

## Position Statement on Sustainable Tourism

### Background

This statement is one of a series, intended to complement the statutory AONB Management Plan, and outline in a more detailed or more up to date way the inter-relationship between a particular issue and the AONB's purposes (principally to conserve and enhance natural beauty).

### Relationship to AONB purposes

The AONB does not have a purpose to attract greater numbers of people as an end in itself, or purely for economic development. Where it does have a legitimate role is in 'promoting forms of development which are sustainable'. It is appropriate for the AONB Partnership to be pro-active in promoting a sustainable approach to tourism, as others will continue to promote and develop the area for tourism, and this sometimes may encourage directions of development which are less compatible with the AONB. The public enjoyment and economic benefits of tourism create an extra reason for conserving the landscape, and justification for the public and private funding which goes towards this. Encouraging sustainable tourism within the UK can also contribute significantly to reducing CO2 emissions from overseas air travel and from car use.

### Definitions and national context

Tourism. For this purpose, the focus will be on promotion and infrastructure (e.g. accommodation, car parks, attractions and catering) relating to staying and day visitors. The topic of countryside access and recreation is closely related, but has been addressed in a separate position statement, which should be read alongside this one.

Sustainable Tourism. Sustainable development seeks to balance environmental, social and economic benefits and not gain some of these at the expense of the others. A sustainable approach to tourism therefore can be defined as one which seeks to achieve less impact on the environment, more understanding and enjoyment, and more benefit to the local economy and community. The actual numbers of visitors are less important – the benefits described above may be achieved with either greater or fewer numbers. This is not a matter of black and white, that a certain form of tourism is sustainable or not, as there is a continuum of impacts and benefits. Neither is sustainability just about making tourism 'less harmful' to the environment – it can actually be beneficial to conserving the landscape, e.g. where boosting a market for local products (food and drink accounts for 46% of visitor spending in the countryside (Countryside Agency, 2001)).

The Countryside Agency (now subsumed within Natural England) outlined in 2005 the following principles for sustainable tourism in protected landscapes (AONBs and National Parks):

1. Sharing responsibility
2. Agreeing a strategy
3. Basing tourism on the area's special qualities
4. Providing a quality experience for all visitors
5. Reducing the environmental impact of tourism
6. Raising awareness and supporting conservation
7. Bringing more benefit to the local economy
8. Engaging with the local community

The AONB Partnership is well placed to take action on these principles, and in some cases a leading role, but the input of the private sector and other parts of the public sector will also be very important.

## **Other strategic links**

A number of strategies and plans are relevant to this area, including:

West Midlands Regional Economic Strategy and Visitor Economy Strategy (Advantage West Midlands, 2004)

Tourism Strategy for Shropshire (Shropshire County Council, 2004)

South Shropshire Tourism Strategy (South Shropshire District Council, 2004)

Shropshire Interpretation Strategy (Shropshire County Council, 2006)

Shropshire Economic Strategy

## **Current patterns of tourism in the area**

Detailed statistics on numbers of visitors and the economic value of tourism in the Shropshire Hills are not available, and a study is currently planned through the County Council's Tourism Research Unit. Though the area is not a major holiday destination like some AONBs and National Parks, tourism is nevertheless significant to the local economy, as illustrated during the 2001 foot and mouth outbreak. The landscape is a major attraction of Shropshire, and research shows that the Shropshire Hills are a recognisable destination to tourists, after Ironbridge, Shrewsbury and Ludlow. Though visitors of all kinds are found, the area has a particular draw for those interested in scenery, heritage and wildlife, those interested in moderately challenging walking and outdoor activities, and has a higher than average representation of retired couples. Tourism is especially important to Church Stretton, the main town within the AONB. District-based and more local tourism associations exist in the area, and the District and County Councils have a role in the promotion and management of tourism. Shropshire Tourism is the main private sector body, and a county Destination Management Partnership has been established. The focus of these networks is mainly on paying attractions and the accommodation and catering sectors, with relatively little input from countryside and landscape bodies responsible for the free 'attraction' which draws many visitors and benefits other businesses.

## **Policies for sustainable tourism in the Shropshire Hills AONB**

1. Tourism activities which draw on the special qualities of the area, without harming them, should be especially encouraged. These include:
  - Development of access infrastructure (e.g. maintenance and improvement of rights of way, off road cycle routes, historic and natural sites),
  - appropriate interpretation to help aid understanding,
  - enterprises based specifically on the special qualities of the AONB (e.g. wildlife watching, landscape painting, walking festivals).
  - cultural events.
  - use of public transport.
2. The relative remoteness of the area and its tranquillity are valued by both residents and visitors alike, and tourism development must be very sensitive to avoid damaging these special qualities. Facilities for activities which are inherently noisy or intrusive should not be allowed.
3. For built development, the location, scale and design of development is often key to how sustainable a particular development is judged to be. Less direct impacts such as transport, and impacts on tranquillity and light pollution, are also important. Government policy is that most new building for accommodation should be in or adjacent to existing towns and villages. Tourism is important however for farm diversification, and for this a dispersed approach of smaller, low-key developments designed in sympathy with local character will blend better into the area and spread economic benefits more widely than larger facilities. Single developments of more than around ten accommodation units are less likely to be supported in small settlements and open countryside. Large static caravan parks are likely to be intrusive. Smaller sites with good landscaping are preferable, and facilities for touring caravans and camping generally have a low impact as there are fewer permanent structures.
4. The provision of any new public car parking should be in scale with the setting and capacity of roads used to reach the location. Larger car parks should generally be situated nearer to settlements or larger roads. Where informal roadside parking is improved to alleviate traffic problems on smaller roads, care should be taken to avoid adding to traffic levels. The linking of countryside attractions and walks to settlements where services and public transport facilities exist and can be promoted, will help to maximise economic benefits, especially from day visitors.

5. Provision of locally produced food, drink and craft products provides an excellent way of enhancing the visitor's experience at the same time as benefiting conservation of the landscape. The development of local food supply and culture within tourism is strongly encouraged.
6. There should be an emphasis in tourism provision on quality, and high environmental standards should be encouraged, such as energy and water consumption, waste and pollution, e.g. through national and regional green tourism accreditation schemes. Quality and sustainability should not however make provision socially exclusive - these standards can also apply to lower cost accommodation (e.g. campsites, bunk barns) and food.
7. Action is necessary to actively support tourism activities at the most sustainable end of the spectrum, e.g. the Shuttle bus service, the Heart of Wales railway line, niche green accommodation, walking/cycling/riding infrastructure, etc. There is also a need to influence 'mainstream' tourism activity towards sustainability, including discouraging less sustainable activities or developments. The opportunity for tourism to contribute directly to practical conservation activities, e.g. through a visitor payback scheme, should be explored.
8. Farm-based tourism has a special importance to the AONB because of the close connection to conserving the landscape. Tourism enterprises can help a farm to survive, enabling the continuation of vital conservation work. Connections between farm-based accommodation and the farm business, and an environmental approach to marketing should be encouraged. There is a need for better integration of business and conservation advice.
9. The economic connections between the value of the landscape and tourism, and the value of tourism in supporting the economy and conservation need to be more fully researched and promoted. Research on local supply and demand should be used to advise potential new businesses, especially farm diversification enterprises.
10. The community has an important role in sustainable tourism, and the work and development of local tourism groups should be supported.
11. The consistent use of the 'Shropshire Hills' identity will strengthen the area's sense of place, and support sustainable tourism by associating this with environmental quality and sensitivity. The 'Shropshire Hills' identity should be given greater prominence in tourism promotion, along with a consistent description of the special qualities of the AONB and opportunities for visitors to adopt a sustainable approach. The formal accreditation of the area for sustainable tourism, e.g. through the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas, should be considered. Greater recognition of the Shropshire Hills should be sought in county and regional tourism organisations and strategies.
12. Promotion of the area for tourism should encourage direct experience of the countryside and aim to minimise travel. This can be a positive message, e.g. experiencing a slower pace of life, rather than being seen as a restriction. The web is an increasingly important source of information for visitors, especially for planning holidays, and co-ordinated marketing and information delivery is required.
13. The capacity of accommodation providers and other hosts in the industry to promote and interpret the special qualities of the AONB may be enhanced by provision of training courses and other material to help with promotion.

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