



A role for quality rural tourism services in rural development? Evidence from the Republic of Ireland

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Publication Date	2003
Publisher	Rural Development Institute, Brandon University and Saint Mary's University

Cawley, M., Gaffey, S. and Gillmor, D.A. (2003) 'A role for quality rural tourism services in rural development?: evidence from the Republic of Ireland'. In Beesley, K.B., Millward, H., Ilbery, B. and Harrington, L. (eds) *The New Countryside: geographic perspectives on rural change*, Brandon University and Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, pp. 143-54.

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One Figure and 3 Tables.

Abstract

High quality products and services are being assigned increased importance as sources of income in rural economies which have been unable to adapt successfully to agricultural restructuring. This paper explores the role of 'quality' tourism services in two peripheral, yet scenic, regions in western Ireland with a view to identifying the ways in which quality is defined, its links to the region of production and the ways in which such links are used in promotion and marketing. The results show that measurable quality features are used in promoting individual services to a greater extent than previous studies, based on the promotion of countries or tourism regions, would suggest. The research also illustrates that social and economic benefits accrue to rural areas.

Introduction

In many European countries, conventional smallscale and low intensity farming systems are becoming severely constrained in their ability to compete with an increasingly capitalised and globalised agriculture (Redclift 1997). Rather than abandoning such populations and areas to the play of free-market forces, government policy in several countries, and in the European Union (EU) more generally, is positively disposed towards supporting adaptive strategies (Baldock et al. 1996; CEC 1996a). Such a response reflects, in part, the continuing political influence exerted by rural and farm populations but also the close alignment that is emerging between low-intensity agriculture and rural environmental protection (Potter 1999; Pretty 1995). The development of niche quality rural products and services is perceived as one possible adaptive strategy (OECD 1995). Thus, the European Committee of the Regions has recommended a greater commitment to local quality-based products as part of on-going reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CEC 1996b). Specific measures have also been introduced by the European Commission (EC), under Regulation 2081/92, to protect geographical indications (PGI) and designation of origin (PDO) by registering the specific character of products through linking them to their places of production. Notions of 'quality' deriving from details of raw materials, their history, methods of production, processing and presentation, are inherent in the concept of regional labelling. Labelled niche products also possess the capacity to command a price premium for smallscale producers who, by definition, lack the ability to compete on the basis of economies of scale.

The environmental features usually associated with undercapitalised and often remote rural localities, namely low levels of industrialisation, low traffic volumes, high air and water quality, and the survival of local cultures, are recognised as conferring particular forms of quality on tourism services (Becker 1995; Ó Cinnéide 1999).

'Ecologically-friendly' tourist activities are of growing importance in many such areas. This paper investigates the links between 'quality' as a characteristic of rural tourism services and place of production (and of consumption because both tend to coincide) and the role of such services in rural development. Whilst the marketing of places as tourist destinations and the 'consumption' of places by tourists have been investigated in several studies to-date, as illustrated by Urry (1990, 1995), the relationships between the quality of tourism services and their geographical location and the use of these relationships in promotion and marketing are underexplored. By addressing these dimensions, the paper seeks to contribute to the more general literature relating to the links between place and promotion. The paper begins with a brief review of studies relating to the commodification of places for tourism promotion and the role of quality in the promotion of products and places. The status of tourism in the Irish economy is described. Research results are then presented (based on interviews conducted in early 1998) relating to the characteristics of 57 specially-selected rural tourism entrepreneurs and their businesses in western Ireland; their perceptions of quality, as registered in subjective and objective ways; and their use of quality features and links to place in promotion. The paper concludes by discussing some of the potential contributions which quality tourism services may make in lagging rural economies.

The research reported took place in two study regions in the Northwest and Southwest of the Republic of Ireland which differ in terms of their landscapes and in the longevity and scale of development of the tourism industry (Figure 1). The Southwest (County Kerry and west Cork) has a long-established reputation as a touring area, based on its spectacular mountainous and coastal scenery and on its proximity to major ports and airports. Carrauntoohill, the highest peak in Ireland (elevation 1040 metres), is in south Kerry. The landscape of the Northwest Counties of Leitrim, Roscommon and Sligo is of lower elevation but provides many opportunities for water-based coastal and freshwater sports and includes distinctive limestone plateaux with a wealth of archaeological remains. The 'Yeats Country' on the border between north Sligo and north Leitrim, immortalised in the poetry of the Nobel laureate W.B. Yeats, is an important touring location.

Place promotion and tourism

Sack (1988, 1993) conducted pioneering research on the relationships between place and consumer behaviour in contemporary post-industrial society, a theme which has been explored further in a series of papers edited by Miller (1995), and in the context of food consumption specifically in papers edited by Bell and Valentine (1997). The use of place in promotion is particularly well exemplified in the case of tourism where actual places are marketed for consumption, or particular tourism products are marketed in the context of their location (Goodall and Ashworth 1990; Urry 1995). McCannell's (1989) analysis of common elements in tourism imagery and the messages which they are designed to convey revealed that a process of commodification may take place in response to consumer demand and particularly in response to an emerging quest for authenticity, tradition, and rurality, as counterpoints to the values of urban industrial society. A review by O'Connor (1993, 76) of the imagery used by Bord Fáilte (BF), the Irish Tourist Board, to promote the country overseas concluded that selectivity and construction were taking place "in a way that offers people an escape from the pressures of modernity to the simplicity and

authenticity of the pre-modern". Quinn (1994) found evidence of similar commodification in promotional materials used by BF in the Continental European market in which elements of rurality, tradition and celticity were invoked. Based on her research relating to the ways in which the landscape of north Mayo in western Ireland is being developed as a tourist attraction, Kneafsey (1995, 136) concluded that "the identity of place ... is composed of layers of different interpretations and relations". Hopkins (1998, 65) categorised the imagery used in promotional literature pertaining to the eastern coast of Lake Huron, in Southwestern Ontario in Canada, as designed to signify "a symbolic cultural landscape that draws upon dominant Anglo-American ideals of the countryside to give identity to the material landscape". The conclusions emerging from such analyses is of commodification of the countryside, sometimes in non-authentic ways, to appeal to consumer expectations of particular places or to appeal to broader quests for 'rurality', 'authenticity' and 'heritage'.

Links between consumption and place, and tourism and commodification, are documented in expanding research literatures. There is, however, little published information available pertaining to the relationships between the inherent quality of tourism products and their location, and the ways, if any, in which such relationships are used in promotion. Quality and place of production are more usually discussed in the context of food and drink products, as in Moran's (1993) analysis of the *appellation d'origine* labelling of French and Californian wines, or Marsden's (1996) assessment of the promotion of quality and traceability in foods by largescale retailers. Ilbery and Kneafsey (1998) have extended the discussion of quality and production to the use of links to place (regional imagery) in the promotion of quality products and services more generally in the lagging regions of the EU. This paper seeks to extend the latter approach with reference to specific empirical evidence for tourism services.

Quality as a characteristic of goods and services

Producers, institutions and consumers are targeting 'quality' as a method, *inter alia*, of increasing market competitiveness, assuring human health and safety, and obtaining value for money. Operational definitions of quality which relate to meeting the needs of the consumer and the demands of the marketplace more generally form the basis for extensive and costly market research and promotion (Hutchins 1990). All businesses pursue operational definitions of quality to some degree as a method of responding effectively to the requirements and expectations of particular market segments and maximising sales. Complex systems of control are also in place in many areas of activity, and are being developed further, to measure and assure standards of 'total quality', based on objective measurable criteria throughout the production process (Dawson 1994). Subjective definitions of quality are recognised also which reflect particularistic expressions of tastes and styles which vary between places, time periods and social groups (Bell and Valentine 1997). Such particularistic quality markers are much prized by producers and by discriminating consumers and are monitored by arbiters of taste and style, particularly food and drinks writers.

The scale of production *per se* is also viewed as having quality attributes and both largescale and smallscale production are evaluated highly according to different yardsticks. Smallscale niche production is viewed by the OECD (1995) as possessing other quality connotations which are particularly appropriate to rural locations. Limited scales of output tend to minimise waste and thereby the potential damage to

the environment. Niche production may involve the retention or revival of traditional crafts, and local resources may be used to enhance the authenticity of the product. Niche production also parallels and benefits from a growing demand for customised products among the expanding service class in post-industrial societies. The promotion of regional labelling by the EC under the provisions of Regulation 2081/92 seeks to capture value for rural food products within the context of this changing market demand. Tourist services that serve to protect the cultural, physical and built environment, and that support traditional methods of farming and farm populations are also viewed as responding to growing interests in rurality and tradition. Western Ireland provides an appropriate context to investigate the role which quality tourism services of these types may play in the rural economy.

Quality rural tourism in context

Tourism is of growing importance in terms of earning revenue and creating employment in the Republic of Ireland (Gillmor 1998). In 1995, some 4.2 million tourists (0.6 million in excess of the national population) visited the Irish state, some 1.1 billion IR punts were contributed in tax revenues by the sector, and some 102,000 people were employed, accounting for 8% of total employment (BF 1997). Successive governments in recent years have promoted the development of the tourism sector actively through research and investment (Gillmor 1994). The *Sustainable Tourism* strategy document published by BF (1994) addressed specifically the development of forms of tourism that will contribute to sustainable ecologies, economies and communities in both urban and rural locations. Whilst urban-based tourism is of growing importance, the countryside is a central component of the Irish tourism product. The Irish landscape, rural heritage and culture play key roles in attracting tourists to Ireland and in the activities undertaken whilst they are in the country (BF 1997). Since the late 1980s, tourism has also been attributed a special role in rural development policy as a method of compensating for declining incomes from conventional farming, and accommodation provision is one of the main forms of on-farm diversification (Cawley et al. 1995).

The promotion of quality as a characteristic of products and services is enshrined in government policy in the Republic of Ireland and both quality and sustainable forms of tourism are advocated in national tourism policy (BF 1994; Government of Ireland 1994). The quality of Irish tourism services is supported and regulated by a range of state, regional and private agencies. The tourism industry is controlled by the Department of Sport, Tourism and Recreation. BF promotes tourism overseas and also assists the development of the tourism industry (CERT 1997; Pearce 1992). Eight Regional Tourism Authorities (RTAs), which are funded partly by the state and partly by regional business interests, serve primarily as promotional and tourist servicing agencies but also regulate and grade self-catering premises. The regulation of hotels, holiday hostels, youth hostels, holiday camps, caravan sites, motels and specialist forms of accommodation (e.g. on health farms) is conducted by private registered bodies on behalf of BF (Deegan and Dineen 1997). Town home, country home and farmhouse accommodation may be registered and promoted by BF but registration is not mandatory and grading does not apply.

The physical environment and certain aspects of recreational activities that take place in that environment are subject to institutional controls. Standards of air and water

quality are regulated by the Environmental Protection Agency and county and city councils have statutory responsibility for the protection and conservation of landscapes and buildings. Adventure sports centres, food catering, fisheries, and passenger vessels are all subject to regulation by various regional agencies and Departments of State. Providers of some recreational activities, to which statutory regulations do not apply (for example golf courses and guided walking tours) practise forms of self-regulation through membership of professional bodies and marketing groups. Several product marketing groups (PMGs) also apply quality criteria which include more subjective features.

The sampled entrepreneurs and their businesses

The selection of businesses for study was based on possession of one or more of the following objective and subjective quality criteria: (i) certification, in terms of possession of a quality mark/symbol or product/service designation; (ii) association through possession of a regional designation, traceability or link to culture or heritage; (iii) specification, in terms of production or service method, raw materials or ownership; (iv) attraction, in terms of design, texture, appearance, premium price, personal attention. All of the businesses are defined as small and medium size with 50 employees or less (many less in most instances). In the absence of systematically compiled databases of quality products and services in Ireland, research was conducted to compile lists of 'quality' services and involved consultation of specialised directories and discussion with experts. All of the selected tourism providers complied with the minimum BF criteria for registration and had an additional quality feature, for example, membership of a quality assessed PMG or a quality commendation in a recognised guidebook. They included a wide range of diverse services: manor house accommodation, farm guesthouses, game angling, coarse angling, sea angling, interpretative centres, private gardens, cruise boat and barge hire, outdoor activity centres, golf courses, organised hill and mountain walking.

In total, 57 providers of quality (as defined for study purposes) tourism accommodation and recreational services were interviewed in the two study regions. Approximately 50% of the businesses were owned by males and an additional one-third in the Southwest (mainly golf courses) had a primarily male ownership (Table 1). Female ownership was more prevalent in the Northwest where smallscale farm guesthouses formed a larger proportion of the sample: the farm housewife may have been registered as owner of the accommodation enterprise, whilst her husband was owner of the farm. Most owners were middle-aged and substantial proportions in both regions were immigrants to the study region, almost 40% in the Northwest and over 50% in the Southwest. Levels of university or other third level education were relatively high with 43% in the Northwest and 59% in the Southwest reporting positively. Prior experience of the business in which they were engaged was high: 68% in the Northwest and 52% in the Southwest reported such experience. By contrast, the incidence of training relating to marketing was low.

Almost 40% of the businesses were farm-based in the Northwest, by contrast with 3.4% in the Southwest, reflecting the presence of farm-based guesthouses in the former region, a feature which contributed also to the higher reported level of family ownership (Table 2). Although commercial tourism is longer-developed in the

Southwest, there was little difference in the average age of the sampled businesses in the two regions: being 18 and 19 years, respectively. Business size, as reflected in the mean number of full-time employees and turnover, emerged as being considerably larger in the Southwest than in the Northwest but employment was in general modest. As the modal turnover figures illustrate, there was also a greater diversity of business size types in the Southwest.

Producer perceptions of quality

Because of the focus of the research on 'quality', the producers' perceptions of the quality of the tourism services that they provided were elicited. All of the producers expressed the view that their product was a 'quality' product and a majority reported their personal involvement in the business and attention to detail as being of greatest importance in determining that quality. Over 90% of the sampled businesses in the Northwest and 66% in the Southwest reported official quality certification. Over 50% overall felt that certification influenced sales, in being an assurance of quality for consumers. The main reasons given for non-certification were the absence of a certification body applicable to the product and no perceived need for official certification. The absence of official certification applied primarily in the recreational sector where, however, all of the sampled enterprises adhered to the criteria of an appropriate professional group.

Producers were also asked to rank a series of criteria identified by the OECD (1995) as being pertinent to the effective marketing of quality products and services. Their responses provide further information about their perceptions (Table 3). Each factor was scored from 1-5 and the resulting total scores are ranked in terms of importance in Table 3. Respondents agreed on 'Close involvement of the owner' being the quality characteristic of greatest importance. 'Good environmental conditions' was ranked highly in both regions. 'Product/service differentiation' was ranked more highly in the Northwest than in the Southwest. In the latter region, 'Association with a particular region' and 'Consumer perception' were allocated more importance, reflecting the established reputation of the latter region for tourism. There was agreement on the importance of 'Presentation/promotion'. 'Traceability' and 'Raw materials' were given low rankings because of their limited relevance to many of the services surveyed. The rankings underline the greater importance assigned to in-house monitoring than to official certification. It is apparent also that quality is recognised as being linked to region and location. These links are elaborated further in promotion and marketing.

The role of quality in promotion

The majority of the entrepreneurs in both regions established their businesses initially without conducting market research, and without institutional support, usually based on general knowledge of the region or sector. In 1998, most were members of at least one local, regional, national or international marketing group which required compliance with regulatory standards above statutory minima or adherence to professional norms.

The quality of the product featured in the entrepreneurs' own promotional and marketing literature and in that of PMGs working on their behalf. Premium prices above the norm for the particular category were characteristic. Whilst the rural

tourism co-operative accommodation product was less costly than that of heritage properties, it tended to be at or above the average cost for farmhouse accommodation and most of the entrepreneurs also provided added value in the form of recreational facilities. Selected recreational activities, golfing, game angling, deep sea angling, and cruising, charged premium prices. Coarse angling was an exception because the angling experience *per se* was available relatively cheaply. Value added took place through charges for accommodation, and for the storage facilities that were provided for fishing tackle and bait. It is worth noting in this context that the marketing of basic, low cost, accommodation in association with coarse angling by tour operators, in Britain and Continental Europe, is viewed by Regional Fisheries Board personnel as posing a threat to the quality image of the coarse angling product.

Photographs and text featured in a range of brochures, business cards and Internet advertising used to promote all of the selected services. Such materials permit the links between the quality of the services and locale to be explored further and the results of an analysis of materials provided by the 57 producers are summarised here. The text always included reference to the inherent quality attributes, locational features of the service and membership of select PMGs, if applicable. Sometimes an image of an historic property featured in isolation from its location, emphasising the heritage dimension of the product, but accompanying text almost invariably referred to locale and to the recreational opportunities and facilities available locally. Many accommodation providers used photographs of their properties set against picturesque scenery in promotional literature, imbuing the accommodation with attributes of the location. Golfing and angling were advertised through use of images of actual golf courses, lakes, rivers and specimen fish, accompanied by explanatory text. In the case of golf courses, details were given of the designer and the challenge presented by the course. For angling, details of species of fish, their size and the numbers caught were given, as were lists of competitions held on particular stretches of water. Interpretative centres featured specific locales, heritage and history. Therefore, whilst most promotional text conveyed quality features as deriving from inherent aspects of the product, the skills and experience of the provider where relevant (for accommodation and guided adventure pursuits), specific locations and more general environmental characteristics were invoked also in promotion and marketing. Whilst the tourism services varied to some extent between the regions and each region has distinctive physical and cultural attributes, which were highlighted in promotional materials, similarities were present in the methods of promotion. This review illustrates that commodification was taking place as part of promotion and marketing. However, rather than appealing excessively to pre-conceived notions of 'rurality', descriptions tended to convey specific information relating to details of the services and their location which conferred quality attributes.

Conclusions

The development of quality niche products and services is receiving increased attention from policy makers as a method of enabling entrepreneurs in remote rural areas to target high-value and specialist markets, as opposed to competing on price in mass-markets where they are at a relative disadvantage because of their low economies of scale. The development of quality rural tourism services is pursued as part of such a strategy in the Republic of Ireland. Selected examples from two contrasting western areas were studied to seek to understand more clearly how quality

and location are linked in promotion and marketing, and to identify the potential contributions which such quality services may make to the development of rural areas. Interregional differences are present but the role of quality and the methods of promotion used are broadly similar.

Both official certification and in-house monitoring emerged as taking place in most quality businesses but the more subjective dimensions of quality, as perceived by the provider of the service, were ranked more highly than official measures. Links to place and environmental attributes were perceived as quality characteristics. Providers also identified location, features of their properties, and aspects of the natural environment in which recreational activities take place, as quality markers in promotion and marketing. Some of the associations related to particularities of specific locales which imbued the services with their niche character (e.g. golf courses). The attention to actual, and frequently measurable, features of tourism products in promotion and marketing by individual entrepreneurs contrasts with the targeting of unreal, romanticised expectations of tourists emphasised in previous surveys of promotional literature relating to Ireland or to specific regions in other countries (McCabe 1999).

The potential role of quality rural tourism businesses in rural development involves both economic and broader social and environmental dimensions. Most of the enterprises surveyed were micro-scale in terms of full-time employment provision and turnover but all were long-established and therefore represented stable if limited sources of employment. Many small farmhouse accommodation enterprises also helped to supplement declining incomes from conventional farming. They used under-utilised resources and labour (accommodation above family requirements and teenage labour during holiday periods). There is evidence of indirect benefits accruing to the broader rural economy, although quantification of the precise monetary contribution involved was beyond the scope of the present study. Most of the accommodation providers reported using local produce in catering and some premium guesthouses featured local fish, meat, vegetables and cheeses in their restaurants. Local foods and cuisine are being marketed also as tourist experiences in themselves through annual food festivals, as at Kinsale, County Cork. Research on tourist expenditure also illustrates that local hostelrys and restaurants benefit from any influx of tourist to an area (Deegan and Dineen 1997). Added value is being created within businesses through, for example, recreational activities being marketed in association with accommodation and, vice versa.

Tourism services which adopt a quality ethos have a potential also to contribute to the protection of natural environments and the support of traditional cultures which frequently form part of the tourism product. Obvious actions include protection of fisheries waters, preservation of historic properties, maintenance of gardens known for their flora or landscaping, and the perpetuation of local traditions and performance arts. Questions may be raised about the way in which preservation takes place and about the packaging and sanitising of local history and culture in theme parks and interpretative centres (Graham 1994). Such issues highlight dimensions of quality that are often overlooked and merit additional attention. The research suggests that an approach to rural tourism development, which seeks to establish quality criteria within

the domain of different realms of activity, has potential to contribute to the sustainability of local environments, cultures and economies.

Acknowledgements

This paper is based on research conducted as part of an EU-funded project on *Regional images and the promotion of quality products and services in the lagging regions of the EU* by laboratories in France (University of Caen; CEMAGREF, Aubiere; ENITA, Clermont Ferrand), Finland (University of Helsinki), Greece (University of Patras), Ireland (National University of Ireland, Galway; Teagasc Rural Research Centre; Teagasc National Food Centre), Spain (University of Valencia) and the United Kingdom (Coventry University; Scottish Agricultural College, Aberdeen; University of Wales, Aberystwyth). The overall Co-ordinator of the research is Professor Brian Ilbery of Coventry University.

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Table 1. Key characteristics of the entrepreneurs by region

	Northwest	Southwest
<i>No. of cases</i>	28	29
% Male	50.0	51.7
% Female	35.7	17.2
% Predominantly male	10.7	31.0
% Predominantly female	3.6	0
Modal age group	55+	46-55
% from the study area	60.8	48.3
% with third level education	42.9	58.6
% with training relating to marketing	28.6	27.6
% with previous experience of the business in which engaged	67.9	51.7

Table 2. Key characteristics of the businesses by region

	Northwest	Southwest
<i>No. of cases</i>	28	29
% farm based businesses	39.3	3.4
% family owned	78.6	55.2
Mean age of enterprises (years)	18	19
Mean no. of full-time employed	5	10
Mean no. of part-time employed	2	3
Median turnover (000 EUROS)	65-97	194-259
Modal turnover (000 EUROS)	<13	65-97& 259-389& 389-648

Table 3. Ranking of selected factors considered to be important in ensuring 'quality'

Quality factors	Northwest	Southwest
Product/service differentiation	2	5
Participation in certification/quality mark	7	<i>10</i>
Association with a particular region	5	3
Good environmental conditions	3	2
Traceability to original owner/traceability of inputs	<i>10</i>	<i>11</i>
Consumer perception	6	3
Premium prices	6	9
Close involvement of the owner	1	1
Raw materials/content	<i>11</i>	8
Method of production	8	7
Appearance	9	6
Texture	<i>10</i>	8
Presentation/promotion	4	4

