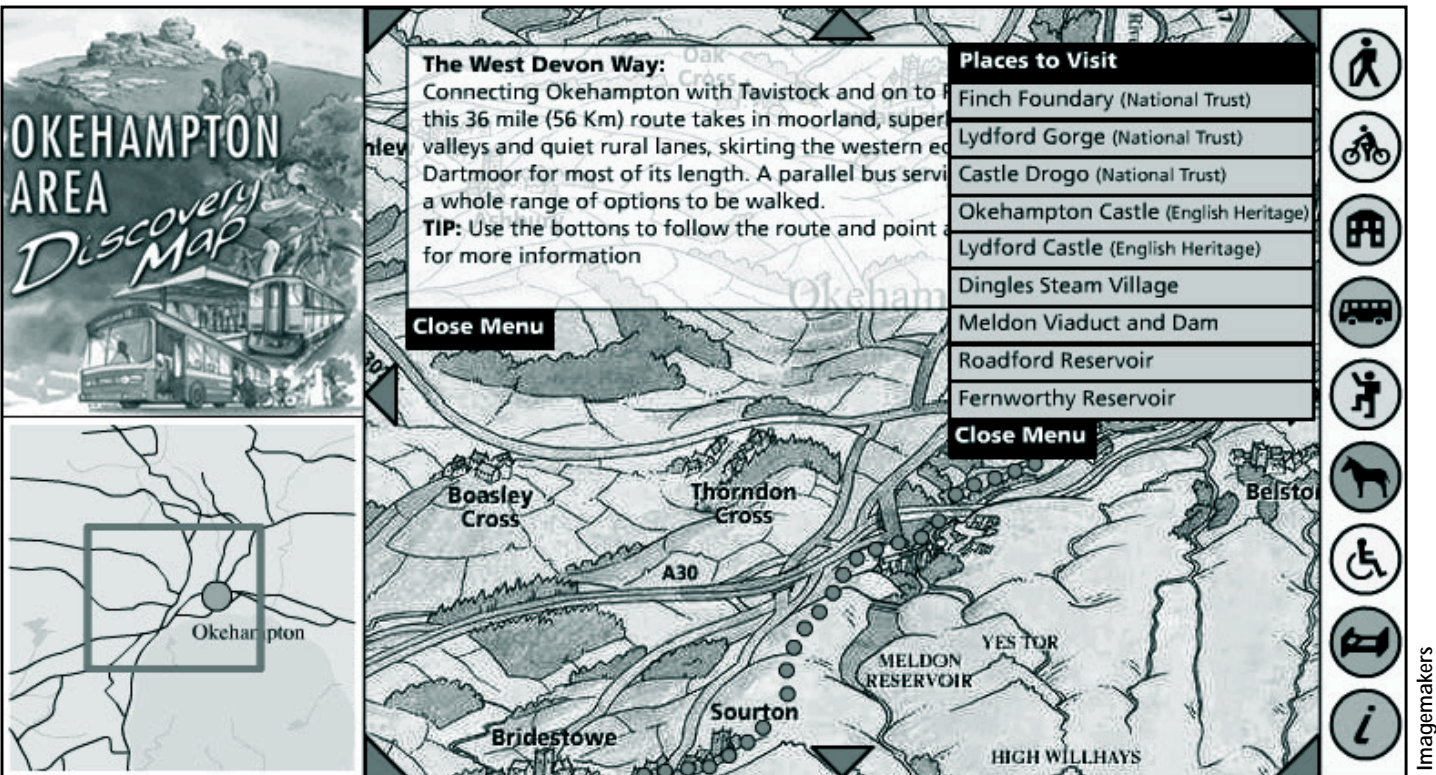


Sustainable Tourism and the Internet

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The internet has made vast amounts of information available to a much larger audience than traditional techniques

From dot coms to WAP phones, the internet is never very far from public consciousness. Whilst it's clear that the business world is taking the internet very seriously, can the same be said of conservation, recreation and tourism professionals?

This article examines how the internet can be used, in particular, to help implement sustainable rural tourism policies in the UK.

Some broad internet trends

According to the UK Government we are living in the 'Information Age':

"The Information Age characterises a society in which there is widespread use and adoption of Information and Communications Technologies and in which information is a key determinant of economic success" (<http://www.dti.gov.uk>).

Use of the internet, at all levels from local to global, is expanding at a huge rate. At the macro-scale, a number of factors are responsible, including the development of cheaper and more accessible technologies, changing patterns of consumer behaviour and working practices and strongly proactive government policy. In Britain, for example, the government has pledged to make the internet accessible to all schools and libraries.

Add to this the growth in publicly-funded drop-in IT centres, the widespread emergence of 'cybercafes' and massive take-up by businesses and home-users alike and it becomes apparent that this exciting and powerful new medium for communication and commerce cannot be ignored. Indeed government has warned UK industry that anyone not developing an internet strategy risks being left behind, and ultimately putting their business interests at risk.

As the internet becomes firmly implanted in the public's mind, people increasingly expect to find the information they are looking for, and buy the goods they want, online. Organisations in the public domain, whether commercial or otherwise, risk losing credibility if they do not enable people to do this.

Using the internet to promote sustainable tourism

Use of the internet as a tool for promoting sustainable tourism is as yet very undeveloped in the UK. This is bound to change once people are more fully aware of its benefits and capabilities. The following sections consider briefly, some of these key benefits for visitors, countryside managers and local people.

At a recent CRN workshop in York, delegates discussed current thinking on sustainable tourism. Through these discussions a number of clear policy objectives emerged, including the need for:

- increased provision and uptake of public transport by visitors
- enhanced economic well-being and quality of life for host communities
- involving host communities in tourism projects and initiatives
- promoting awareness of how people's actions affect the environment
- engendering a sense of local pride and ownership

The attainment of these objectives depends largely on being able to involve, inform and educate visitors and local people in order to modify behaviour in appropriate ways.

Visitors must be informed and aware of the impact of their actions throughout the visit process, from initial choice of destination and mode of transport to choice of on-site activity and accommodation. Local people need to be fully aware of the impacts of tourism (both positive and negative), and the importance of looking after the natural and cultural heritage of their area, which is the fundamental

tourism resource. For tourism, recreation and conservation professionals, there needs to be a willingness to consult and involve local people in decisions which affect them - not simply an assumption that tourism is a universal panacea.

Communicating sustainability messages to visitors

Traditional methods of informing and educating visitors, such as leaflets, posters, visitor centres and outdoor panels, are effective over a relatively limited geographical area and timeframe. By contrast, the internet is able to reach a potentially global audience over an indefinitely extended timeframe.

Promoting public transport

Reducing people's dependence on the car, both as a means of reaching a destination and moving around within it, is a key element of sustainable tourism policy. Accordingly, people need to know what options are available before setting out. Using the internet, people can download timetables, book tickets, and plan whole travel itineraries. Using the new generation of internet-accessible mobile phones, people can even find out where the nearest bus route is whilst they are out and about. The ability to access this sort of information when and where people want is a major advance in combating the most common excuse for not using public transport, namely that it is inflexible and inconvenient.

Promoting understanding and enjoyment

Communicating important management or heritage interpretation messages to visitors is an essential part of modifying behaviour in order to lessen environmental impacts and generate support for conservation work.

Using current internet technologies people can take virtual tours of countryside sites, historic buildings or visitor centres; they can view virtual reality reconstructions of historical sites, such as Iron Age hill forts; and learn about wildlife and landscape conservation through online interactive panels and leaflets. People can also view published policy

documents, management plans and codes of conduct.

Using password-protected databases, up-to-the-minute news items or articles from visitor newspapers can be added simply to a website or updated instantly by anyone regardless of their technical knowledge.

Education

As budgetary and curriculum constraints make it increasingly difficult for many schools to conduct field visits, the internet offers an opportunity to take the countryside to the classroom. Detailed fieldwork itineraries, online teachers' resources, downloadable worksheets and project work bulletin boards are some of the ways in which the internet can contribute to educating and informing the next generation of countryside users.

Rationalising resource use

Using the internet as a medium for disseminating information can help reduce the need for costly

leaflet / brochure re-prints, particularly those which incorporate features such as timetables, events and accommodation listings, multiple languages and telephone numbers.

It also allows re-use of panel, leaflet and / or visitor centre artwork. This artwork can simply form a backdrop for textual information, or may be the basis for more complex animations and interactive games and puzzles. In the long term this means reduced consumption of paper and greater value for money.

Increasing visitor spend

By staying in accommodation and buying local products and services, visitors can help sustain rural communities. Increasing visitor spend is therefore an important aspect of sustainable tourism. A well designed website can attract new visitors (both foreign and domestic) and provide opportunities for generating valuable new revenue streams, for example through setting up online marketing co-operatives, accommodation booking facilities and events and attractions guides.

Fig 1. Summary of internet benefits for information provision

- Increases public awareness - achieving the same exposure using traditional media would be prohibitively expensive for most organisations.
- Opportunity to provide up-to-the-minute information.
- Allows control over the information presented through ownership. 'Public' ownership of the internet means that people can promote pretty much any message that they want. This sometimes causes conflicts of interest, for example, between a local business promoting jet-ski hire in a fragile marine environment and a conservation organisation for protecting that same environment. In is case, the conservation organisation could exert greater influence over the business if it was to develop its own site (e.g. by offering links or advertising space to the business on the proviso that the business displays codes of conduct on his or her site).
- Reduces the need for costly leaflet/brochure reprints, particularly those incorporating features such as timetables, events and accommodation listings, multiple languages and contact details.
- Allows re-use of panel, leaflet and/or visitor centre artwork. This artwork can simply form a backdrop for textual information, or may be the basis for more complex animations and interactive games and puzzles.
- Enables rationalisation of information. This appeals to modern consumer behaviour which favours the one-stop-shop.

Visitor payback

Just as local communities can benefit from the marketing power of the internet, so too can countryside organisations. The extra money which can be generated by selling all manner of tourist-related publications, can be used to help sustain and develop a website, and more importantly, can be ploughed back into the local environment, e.g. path maintenance.

Involving local communities

The internet can be used as a medium for conducting public consultation exercises, through chat rooms, online questionnaires and bulletin boards.

Working with local people to set up a 'community website', can help bolster a sense of pride and ownership - for many people the thought of their community and local area being given a global stage is actually quite a powerful and motivating thing.

Local community groups can use a website rather like a parish notice board, for example by writing articles and submitting them directly to appear 'live' on the site, or advertising local events. Take this a step further and you might also have a car-sharing page, or a facility whereby people could organise their public transport travel through an online booking, ticketing and timetabling service.

Monitoring resource use and visitor preferences

Monitoring visitor preferences and attitudes is a vital part of managing the tourism resource and targeting visitor information strategies. Traditionally this monitoring has been achieved through on-site interviews, mailback questionnaires and focus groups. Using the internet, online questionnaires can be accessed by a wide range of visitors and dedicated chat rooms can complement these methods.

A less obvious advantage of the internet is the ability to collect all sorts of statistics about the enquiries that website visitors make. This information can range from the value of online transactions and bookings to the locations and types of activities which people most often enquire about. All of this can assist countryside managers in gauging the likely success of schemes and initiatives in the future.

Summary

For countryside, tourism and recreation professionals, the internet provides an excellent and cost effective means of promoting sustainable tourism initiatives. Given the relentless pace at which new internet technologies are developed, the opportunities, and the potential audiences, can only increase. What better way of tackling the global issue of sustainable tourism than through the global network that is the internet?

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