

The Countryside, Parks, Tourism and Foot and Mouth Disease in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

In April 2001, from a viewpoint in the Northern Pennines of England I could see not only the beautiful rural landscape of the Lake District National Park, but also the sad and disturbing sight of seven fires burning the carcasses of farm animals to control Foot and Mouth Disease. Within weeks the countryside and many parks in much of the U.K. (United Kingdom) were transformed visually, ecologically, socially and economically. A year later, with the eradication of the disease, the countryside, with its agriculture, parks and tourism, is reviving but is unlikely to be the same as before. This paper examines the impacts of the Foot and Mouth Disease epidemic of 2001 on the countryside, parks and tourism of the U.K.

The Countryside

The U.K. (United Kingdom) is a small country with a large population. There are 59 million people settled at an average density of 626 people per square mile. This compares with an average density for Canada of 8 people per square mile. There are of course parts of the U.K. and Canada where the actual population density is quite similar. There are many cities, no wilderness (according to most people's standards), but 70% of the country is a rural, largely agricultural landscape, usually referred to as the "countryside." It is a treasured landscape, that for many epitomizes the U.K., and contributes to a sense of national identity (Parker, 2002). Engel went so far as to exclaim that "if you don't understand why the countryside matters so much to the British, I would respectfully contend that you understand nothing" (Engel, 2001).

Most of the countryside is private farmland. Its character reflects various geographical opportunities and constraints as well as centuries of farming practice. But, it also is influenced, and many would argue sustained, by farming subsidies from the British government and European Community amounting recently to £3 billion per year. There are currently 350,000 farmers but there were 400,000 in 1994, and the decline is continuing. It has been predicted that "up to 25% of all farms could disappear by 2005-06" (Ilberry, 2002: 146).

The countryside, especially in the northern and western parts of the U.K., although largely farmed, is important for the conservation of biodiversity and is also a major resource for recreation and tourism. Therefore, much of it has been included in protected areas.

Parks

There are at least 29 categories of protected areas in the U.K. (Bishop *et al.*, 1997). Two of the most extensive are National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The National Parks are intended to protect natural beauty and provide opportunities for recreation and tourism while allowing rural land uses such as agriculture, forestry and villages, to continue. The 11 National Parks, designated since 1951, cover 10% of England and Wales. Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) are intended to conserve natural beauty while allowing recreation, tourism, agriculture, forestry, other rural industry and community development compatible with this objective (Gubbay, 1986). Since 1956, 37 AONB have been designated. The land in these Parks and Areas is part public, part private, and mostly farmed. Thus, Cartwright felt justified in saying: "We have come to understand that landscape is entirely artificial. Those parts of the landscape free of garden centers and Little Chefs – the parts that seem most natural – are that way because people made them that way. There is nothing about the countryside that could be called natural, from the artfully placed copses and carefully tended stone walls to the church spires dominating the villages" (Cartwright, 2001: 10). Nevertheless this countryside has conservation values, protected in parks, but influenced by agriculture and tourism.

Tourism in the Countryside

According to The Countryside Agency (2001), "the landscapes, cultural richness and biodiversity of the English countryside are increasingly seen as a reason for overseas visitors to come to the U.K. and for British visitors to stay here on holiday." The scale of this visitation is impressive. The National Parks attract some 100 million visitors per year. The Peak District National Park covers 550 square miles and is within 100 kms of half the population of the U.K. so it alone attracts 30 million visitors per year. The 305 km Coast-to-Coast trek, on footpaths through the Lake District, Yorkshire Dales and North York Moors National Parks attracts 30,000 hikers per year (Avery, 2002). Tourism is twice as important as agriculture in the rural economy. Visitors to the English countryside spend L.12 billion/year (c.\$27 billion). Tourism in the English countryside supports 380,000 jobs (Norfolk, 2001).

Foot and Mouth Disease and Its Control

The Foot and Mouth virus was first recognised in Europe in the nineteenth century. It affects cloven-hoofed animals, especially sheep and cattle. It may lie dormant for many years then erupt and spread easily and quickly, by physical contact but even through the air. The last serious outbreaks were in 1923 and 1967. The latest outbreak in the U.K. began in February 2001 in southwest England, then, as a result of animals being shipped, spread to northern England. By April 2001 there were 1603 cases. It was controlled firstly by isolating farms, killing livestock and incinerating them. Over 4 million sheep, cows and pigs were slaughtered.

Access to most of the countryside and parks, even areas well away from where Foot and Mouth Disease had been found, was prohibited. In March 2001, for example:

- all 140 Royal Society for the Protection of Birds Nature Reserves were closed;
 - all 11 200 English National Nature Reserves were closed;
 - 70 Nature Reserves in Scotland were closed;
 - in Snowdonia National Park in Wales, all rights of way across farmland and common land were closed;
 - in Exmoor National Park, in south-west England, there was no access to woodland or moorland, and all footpaths and bridleways were closed;
 - in the Lake District National Park in north-west England, access to the open fells and moorland was banned;
 - in Northumberland National Park in north-east England, visitors were urged to stay away, and all footpaths and bridleways were closed;
 - in the Norfolk Broads in eastern England, boating was restricted and all footpaths were closed;
 - in Lincolnshire alone, 4500 footpaths were closed to the public;
 - most Forestry Commission woodlands, totaling 2.4 million acres, were closed;
 - more than 70% of Britain's 2000 mile canal network was closed; and,
 - the National Trust's 15 major estates in Northern Ireland were closed.
- (Anon, 2001a: 18).

By May 2001, there were about 2000 cases of Foot and Mouth Disease, but it was deemed to be under control so visits to the countryside were gradually permitted. However, on May 12 it was reported that "the drive to lift restrictions in time for last week's Spring Bank Holiday succeeded in opening only 18% of the country's 130,000 miles of footpaths" (Cook, 2001: 16).

The U.K. was not declared completely disease free until January 2002. In May 2002, it was estimated that the epidemic had cost the British taxpayer, including vet bills, cleanup and compensation paid out to farmers, over C\$5 billion (Campbell, 2002).

Immediate Impacts on Tourism

Upon the outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease and the consequent imposition of constraints on access to the countryside, recreational visits to the countryside, including non-farm areas, villages and events, by domestic and foreign tourists, declined rapidly and severely. It was estimated that the financial loss of domestic tourism, amounted to £2-3 billion. Lost foreign tourism income in 2001 was estimated at £1-2 billion. Eighty percent of accommodation providers in the countryside were affected. Two to three hundred thousand jobs in the countryside and elsewhere were affected. In March 2001, it was estimated that the Wildlife Trusts were losing L.50,000 per week because their wildlife reserves were closed.

There were also broader impacts. Foreign tourism to the U.K. as a whole declined. Other countries gained tourists. Some countries became reluctant to accept visitors from the U.K. For example, a group from the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, intending to work in the Nature Areas at Trent University in Peterborough, Canada, were asked not to come for fear that they might bring Foot and Mouth Disease into the country and to the campus which is surrounded by farmland.

Government Responses

The government responded to the Foot and Mouth Disease crisis and its repercussions in a variety of ways, albeit, according to some, too slowly and inappropriately (Anon, 2001). A Rural Task Force was established and financial aid offered to those adversely affected by the epidemic. By May 2001, £250 million had been given by the government to help businesses affected by disease and its impacts. £2 million was provided for 78 national park and local authorities to restore access to the countryside. A Helpline/website was created to indicate opportunities to visit the countryside. Charitable foundations, such as the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Association, also relayed public donations to farmers and afflicted rural communities. By June 2001, a 5-year Strategy for Rural Tourism had been prepared by The Countryside Agency and the English Tourism Council to counteract the decline of tourism in the countryside. In February 2002, the government launched a campaign entitled "Your Countryside – Your Welcome."

Other Consequences

The epidemic has accelerated previous trends toward farm consolidation and closure. Some farmers have changed from livestock to arable farming. Less or different farming will modify the appearance and possibly the appeal of the rural landscape and the parks that protect some of it. Simon Lyster of the Wildlife Trusts worried that "the current crisis will force livestock farmers out of business or arable. It is

already difficult to find graziers for our nature reserves... Without grazing, many of our most precious habitats will lose biodiversity and perhaps disappear altogether" (Lyster in Thomas, 2001: 72). *Country Life* magazine noted that "the Lake District National park will have to consider how to manage fells that have been stripped of their sheep" (Anon, 2001).

There is now a greater appreciation of the importance of countryside tourism. Accordingly, a vision is developing of the countryside as a recreation and conservation resource more than an agricultural resource. The crisis provoked a review of EU/U.K. subsidies for farming, tourism and conservation. Farmers are now being urged to manage land for tourism and conservation, not just agriculture. However, not all wish to do so. In the words of Forgrave, "No farmer wants to become a glorified park-keeper..." (2001, 2).

Conclusion

The Foot and Mouth Disease epidemic of 2001 in the United Kingdom had a major impact on agriculture, the countryside, parks, recreation, tourism and the rural economy. It increased awareness of the amenity value of the countryside and its parks and has accelerated some existing trends in farming. Yet the amenity value, biodiversity, and landscape of the parks in the countryside have depended to a large extent on the farming, which seems bound to change.

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