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CONFERENCE PAPER

EXPLORING THE INTERACTIONS BETWEEN LAND-BASED INDUSTRIES AND COMMUNITIES IN RURAL ENGLAND

Christopher Short, Brian Ilbery, Paul Courtney, Carol Kambites and Ros Boase

Over recent years, there have been significant changes in rural land use and in the composition of rural communities. A wealth of evidence shows that the traditional economic and employment impacts of agriculture and forestry are in decline and that other land uses, such as recreation, nature conservation and equine businesses, are increasing in terms of land area, employment and socio-economic significance. In parallel, significant demographic, income and occupational changes have taken place within the rural population and in rural communities themselves. As such, a reported characteristic of rural society in the UK is an increasing detachment from the land among the wider population, and a declining involvement by land managers in community activities. However, there is little substantive evidence to show that this pattern is consistent across different types of rural area; likewise, there is limited research that examines new forms of interaction associated with a restructured economy and society.

In response, this paper reports on a recent project for the Commission for Rural Communities that employed ethnographic techniques to assess the various interactions between five English rural communities and the land-based industries that surround them. In particular, it examines the relationships between land-based industries and rural communities and explores whether existing theories relating to rural change, including the multifunctional rural transition (Holmes 2006), and variation within the differentiated countryside (Murdoch et al 2003), are appropriate for explaining some of the key findings. The project found three overarching conclusions. First, the decline in jobs from agriculture and forestry has to some extent been offset by an increase in jobs from other land-based industries such as nature conservation, equine and recreation. Second, those in the land-based sector have a declining influence on local governance, in line with demographic changes. Third, the picture varies considerably from place-to-place, reflecting a wide range of factors including the local social structure, influence of key individuals and the nature of the land-based sector.

Key Words Land-based industries, rural communities, community and land interactions

Introduction

It is now widely accepted that there have been significant changes in rural land use and in the composition of rural communities in the UK. There is a wealth of evidence to show the decline in the economic and employment impacts of agriculture and forestry. In his review of policy over the past decade, Ward (2006) cites Defra figures (2005) to show that the agricultural labour force averages 2.6 per cent of the population in rural areas and that agriculture as a whole generates just 0.8 per cent of the UK's Gross Value Added. The (former) Countryside Agency (CoAg) (2004) suggested that jobs

1. This paper was originally presented at the conference *Rural Futures: Dreams, Dilemmas, Dangers* in Plymouth, UK, April 2008, and is reprinted by kind permission of the Rural Futures Unit, University of Plymouth. It is extracted from the Academic Peer Reviewed Papers section of the Conference Proceedings, ISBN 978-1-84102-185-0.

in agriculture and fishing dropped by 16 per cent (26,000) between 1998 and 2002. Within the land-based sector, other land uses, such as recreation, nature conservation and equine businesses, are increasing in terms of land area, employment and socio-economic significance. However, while figures to support this are scarce, there is some evidence, such as comments coming from the RICS that land sales to non-farmers are outnumbering those of farmers; likewise academics have noted and commented on this trend (McCarthy 2008 and Slee 2005). The spread of agri-environment schemes across much of rural England has also ensured that issues of nature conservation, landscape, access and recreation have become a central theme of most land-based and rural development initiatives (Fish *et al* 2003 and Dwyer *et al* 2007).

In parallel to changes in land use, there have been significant demographic, income and occupational changes within the rural population and in rural communities themselves. The declining dominance of farmers and other landowners in local rural governance has been noted for quite sometime (see Newby *et al* 1978). More recently, The State of the Countryside 2006 report revealed that, like urban areas, the two largest business sectors in rural areas are wholesale and retail and business and professional services (CoAg 2006). Earlier analysis also showed that 80 per cent of rural employment was within four broad sectors: distribution, hotels and restaurants; public administration, education and health; manufacturing; and banking finance and insurance (CoAg 2003).

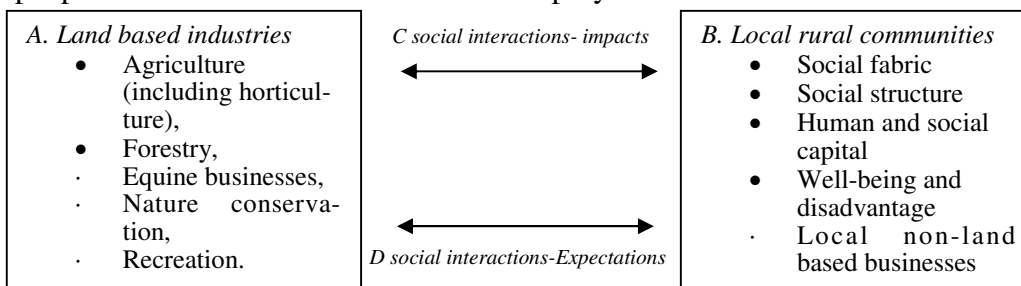
Consequently, the population of rural England now has increasingly weaker ties to the land with many rural settlements largely made up of individuals and families orientated around non land-based employment. Naturally, therefore, rural society in the UK has an increasing detachment from the land among the wider population, and a declining involvement by land managers in the activities of rural settlements. As Ward and Lowe (2007) highlight, in the past rural policy tended to relate separately to traditional land-based activities, such as agriculture, and socio-economic concerns such as affordable housing, social deprivation and local governance. However, these changes are connected even if the policies and evidence are not and it is these interactions that this paper will focus on.

This paper seeks to outline the research undertaken in the LandComm project and to take the findings of the research to see what they reveal about the existing theories concerned with rural change. First, the paper outlines the LandComm research project including the research methods used. The second section reviews two relevant theoretical perspectives and the overall evidence base before presenting some of the main findings. The paper concludes with some overarching conclusions.

The LandComm Project

This paper reports on a recent project conducted for the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) which explored the social interaction between land-based industries (LBIs) and rural communities (Courtney *et al* 2007). The aims of the study were to explore the level and nature of social interaction

between LBIs and rural communities and then to produce relevant policy implications and, where appropriate, highlight elements of good practice. LBIs are defined as agriculture, forestry, equine industries, nature conservation and recreation. The project was concerned with the social *impacts* of LBIs on rural communities as well as the *expectations* that rural communities have of LBIs. These interactions are highlighted and are divided into *impacts*, which can affect people, places and things in both A and B, and *expectations* among people in rural communities and those employed in LBIs.



The research employed an ethnographic approach, involving in-depth qualitative research in five case study communities in different parts of upland and lowland England. Study areas were selected to ensure variations in terms of unemployment, deprivation, age structure, land use and sparsity. These five case study communities were:

- Clun (Shropshire)
- Harting (West Sussex)
- East Hatley and Hatley St George (Cambridgeshire)
- Horton and Rudyard (Staffordshire)
- Rookhope and Eastgate (County Durham)

The research team developed a fieldwork checklist, informed by the literature review, to guide the two researchers who spent ten days in each of the five communities between May and September 2006. The researchers were immersed into each area by participating in various community activities, both formal (attending evening meetings, going to church or booking a session at the mobile library) and informal (eating meals and purchasing refreshments, walking on footpaths and visiting the pub). The data were collected using methods that included semi-structured interviews, one-to-one and group interviews, participant observation, informal conversations and analysis of text and visual information.

Theoretical Perspectives

This section looks at two existing theories that seek to explain and provide a framework for understanding rural change. However, none could be found that neatly matched the rural land use and community development interaction aspects of the research project and therefore there was a need for some adaptation.

First, the multifunctional rural transition framework developed by Holmes (2006) is considered. Holmes proposes a triangular approach to rural land use change based around production, protection and consumption as an alternative to the productivist to post-productivist continuum. Holmes suggests that the dynamic created by the tensions between 'agricultural overcapacity' (production), market driven 'amenity uses' (consumption) and changing social societal values (protection) all contribute to multifunctionality (2006:143). Through this framework, it is possible to visualise the social, economic and environmental processes that shape the countryside and to highlight how different areas adjust to and accommodate variations in land uses. The framework fits LBIs well in terms of agriculture and forestry (production), recreation and equine (consumption) and nature conservation (protection), but would need to be adapted in order to accommodate the community dimension. It could be argued that protection and consumption are two sides of the same coin as high levels of protection also coincide with high levels of consumption. Protection is represented by the designations for landscape, nature conservation and heritage and consumption by land uses such as access, recreation and tourism.

The second focuses on the four countryside types developed by Murdoch *et al* (2003) in the 'differentiated countryside'. Derived from the Countryside Change project, which they termed 'an academic reassessment of rural space' (2003:11), the types are based around the varied interplay of four parameters: economic, social, political and cultural. This produced four different 'types' of countryside:

- the 'preserved' countryside (dominance of preservationist attitudes)
- the 'contested' countryside (traditional agriculture challenged by incomers)
- the 'paternalistic' countryside (large estates and low development pressure)
- the 'clientelist' countryside (marginal farming and employment concerns).

Murdoch *et al* present the four types to indicate the 'regionalising of the rural' in a socio-economic sense, arising out of interactions at all levels. In this sense, the four types cover the social and economic interactions but they are less able to represent the environment and land use based aspect of LBI and community interactions.

The Existing Evidence Base

The first point that the literature review revealed was that, while there is plenty of factual and academic work regarding the changes that rural settlements and areas are currently undergoing, there is little substantive evidence to show whether or not the pattern of change is consistent across different types of rural area. For example, McCarthy (2008), in the final part

of his trilogy on rural geography, talks of the ‘amenity migration’ that is spreading across the increasingly globalised countryside. His use of the word ‘migration’ suggests movement, presumably from urban areas into rural areas, but he says little about its extent or impact. Slee (2005) asserts that, for most rural residents, the countryside that surrounds them is seen more as a consumer commodity than as a place for the production of food. Both of these may be true, but it is unlikely that they will be universally so in terms of extent and frequency.

The second aspect that was largely missing from the academic literature concerned the interactions between rural communities and the land-based industries. This includes the impacts of land use on rural communities and the expectations and attitudes from the same rural communities of land users and vice versa. For example, there is a considerable literature on the importance of social capital to rural areas (see Moseley 2003, Selman 2001, Williams 2003 and Lee *et al* 2005) and this has been recognised by government (DETR 2000 and Defra 2004). However, the importance of LBIs to social capital has been little researched.

Some studies have established a link between changing rural communities and land use. These include the contribution of natural heritage to rural development (Hill *et al* 2002) and the differential economic performance of different areas (Courtney *et al* 2004). There has also been a range of studies on the impact of land use on rural communities. For example, those that consider the contribution that woodland makes to human well-being and quality of life (Burgess *et al* 1988 and O’Brien 2003). Hill farming has been much studied, for example by IEEP (2004), who examined the social, environmental and economic impact of hill farming and concluded that, while the economic aspects in terms of employment and output are in decline, at the regional and local level they remain significant. They also highlighted the strong connection between the traditional farming system and the tourism economy, and the positive contribution of farmers to rural communities. Lobley *et al* (2005) review into the social impacts of agricultural change noted that farmers were increasingly less active in the community relative to non-farmers. However, they also found that farmers who had adapted and diversified had increased their social contacts, often as a result of their diversified activities.

The third and final aspect of the review concerned the expectations and attitudes between communities and LBIs. Work by Bell (1994) concluded that social groups were carefully aligned to wealth and other social differences. Of his two types on rural lifestyle, those with the strongest link to the land tended to be the informal, ‘back door’ groups rather than the formal and distant ‘front door’ groups. Some studies, such as Burgess *et al* (1988), looked at the local scale in more detail and found complex and often specific feelings that link pleasure, nostalgia and fear. The most frequently articulated attitude between land managers and rural inhabitants is one of conflict, often labelled as a clash between locals and incomers. However, Milbourne *et al* (2000) discovered a mix of attitudes with most incomers having regular but often superficial contact with farmers, for example through the process of buying local food.

What became clear from the literature view was that a finer level of

analysis was required in order to understand the wide range of land use and community impacts and expectations. Nevertheless, some general conclusions emerged. First, impacts can be both actual and perceived, and we suggest that an attempt should be made to establish both among land managers and local communities. Second, the literature is very quiet on the role of mediators or intermediaries who shape both the impacts and expectations. Third, there is considerable variation in the degree and depth to which the various sectors of land-based industries have been scrutinised. Agriculture and forestry have been researched much more than conservation, recreation and equine. Fourth, much of the local social impact appears to be the result of economic activity, suggesting that it would be unwise to separate economic and social aspects. Finally, it is clear that social heterogeneity, rather than homogeneity, is likely to be present in terms of impact and/or expectations.

Results Summary

Findings reveal that the nature and scale of interactions between land-based industries and rural communities vary considerably from place to place, reflecting a host of factors including the nature of local land-based industries, local social structures and norms, and the influence of key individuals. Caution therefore needs to be exercised in making generalisations about the various contributions of LBIs to rural communities in England.

Farming and forestry have in recent years had a generally declining impact on the local labour market. However, land-based industries retain importance as employers in some communities and new employment has been created through farm diversification and the growth of 'consumption activities' such as equine activity and other types of recreation. The nature and scale of such diversification are important in the context of local employment impact. 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 have all served to offset, to some degree, the typical decline of land-based employment.

The findings also suggest that relationships between land-based industries and rural communities may be reinvigorated to the extent that wider forces of demand and supply (associated with sustainable consumption and environment agendas) encourage more local selling and buying of agricultural produce. Nowhere are such sales a dominant element of the local economy, but many examples were found of modest sales of farm produce, often linked to a growing tourism industry and to the general level of vibrancy in the community.

While there has been a decline in the influence of several land owners and managers as community leaders, this decline has been rather less – and certainly more geographically variable - than first thought. The reasons for such declining involvement include a sheer decline in the numbers of owners and managers of land-based industries living locally, the reduced time available to such people as more and more labour is shed, and the growing role played by newcomers with little or no direct connection with the land. The latter can sometimes be compounded by a strong preservationist ethic – a state

of affairs that appears to have alienated many hitherto politically active farmers. That said, 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.

Focusing on the expectations that local residents place on the land-based industries, many relate to countryside access and a concern that traditional privileges be respected. Other expectations include a wish that the residents' peace, quiet and freedom from excessive farm traffic, smells and noise be respected, coupled with a dominant anti-development ethic. Such views tend to be more strongly held or expressed by relative newcomers with only limited knowledge of modern land-based industries. Those in local businesses (for example, running B&Bs, pubs and tourism facilities) expect the land-based industries to continue to manage the area's landscape and associated wildlife in a way that is sympathetic to the needs of tourism, itself a source of mutual dependence by land-managers and rural communities.

Conclusions

The project found three overarching conclusions. First, the decline in jobs from agriculture and forestry has to some extent been offset by an increase in jobs from other land-based industries such as nature conservation, equine and recreation. While there has been some work on the economic contributions of non-production based LBIs, there is very little on the aspect of social interaction. However, in Rudyard the equine businesses were numerous and there was evidence of an associated social and employment network. Within conservation, while people from within the study area undertook some work, much of it was the responsibility of external people not known locally. The sale of local produce was important but a variable picture emerges. In none of the study areas was such sales dominant, but in Clun and South Harting the combination of a growing tourism industry and vibrancy within the community means this is increasing. Interestingly, LBIs tended not to buy their inputs locally.

Second, those in the land-based sector have a declining influence on local governance, reflecting their frequency in the population. This mirrors the trend that Newby *et al* (1978) noted nearly 30 years ago. However, this universal decline does not support Murdoch *et al* (2003) who, within their regional variations, note that in some areas farmers were 'disproportionately represented at various levels of government' (p.101). What is apparent is that farmers remain central to various aspects of community interactions, having strong links to the maintenance of schools and the construction elements associated with fetes and other social activities.

Third, the picture varies considerably from place-to-place, reflecting a wide range of factors including the local social structure, influence of key individuals and the nature of the land-based sector. However, in none of the case studies did we find evidence of a 'fault-line' between LBIs and their local community, and variations that did occur could be explained by divisions *within* those communities. Many of the expectations that local residents place

on LBIs concern the continuation of tradition (walking in favoured locations), the general wish for 'peace and quiet', and the continued sensitive management of the local environment.

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Appendix. Some key characteristics of the five case study communities			
<i>Parish*</i>	<i>Social characteristics</i>	<i>Facilities and services</i>	<i>Dominant LBIs</i>
<i>Clun (Shropshire)</i>	Essentially a very small town. Mix of indigenous and newcomers. High % of elderly people	Wide range of services as befits a small town including shops, post office, 2 pubs, hotels and B&Bs, castle remains and doctor's surgery.	Active forestry sector. Low intensity farming. Whole area is AONB, Offa's Dyke trail passes close to the parish. Some equine activity
<i>Harting (West Sussex) (includes South Harting)</i>	The main settlement, South Harting, is a socially very active mixed community – a wide social spectrum. High % of elderly people. Very high % of owner occupation.	Good range of village services, and community social / cultural activities.	Farming is important – largely arable with some sheep and beef cattle. A growing equine sector. Much outdoor recreation including South Downs Way. Nature conservation and landscape designations
<i>Hatley (Cambs) (consists of East Hatley and Hatley St George)</i>	East Hatley is a small 'middle class' commuter settlement. Hatley St George is an estate village. Little interaction between the two.	East Hatley – no facilities. Hatley St George has small shop and post office and a playing field. Each has a medieval church.	Arable farming is important and productive. Includes a large private estate. No significant designations for landscape or conservation, apart from one small SSSI.
<i>Horton (Staffs) (three hamlets including Rudyard)</i>	Well established population - very few newcomers (i.e. resident for less than 15 years)	Neither Horton nor Rudyard has a real centre and no pub, shop or post office. There is a small primary school, village hall, church and two chapels.	Recreation and tourism centred on large scenic lake. Dairy and beef farming. Growing equine sector. Close to Peak District NP but no designations.
<i>Stanhope (C. Durham) (includes Rookhope and Eastgate)</i>	Very small settlements in a remote location. Rookhope and Eastgate constitute 'deprived' communities in many respects	Rookhope has various services including shop, post office and community-run pub. Eastgate has more basic provision	Small upland farms – largely sheep and beef cattle. Tourism and grouse shooting. Industrial heritage. Fells are protected conservation sites.

*Containing the particular subsumed settlements and communities relevant to the study.