development

Rural Tourism has been seen as tool though which many of development problems in rural areas can be addressed. In less developed countries like sub-Saharan Africa, afflicted by debilitating rural poverty, tourism is perceived to be one of the few feasible options for development (Briedenhann and Wickens, 2004). And the presence of rural areas has been cited as one of the reasons why rural tourism should be promoted, but ironically rural tourism is well established in most developed countries of Europe, North America and Australasia, while it remains unacknowledged in most developing countries (Mahony and Van Zyl, 2002). The benefits of tourism is that it is seen as a means of alternative development strategy for economic and social regeneration of rural areas, as a catalyst to stimulate economic growth, increase viability of underdeveloped regions and improve the standards of living of local communities (Briedenhann and Wickens, 2004).

**Indian Institute Of Management, Prabandh Nagar, Off Sitapur Road, Lucknow. Phone: (0522) 2736662 Fax: (0522) 2734025. rajeshhaithal@iiml.ac.in*

*** UNDP, New Delhi*

Within the concept there are debates on the degree of community involvement and government or outside agency's role. Campbell (1999) in his study of ad hoc development of rural tourism in Costa Rica found that though the residents there has a positive attitude towards tourism, they had limited awareness of employment and investment opportunities. He says that for the communities to further benefit from tourism it was essential that some amount of formal planning and interventions are done by the government (Campbell, 1999).

Though tourism is hailed as a tool for regional development, there is rarely a clear conception of rural tourism or of the role of tourism in rural regions or local communities which could inform strategy or planning (Butler et al., 1998). In spite of that it rural tourism has been acknowledged as a viable means of achievement developmental goal in rural areas.

Benefits of Rural Tourism

The benefits of rural tourism can be seen from the perspective of the various stakeholders involved. According to Wearing and McDonald (2002) the introduction of tourism, or tourism planning into rural and isolated areas has a profound bearing on the social organization and decision-making process in the respective communities. In terms of benefits to other businesses it has been cited that very nature of the rural tourism vacation creates a considerable impact on the rural regions for all type of businesses, not just tourism businesses (Fleischer and Pizam, 1997).

The rural people benefit as rural tourism supplements their income and enables them to stay on the farm with the decline in the ability of farm agriculture to generate sufficient income has caused many farmers to seek new sources of income and for the diversification of the agriculture base (Fleischer and Pizam, 1997) and this has been stated as one of the main benefits. And From the overall economy perspective tourism helps to energize the rural economy and, in particular, plays an important role in creating a value-added commercial channel for local produce. By integrating local products or cultural attributes into tourism, rustic flavored event tourism has also helped to shape the emerging form of rural tourism (Abby Liu 2006).

In the context of diversity and sustainability, with sustainability seen from the perspective of maintaining communities and conserving environment some countries to prefer to retain their focus on domestic tourist and has emphasized the linkage of overall income growth in the country and the need for government support and funding (David Turnock 1999).

Activities within rural tourism

Many activities can be included under rural tourism. Bramwell and Lane (1994) propose that rural tourism can include activities and interests in farms, nature, adventure, sport, health, education, arts, and heritage. In 1996, Pedford expands the concept into living history such as rural customs and folklore, local and family traditions, values, beliefs, and common heritage. Turnock (1999) further broadens the view of rural tourism to embrace all aspects of leisure appropriate in the countryside.

Marketing of Rural Tourism

Seeing into the benefits which all the stakeholders can derive in rural tourism one needs to work on the issue of marketing of rural tourism. According to Kotler et.al.(2002) any place that is able to clearly communicate its distinctiveness can compete in tourism, as long as it consistently offers something attractive and remains accessible. But there is a need for rural tourism to be differentiated from main stream tourism, eco-tourism and geo-tourism, and is argued that the context of rural tourism challenges the 'Traditional' approach to marketing (Roberts & Hall, 2004).

And branding has become a central element of tourism destinations, with image being the singular most significant element of a brand, which needs to be very seriously considered in the context of rural tourism. Therefore it is salient to look at the images presented by the popular, mass media and consider how they relate to tourism in general and more specifically in rural tourism (Beeton , Sue, 2004)

Though the basics of marketing would not change in the rural tourism but the fact that rural tourism would have a niche appeal rather than a mass appeal needs to be taken into consideration while deciding on a marketing plan for rural tourism. The fact that it is requires niche marketing approaches also makes it important that one also gives due consideration to the issue of communicating to these niche customer who might not be accessible through the mainstream communication channels. Thus marketing of rural tourism is more challenging hen compared with marketing of main stream tourism.

Rural Tourism Studies in Various Countries

The Table I below summaries the studies which have done in various countries on rural tourism.

Table I

Country	Methodology & Objectives	Findings
French Acadian region on an island in eastern Canada (MacDonald and Jolliffe 2003)	Case Study, a framework with fours stages of development and three hypotheses	Culture, which is often well preserved in rural areas, is a valuable resource to include; and that community-based partnerships such as cooperatives may be very effective in promoting rural tourism.
Romanian Carpathians (David Turnock, 1999)	Description and assessment of the current status of rural tourism	Critical factors for successful development emphasized, fiscal incentives, environmental policies, and growth of institutions at all levels. Topography of mountains seen as a major advantage for promotion.
Israel (Fleischer and Pizam, 1997)	Survey based, to compare Israel with Europe and North America	Growing activity and with the reduction in agricultural activity people are shifting to rural tourism. Findings how that the rural tourism creates a considerable impact on the rural regions for all types of business not just tourism business.
Malaysia (Abby Liu, 2006)	Empirical study examining the adequacy of the planning approach and establishment types in developing rural tourism with a focus on rural capacity to absorb tourism through interviews and policy analysis	The study brings out clearly the importance of local capacity building in making rural tourism initiatives succeed. It also points out that it should not be assumed that tourism is ultimately an income alternative to rural dwellers. The importance of training of local community has also been brought out in the study.
South Africa (Briedenhann and Wickens 2004)	Qualitative study to understand the challenges confronting growth of rural tourism	Lack of capacity of local government to assume responsibility. Dearth of entrepreneurial expertise, management skills and capital. The study also brought out the need for cooperation between rural tourism operators.
New Zealand (James Higham, 1999)	Focused on the field of wilderness experiences,	Four key properties of wilderness recreation identified. And understanding of tourist perceptions of wilderness as crucial to the management of wilderness tourism also brought out. The study also considers the application of the perceptual approach to wilderness tourism as a means of sustaining wilderness values while promoting the satisfaction of visitor expectations.

Conclusion

An attempt was made in the paper to understand the concept of rural tourism through a review of literature and understanding the experiences of rural tourism in various countries. The benefits of rural tourism and the linkage to development have also been touched upon in the paper. The unique challenges posed in marketing of rural tourism have been raised and the issue of niche marketing as an approach to marketing of rural tourism raised.

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