



Natural Economy Northwest

Natural Tourism strategic review working papers

Prepared for Natural Economy Northwest
by Blue Sail and TEAM



Funded by



Preface

This is one in a series of reports produced between 2007 and 2009 within the Natural Economy Northwest (NENW) programme. NENW is a regional partnership programme led by Natural England, the North West Development Agency and the SITA Trust on behalf of a wide range of economic and environmental partners. The main focus is to deliver priority action 113 in the Regional Economic Strategy, to optimise the natural environment's contribution to the regional economy and quality of life.

The programme also includes the Enriching Nature SITA Trust biodiversity programme and the aspirations of Natural England and other environmental and economic partners to mainstream the natural environment within sustainable economic development. Key work areas within the programme are to:

- increase awareness of the value of the natural economy,
- commission and disseminate research to promote and facilitate delivery,
- provide direction to promote effective use of limited financial resources,
- contribute to the development and delivery of regional and sub-regional strategies,
- facilitate natural economy project development and encourage project delivery,
- promote and facilitate Green Infrastructure and Natural Tourism especially through the Sub-Regional Economic Partnerships and the Tourist Boards,
- encourage strategic investment in natural economy projects, and
- to facilitate training, skills innovation and advice to business.

This particular report consists of papers commissioned from the Team and Blue Sail consultants, reviewing existing regional and sub-regional strategies to inform the positioning of natural tourism development.

This work along with other NENW information and publications is on our website – www.naturaleconomynorthwest.co.uk. You can contact us through our website. We are interested in the ways that this report has been of use to you so that we can take into account in the further development of the programme.

This report has been commissioned by Natural Economy Northwest in the delivery of its aims, outputs and outcomes and it should not be assumed that it represents the policy of the funders – Northwest Development Agency, Natural England and the SITA Trust.

Dr Will Williams

Programme Director
Natural Economy Northwest

CONTENTS

1. DESTINATION MANAGEMENT PLANS	...3
2. REGIONAL ECONOMIC STRATEGY	...9
3. REGIONAL TOURISM STRATEGY	...13
4. REGIONAL SPATIAL STRATEGY	...16
5. VISITOR INFORMATION STRATEGY	...19
6. REGIONAL FORESTRY STRATEGY	...23

NATURAL TOURISM AND DESTINATION MANAGEMENT PLANS

Chester & Cheshire

The DMP for Chester and Cheshire identifies 5 priorities:

1. Improve the Chester Experience
2. Increase Awareness of Cheshire's Appeals
3. Grow Conference Tourism
4. Increase appeal as a family fun destination
5. Increase effective partnership working between businesses and the public sector

Natural Tourism has most to offer Cheshire in enhancing visits to and business opportunities connected with specific areas of the County where the natural assets provide a particularly strong element of the appeal. In particular these are:

- ▶ The Peak District Fringe
- ▶ The Cheshire Meres and Mosses
- ▶ The East Cheshire sandstone ridge
- ▶ The proposed Weaver Valley Regional Park
- ▶ The canal network

Natural Tourism has the most relevance to supporting DMP Priority 2 and 4 and in particular the following actions:

- ▶ Developing a brand map of Cheshire that includes:
 - iconic products that will appeal to particular niche market segments
 - (e.g. historic houses, gardens, equestrianism).
 - key themes through which Cheshire's strengths can be promoted
 - (e.g. 2008 "Cheshire Year of Gardens" and the "lazy outdoors" promotion).
- ▶ Establishing Cheshire's reputation as one of England's great garden counties through actions such as "CheshireYear of Gardens" 2008 promotion.
- ▶ Encouraging "non-garden" businesses to see the opportunity presented by, and participate in, "CheshireYear of Gardens" 2008.
- ▶ "Greening up" the Cheshire tourism product to take advantage of growing environmental consciousness and demand for "greener" tourism products, through actions such as:
- ▶ Sharing intelligence between VCC and businesses in the visitor economy on "green" customer trends.
- ▶ Improving environmental practices by businesses (e.g. covering waste management, procurement, operations and management).
- ▶ developing environmental policies for businesses, and communicating them to guests.
- ▶ Natural economy promotion to encourage walking/cycling/outdoor pursuits.
- ▶ Development of activity products in Cheshire (e.g. cycling and walking).
- ▶ Developing marketing partnerships that increase the critical mass of appeals in the area

Lancashire & Blackpool

The DMP 2007/8 is the third version of the plan. The plan identifies 4 priorities for action for the development of tourism in the sub region as follows.

1. To build a confident and skilled workforce
2. To develop a high quality visitor experience
3. To create a truly sustainable destination
4. To adopt a market-led approach

Natural Tourism is particularly relevant in connection with the development of the following major investment projects identified in the plan:

- ▶ East Lancashire and Ribble Coast and Wetlands Regional Parks
- ▶ Brockholes Wetland
- ▶ Barton Grange - construction of a new large Garden Centre
- ▶ Slackwood Farm Visitor and Education Centre – Arnside-Silverdale AONB
- ▶ West Pennine Moors
- ▶ Forest of Bowland Bridleway

In particular the DMP recognises the need for the following actions which of direct relevance to Natural Tourism:

- ▶ Identify a series of cycle/walking hubs and enhance facilities to create critical mass including car parking, picnic sites, refreshment kiosks/cafes, cycle hire/repair etc at the start of clearly marked trails
- ▶ Promote and develop the potential of the natural environment by working with existing attractions and sites to create critical mass
- ▶ Encourage and support business investment in facilities and promotion that reinforces distinctiveness of local produce, local building materials, and local crafts and traditions
- ▶ Develop and upgrade interpretation and trails to enhance the visitor experience and encourage further exploration.
- ▶ Continue to develop and support the winning themes of Country Escapes, Coastal Contrasts, Living Legends and Family Fun

Merseyside

The DMP 2007-2010 for the Liverpool City Region is an action plan for the partnership of organisations involved in developing Liverpool and Merseyside as an internationally important tourism destination. European Capital of Culture status in 2008 together with the inscription of parts of the waterfront as a UNESCO World Heritage Site is recognised as the prime opportunity to re-position Liverpool as a leading visitor destination.

The Mersey Waterfront Regional Park also provides the strategic framework for a pan-waterfront approach to the transformation and enhancement of the coastal assets. The key waterfront assets incorporated include England's Classic Resort of Southport, the World Heritage Site of Liverpool, the Dee estuary and the estuary-wide SPA/Ramsar wildlife sites.

There are four key strategic objectives within the DMP:

- ▶ To develop a class destination for conferences and business visits
- ▶ To promote the Liverpool City Region as a world-class destination for leisure
- ▶ To develop the sub-region as a major events destination of international repute
- ▶ To deliver a warm Liverpool Welcome throughout the City Region

Natural Tourism has particular relevance on Merseyside to:

- ▶ Developments on the Wirral coastline, country parks and coastal brand
- ▶ The sustainable tourism potential of the Sefton coastline
- ▶ The development of the marine lake Southport
- ▶ The Mersey Waterfront developments
- ▶ The role of the Clore Natural History section of National Museums Liverpool
- ▶ The Sefton Park enhancements
- ▶ A possible major Rainforest Project (although the location for this is uncertain)

Working with the Mersey Waterfront programme is particularly important and Natural Tourism has a key role to play in developing tourism products and image for the coastline of Merseyside.

Greater Manchester

The DMP 2007/8 is the Visitor Economy Action Plan for Greater Manchester has 5 main aims:

1. **Image:** to develop the Manchester brand through promotion of the city to focus on the contemporary and traditional strengths of the city region's culture
2. **Events:** to increase the interest in, and visitors to the city through the creation of a world class events programme that builds on the success of the Commonwealth Games and strengthens the Manchester brand
3. **International destination:** to position Manchester as a vibrant international destination which also acts as a gateway to the Northwest and represents an alternative gateway to Britain
4. **Business Destination:** to ensure that Manchester is further established as one of Europe's leading business destinations
5. **Infrastructure:** to support the enhancement of the tourism product in Greater Manchester through the development of tourism infrastructure

Amongst the main products and experiences that are the basis for tourism promotion and development are Manchester's Countryside and Industrial Heritage (many of the key sites often have a natural environmental setting of water and woodland for example)

Green spaces and public areas in the city are recognised as one of the facilities that require to be further developed and urban parks such as Alexandra Park and Heaton Park and a number of the Manchester valley open space/country parks are potentially attractive venues for visitors, particularly in the summer.

Priorities for action include the enhancement of Manchester's natural and built environment to support the destination's tourism product. A specific aim is to champion a World Heritage Site bid for a central area of Manchester and create an Irwell City Park.

Cumbria

Of the five sub regional tourist board areas, Cumbria has the most rural and natural environment orientated image, largely because of the high profile of the Lake District National Park and the internationally recognised quality of its mountain and lake scenery

The Cumbria DMP 2007/8 covers the three year period from April 2007 to March 2010. The plan has the following objectives:

6. **World-class product development and investment:** develop the tourism product in Cumbria to meet the needs and expectations of visitors and the community whilst conserving and enhancing the environment on which tourism depends.
7. **Marketing and promotion:** maintain the vigorous marketing and promotion of The Lake District-Cumbria as a premier destination for visitors
8. **Information:** ensure that visitors and the industry have effective, efficient and easy access to the information they require in the most effective formats.
9. **Infrastructure:** develop infrastructure and sustainable transport networks to improve visitors experience of the region and to bring added community and environmental benefits.
10. **Performance of tourism businesses:** enhance the quality, performance, sustainable practices and profitability of tourism businesses in Cumbria.
11. **Potential of people who work in tourism:** Improve the skills and capability of industry staff, and create a more stable, attractive and rewarding career for the workforce.
12. **Representation of visitors and the industry:** Understand the needs of visitors, tourism businesses and employees in Cumbria's tourism and hospitality industry, to share this with others involved in delivering services to them and to represent their interests whenever necessary.
13. **Measurement and research:** Provide the evidence required to produce an accurate evaluation of tourism across Cumbria and ensure informed decision making.

Natural Tourism is at the centre of the Cumbrian Tourism offer and has relevance to all of the above objectives. Of the tourism related investment proposals Natural Tourism is central to:

- ▶ Grizedale Forest redevelopments
- ▶ Derwent Forest, Allerdale
- ▶ Lowther Castle and gardens
- ▶ Hadrians Wall related developments
- ▶ The South Solway Peatlands

Outdoor attractions and activities are central to add value to Cumbria's natural assets and rich resource of lakes, mountains, footpaths, bridleways and forests to attract

holidaymakers in new and expanding markets. The opportunities for growing Cumbria's "natural" tourism products and expanding the outdoor markets further are significant.

Specific actions identified in the DMP are:

- ▶ Cumbria Adventure Capital UK
- ▶ Grizedale Forest
- ▶ Whinlatter Mountain Bike trail centre
- ▶ Pennine Bridleway
- ▶ Equine tourism - Trails Development
- ▶ Outdoors Marketing and Accreditation scheme (ROAM)
- ▶ Bassenthwaite Lake catchment enhancement programme
- ▶ Derwentwater Foreshore Scheme
- ▶ Wild Ennerdale
- ▶ Kendal Mountain Film Festivals
- ▶ Keswick Mountain Festival
- ▶ Cumbria Bike Festival
- ▶ Responsible Tourism Scheme/ Green Tourism Accreditation
- ▶ Lakeland Trails Series
- ▶ Unique North Pennines
- ▶ Northwest Golf Promotion and co-ordination

The plan lists a large number of investment projects being progressed by a range of largely public and voluntary sector partners. Many are relevant to Natural Tourism with the natural environment being at the forefront of much of the proposed image and marketing of the County.

Developing the visitor payback scheme and supporting the Natural Tourism initiative are identified as generic projects whilst there are numerous site specific and marketing projects for the different local areas of Cumbria.

NATURAL TOURISM AND THE REGIONAL ECONOMIC STRATEGY

The Regional Economic Strategy (RES) clearly recognises the importance of tourism to the regional economy. The visitor economy is worth some £7 billion per year to the region (7% of the economy), supporting an estimated 400,000 jobs.

Natural Tourism – the visitor economy based on the natural assets of the NW – has a significant role to play in supporting the NW Regional Economic Strategy (RES). In particular it is a key aspect of one of the three drivers to achieve the RES’s vision for the region, namely:

“creating and maintaining the conditions for sustainable growth and private sector investment”.

The RES states that this means investing in the region’s environment, culture and infrastructure, improving the quality of life, tackling deprivation, valuing diversity and social inclusion, and recognising the social and environmental implications of economic growth.

It is critical to wider regional success to create sustainable communities where a thriving economy is matched by high quality natural and built environment, high quality local services, good transport connections and an active, safe and inclusive society. The development and management of natural tourism has an important role to play in achieving this. In particular the RES identifies that creating the conditions for sustainable economic growth requires:

- ▶ Promoting the image of the region
- ▶ Maximising cultural and major event opportunities
- ▶ Developing the quality of the visitor experience
- ▶ Supporting cleaner, safer, greener communities
- ▶ Developing community cohesion
- ▶ Reducing health inequalities and social exclusion
- ▶ Realising and nurturing the natural and built heritage assets
- ▶ Improving the physical environment

The RES identifies a large number of actions. Those most relevant for Natural Tourism are listed below with some suggestions about how natural asset based tourism can positively contribute.

RES ACTIONS	How Natural Tourism can contribute	Examples
Promote the image of the region		
Develop and implement marketing programmes to promote a positive image of the benefits and diversity of the Northwest as a location for businesses, visitors, investors and as a place to live	Through promotion of the natural assets of the region Particularly the coast, estuaries, National Parks, AONBs, the lowland estates and the canal network Implementing the recommendations of the “Marketing the Natural Environment “ 2006 report	NWDA web site and marketing activity Lake District and Peak District National Parks Arnsdale-Silverdale and Forest of Bowland AONBs

Maximise cultural and major event opportunities		
Support Liverpool European Capital of Culture 2008 to maximise the full economic benefit through coordinated marketing, business and product development activity	Ensure that the natural assets of the Mersey Waterfront are developed and promoted	Develop tourism products at Sefton Coast
Develop the appeal, distinctiveness and diversity of the "Cultural Offer" in the Northwest focused on Manchester and Liverpool and other cities	Ensure that the key open spaces in and near the cities are restored and promoted. Many Country Parks have a key role as tourist assets.	Tatton Park Dunham Massey Haigh Hall
Secure sports, business and cultural events and conferences for the region to host in line with the Major Events Strategy	Sports and outdoor events based on natural assets have a part to play Major environmental conferences can draw attention to the natural assets of the region	Fell and cross country running
Develop plans to exploit the predicted business opportunities in the growth of sport	Capitalise on outdoor pursuits and outdoor activities. Important role for sports colleges at Ambleside, John Moores Liverpool, Crewe and elsewhere	Training and conference opportunities
Develop the quality of the visitor experience		
Improve the product associated with the region's tourism 'attack brands' and 'signature projects' as identified in the Regional Tourism Strategy, in line with market demand	Relate specific actions to the Destination Management Plans of the tourist boards	See comments on Destination Management Plans
Capitalise on the strengths and key assets of Southport as a "Classic Resort"	Ensure the natural coastal assets play a key part in the Southport Classic resort developments	Bird watching facilities at Southport pier
Implement a Business Tourism Strategy, to develop the quality and range of facilities within the region	Importance of small and medium sized hotels for rurally based conferences and seminars	Country House hotel conferences
Develop and implement a Visitor Information Strategy for the region	Ensure that Natural Tourism is given a high profile in all promotion and web sites	Tourist Board web sites
Support business development for tourism businesses through the region's five Tourist Boards to grow the market share of domestic, overseas and business visitors	Ensure new businesses providing natural tourism products and services are encouraged and supported.	Eg wildlife watching packages
Support cleaner, safer, greener communities		
Deliver the following to support cleaner, safer and greener communities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Regional Reducing Re-offending Action Plan ▶ Initiatives to reduce the level of alcohol related crime and violence in towns and cities ▶ Support for masterplans and local businesses to incorporate "clean, safe, green" and "secure by design" principles ▶ Business Improvement Districts and green business parks 	Utilise the links between environmental enhancement of settlements to enhance the visitor economy with the positive impacts for the local population	Weaver Valley Regional Park Mersey Waterfront Chester enhancements
Develop community cohesion		
Implement the Sustainable Communities Plan and develop the skills of regeneration professionals and leaders to support sustainable communities	Exploit the links between developing natural tourism and providing training and employment opportunities for local people	Use natural tourism related projects to generate community involvement
Promote the role of the Voluntary and Community Sector, Social Enterprise, Trade Unions and Faith Communities, in tackling social exclusion and improving community cohesion	Take advantage of the role that the voluntary sector can play in natural tourism provision and new business opportunities. Voluntary sector active in management of assets eg wildlife trusts	Small scale visitor centres, events guided walks and trails, etc. Engage natural asset owners/managers.
Reduce health inequalities and social exclusion		
Deliver the Regional Equality and Diversity (RED) Strategy with a focus on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Economic participation for all ▶ Reducing hate crime and violence 	Utilise the role of rural tourism for health, exercise and tackling obesity matters	Walking for health Outdoor pursuits for deprived youth groups

▶ Promoting diversity as an asset		
Deliver the Investment for Health strategic plan with a focus on tackling health inequalities	Exploit links between the countryside, parks and health issues	Role of urban parks
Realise and nurture the natural and built heritage assets		
Develop the economic benefit of the region's natural environment through better alignment of environmental activities and economic gain	Develop more tourism products based on environmental assets	Wildlife guiding holiday packages
Implement The Lake District Economic Futures Policy Statement to secure the renaissance of The Lake District's tourism offer and broaden its economic performance	Natural Tourism to play a part in Cumbria Vision Work closely with the LDNPA	Support bid for World Heritage Site status for the Lake District
Deliver sustainable growth through use of the region's heritage environments and assets – especially World Heritage Sites, the cities of Chester, Lancaster and Carlisle and The Lake District	Exploit the high profile of the Lake District, give more emphasis to other underutilised natural areas	The Cheshire Peak District fringe, Sefton Coast and Ribble estuary, Solway Firth Wirral coast
Create and manage the following Regional Parks: ▶ Mersey Waterfront ▶ East Lancashire ▶ Weaver Valley ▶ Ribble Estuary ▶ Northwest Coastal Trail ▶ Wigan Greenheart	Key role for natural tourism in all of these	Development of educationally orientated interpretation facilities and services
Implement the Regional Forestry Framework	Recognise the recreation and tourism potential of some forest and woodland areas	Grizedale, Delamere Macclesfield forest
Promote sustainable farming and food production and its role in the management of rural environmental assets	Promote local foods and cuisine	Forest of Bowland foods Lake District lamb
Invest in quality public realm, green space and environmental quality focused on: ▶ The cities of Liverpool, Manchester and Preston ▶ Tourism "Attack Brand" and "Signature Project" locations and key arrival points ▶ HMR and URC areas ▶ Key Rural Service Centres	Utilise urban green space and country parks as introductions to the wider countryside	Regenerate Sefton Park, Liverpool Alexandra Park, Manchester
Understand the economic case for, and promote, good design ensuring project developers and managers provide strong client leadership	Attempt to reinforce local distinctiveness through design and use of plant materials	Native plants where appropriate Local stone
"Future proof" physical development projects to ensure they meet the demands of future generations		
Protect existing areas of high economic value from flooding, to appropriate standards	Floodplains and wetlands can be important sites for nature conservation and provide outdoor recreation areas close to peoples homes (important for VFR markets)	Manchester Valley parks

Skills Development and Training

Skills development and training is an important aspect of regional economic development. The RES recognises this and in particular recommends the "development of a skilled workforce in rural areas to enable business to diversify and expand". The Regional Skills Partnership is seen as the important coordination mechanism and the Learning and Skills Council is a key organisation. The visitor economy is identified in the North West Annual Statement of Learning and Skills Priorities (2006/7) as one of the seven priorities for NVQ Level 3 training for 2006/7.

The development of the skills required to develop Natural Tourism and contribute to the quality and growth of this sector of the economy could include:

For accommodation and attraction providers

- ▶ Welcome host
- ▶ Resource efficiency and waste minimisation (in conjunction with the Business Resource Efficiency and Waste (BREW) partners)
- ▶ Information provision for visitors
- ▶ Catering using local produce
- ▶ Green Marketing
- ▶ Guiding skills

For Planning and Management Organisations

- ▶ Visitor management
- ▶ Environmental and Heritage Interpretation planning
- ▶ Tourist Information Centre operation
- ▶ Local carrying capacity studies

For Farmers and Land Managers

- ▶ Providing for visitors
- ▶ Tourism enterprises as farm diversification
- ▶ Accommodation provision and marketing
- ▶ Using local produce for catering
- ▶ Education and interpretation

Working with new education and training providers will be important. Some educational initiatives known to us that are emerging in the Region that are relevant to the future development of Natural Tourism linked education and training are:

1. Tourism and recreation training at the agricultural colleges at Reaseheath, Myresough and Newton Rigg
2. The proposals for a new regional rural skills and construction training, education and business centre at Savio House (Ingersley Hall), Bollington in conjunction with Macclesfield College and the Field Studies Council
3. Investigations to create a new role for Brockhole in the Lake District and the potential to create a Sustainability Centre linked with Brathay Hall and Wray Castle
4. The development of a new University of Cumbria
5. The work of the new Lancaster University Tourism Centre

NATURAL TOURISM AND THE REGIONAL TOURISM STRATEGY

The Vision of the Strategy is that within ten years the NW Region will offer the best tourism destinations in Britain, with a thriving visitor economy that is second to none.

The natural assets of the NW will play a vital role in creating the image for the region and provide a basis for specific leisure activities. The Tourism Strategy recognises that the visitor infrastructure and the visitor services that will assist people to appreciate and utilise the natural assets will also have to be first class in order to achieve the vision.

The Strategy strives to encourage real excellence and superb experiences for visitors and local residents making leisure trips and specifically identifies ten ambitions to achieve this. One key ambition where natural tourism is particularly important is to *“Demonstrate through action that we really care for our environment and for the people who visit our region and its destinations”*. The natural environment, landscapes and habitats of the region will provide either the backcloth or setting for visits or will be the focus for more specific activities. The key to making more of the region’s natural assets for tourism will be to encourage greater joint working and dialogue between the organisations that manage the environmental resources and the tourism businesses that are developing products based upon them. This is exactly what the Natural Tourism project is positioned to do.

There are six strategic goals identified in the Regional Tourism Strategy. Each can be supported through developing natural tourism in the Region as follows:

Strategic Goals in the Tourism Strategy	Natural Tourism Component
Enhancing the region's communication with visitors	Developing further a strong image that the NW is England's best natural environment and making the most of the diverse natural environments that the Region has to offer
Boosting the productivity and performance of businesses in the visitor economy	Through business advice and accreditation that assists natural tourism businesses to be established and to grow
Improving the products and experiences that brings people to England's Northwest	Through product development that make the most of the natural assets of the Region
Maximising the skills and potential of the people who work in the visitor economy	Providing advice and training to natural tourism businesses and working with appropriate tourism clusters
Improving the infrastructure of the visitor economy	Investing in the visitor infrastructure at key sites – improved interpretation, access and visitor services at natural environment sites
Supporting sustainable development and strengthening social inclusion	Ensuring that the natural resources are properly managed. Providing opportunities for all to appreciate the region's natural assets

The Strategy then identifies eight priority programmes. Natural Tourism development has a role to play in achieving them all as follows:

1. Productivity and Performance

The Region has some larger and smaller tourism products that are exemplars of how to make the most of the region's natural assets. The Region has, for example:

- ▶ wildlife viewing sites managed by key voluntary and public bodies such as the RSPB, the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust and the Forestry Commission.
- ▶ outdoor centres offering quality training and personal development courses
- ▶ field studies centres of national standard
- ▶ walking and cycling packages
- ▶ long distance and shorter walking trails managed by the public sector
- ▶ equestrian facilities with teaching courses and others.

The challenge is to build on these businesses, expand the number and network better between them.

The key contribution that natural tourism can make can be achieved through developing a closer dialogue between the owners and managers of natural assets and the businesses that provide the tourism infrastructure and the marketing.

2. Signature Projects

A small number of signature projects will be developed in the Region and a number of these will focus on the natural assets of the Region, notably the:

- ▶ the Renaissance of the Lake District National Park
- ▶ Hardrian's Wall
- ▶ Mersey Waterfront

Significant sub regional signature projects are identified in the destination management plans prepared by the 5 Tourist Boards.

3. Signature Events

At the present time there are no events in the Region with a strong natural environment theme that could be seen to have a national or international profile. There are many smaller countryside events such as walking festivals, agricultural shows and rural arts festivals, but none has been developed to a scale that could be classed as a signature event.

There may be scope to develop such a signature event and this could involve the grouping together of a number of smaller events in a specific geographical area during a specified period. The Mid Wales Festival of the Countryside is a useful model of this type of natural environment orientated event.

4. Sense of Place

The natural assets of the region and how they are presented play a major role in helping to create a sense of place. The proposed Regional Interpretation Challenge fund is designed to enhance the quality and amount of environmental interpretation in the Region. This will contribute to creating a sense of place linked to natural environment themes.

The quality of the design of visitor infrastructure will also contribute to the character of local destinations.

5. Superior Skills

Enhancing skills in those organisations in the natural environment sector that wish to attract more visitors will be important. Many organisations struggle with small marketing budgets and require assistance in this area. Enhancing the quality of information provision and natural heritage interpretation will also be important.

6. Easy Access

How visitors reach the region is possibly beyond the scope of the natural tourism component of tourism development, but once they have arrived, natural tourism has much to offer in encouraging them to explore areas in ways that are more sustainable than using their private cars. Cycling, walking and riding and the provision of guided group tours all have an important role to play in helping people to appreciate the environment and to lower their carbon footprint.

Providing access for all at natural sites is also of importance, but a balance must be struck with retaining a sense of wildness and naturalness in some locations.

7. Attack Brands

The NW Region can have a stronger natural environment image and appeal than it does at present. Clearly the Lake District is a nationally and internationally significant brand and will always play a major part in defining the image of the North West and this position should be maintained. But there are other sub regional natural environment brands that should be made more of. These are:

- ▶ The Peak District Fringe (in association with the Manchester conurbation in particular)
- ▶ The North Pennines
- ▶ The Mersey Waterfront, Sefton Coast and Ribble Estuary
- ▶ The Forest of Bowland and Arnsdale Silverdale AONBs
- ▶ The South Solway Estuary and Peatlands
- ▶ Hadrian's Wall Country
- ▶ Walney Island

These are not the only areas of the Region with strong natural environment appeal, but possibly they are the areas where increased visitors would be welcomed in particular and the quality and potential of the natural environment to provide interest and a setting is clear. The development of visitor infrastructure along with enhanced marketing and the formation of new business clusters that bring together the public, private and voluntary sectors will be important.

8. The Power of Information

The NWDA have launched Natural Northwest – a web site promoting the natural assets of the region. Supported by funding through for the implementation of the Visitor Information Strategy Tourist Boards will be investing in their web site and the Destination Management System which drives content. Increasingly people are putting together their own packages and this infrastructure when fully developed and maintained will provide that opportunity for those that wish to make more of the natural environment of the region and the activities that take place within it.

NATURAL TOURISM AND THE REGIONAL SPATIAL STRATEGY

The Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) for North West England provides a framework for the physical development of the region over the next fifteen to twenty years. Incorporating the Regional Transport Strategy, it addresses the scale and distribution of future housing development and sets priorities for dealing with environmental issues, transport, infrastructure, economic development, agriculture, minerals and the treatment and disposal of waste. The RSS is part of the statutory development plan for every local authority in the North West. Each local planning authority must prepare a Local Development Framework, which is required to conform to the RSS. As such the RSS is an important strategic document that can influence the provision of infrastructure relevant to the tourism industry.

The RSS is strongly supportive of tourism development that is sympathetic to the environment and sees a very positive role for tourism in supporting economic growth and the quality of life for local people.

The RSS has a statement that the regional economy will be strengthened by:

“Supporting tourism development in preferred locations, in particular identifying Blackpool as the priority location for regional casino development in the NW along with the regional centres of Manchester/Salford and Liverpool, and ensuring the revival of coastal resorts more generally; and giving positive support to the sustainable diversification and development of the rural economy whether existing businesses or the creation of new enterprise.”

Tourism is seen as an important component of achieving a sustainable economy. The plan requires protection and enhancement of the most significant biodiversity, landscape, heritage and woodlands assets, as well as more sustainable approaches to land remediation, in particular:

- ▶ Promoting a more integrated approach to delivering a better environment through land and water management, including a better relationship of new development to water resources, flood risk and adaptation to the impacts of climate change;
- ▶ As part of this, developing approaches for delivering green infrastructure as an implementation priority – creating multifunctional networks of green spaces which are important not only in terms of environmental quality, but also in providing recreation, in improving health, adapting to changing climate as well as other social and economic benefits.
- ▶ Continuing to develop strategic frameworks for, and to implement, Regional Parks in three broad locations – the North West Coast, Mersey Basin, and East Lancashire;
- ▶ Ensuring that the coast, as an important but complex set of ecological and human systems, is properly managed.

Special mention is given to the coast. Local plans and strategies should:

- ▶ Enhance the economic importance of the coast and the regeneration of coastal communities in ways that
- ▶ safeguard, restore or enhance and make sustainable use of the natural, built and cultural heritage assets of the North West Coast and address issues of environmental decline and socio-economic decline, through support for:
 - the protection, development and diversification of the North West's maritime economy;
 - regeneration based around opportunities for sustainable growth in coastal tourism and recreation;
 - regeneration opportunities associated with reuse of developed or under-used developed coast, former docks and other adjacent industrial areas;
 - improving the image of coastal resorts²⁷ to attract inward investment and tourism;
 - the diversification of economic activity in coastal communities and rural coastal areas;
- ▶ Define the undeveloped, developed, and remote coast at a strategic and local level
- ▶ The RSS has specific strategic policies for tourism and the visitor economy. The RSS calls for plans, strategies, proposals and schemes to deliver improved economic growth and quality of life, through sustainable tourism activity in the North West. In particular:
 - ▶ The regeneration of Blackpool as an International Tourism Destination, and the North West's other coastal resorts as priority locations for major footloose tourism development, where tourism is a critical component of the economy
 - ▶ The regional centres of Manchester and Liverpool, and regional city of Preston, where tourism is a contributory component of the economy
 - ▶ Chester as a heritage city of international renown where tourism is a significant component of the economy;
 - ▶ Carlisle, Bolton, Birkenhead and Lancaster as destinations with emerging potential for heritage related tourism development where tourism supports and compliments their status as historic towns and cities;
 - ▶ Promoting business tourism through the development of high quality conference and exhibition facilities, particularly of European significance in Manchester and national significance in Liverpool and Blackpool.
 - ▶ The Lake District National Park and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty are important tourist attractors in their own right. However the over-riding emphasis should be to ensure that the statutory purposes of the designation would not be adversely affected. Sustainable tourism activity which will strengthen and diversify the economic base within these areas, and which respects this principle, will be supported. Wherever possible, tourism development opportunities should be sought which take place in locations adjacent to the National Park and AONBs, thus spreading the economic benefit of tourism. Tourism activity related to Regional Parks, Hadrian's Wall and Liverpool World Heritage Sites should be promoted, within the framework set out in the relevant Management Plans.
 - ▶ In rural areas, tourism development should support rural regeneration and diversification and be of an appropriate scale and be located where the environment and infrastructure can accommodate the visitor impact.

The RSS gives a strong encouragement for natural tourism development and states

“In rural areas, employment opportunities are not necessarily associated with the allocation of new development land. Agriculture will continue to play an important role in the rural economy, especially in relation to landscape management and ecological protection and enhancement, and the need for agricultural diversification – finding new and sometimes imaginative uses for land and buildings previously used for farming purposes – particularly in sparsely settled rural areas. Priority should be given to economic activity that has strong links with the area in question, for example food and drink processing, tourism and leisure, the conservation of natural, cultural and historic resources and businesses that are ancillary to farming and forestry”.

The RSS puts forward the following principles for tourism development:

Plans and strategies should ensure high quality, environmentally sensitive, well-designed tourist attractions, infrastructure and hospitality services, which:

- ▶ Improve the region’s overall tourism offer, increasing the market share of attractions;
- ▶ Meet the needs of a diverse range of people;
- ▶ Support the provision of distinct tourism resources that harness the potential of sites and their natural attributes, including built heritage and cultural facilities;
- ▶ Encourage and facilitate regeneration;
- ▶ Promote facilities which will extend the existing visitor season;
- ▶ Harness the potential of sport and recreation, particularly the role of major sporting events;
- ▶ Improve the public realm;
- ▶ Are viable in market and financial terms;
- ▶ Help to relieve pressure on locations vulnerable to the impacts of climate change;
- ▶ Respect the environmental sensitivity of the coast, particularly the undeveloped coast;
- ▶ Promote eco-tourism in areas of high natural value in a way that minimises any adverse effect on the natural assets that visitors seek to experience.

The maintenance and enhancement of existing tourism development will be supported, providing that improvement, intensification and expansion proposals meet environmental and other development control criteria.

The RSS gives special support to wildlife tourism development and states “The development of new tourism opportunities, including eco-tourism associated with the North West’s rich and diverse wildlife, will be important in extending the existing visitor season”.

NATURAL TOURISM AND THE VISITOR INFORMATION STRATEGY

According to the Visitor Information Strategy, the vision is:

“of a world-class visitor information service that exceeds expectations of our visitors, provides a competitive advantage to the region, and that makes a measurable and valuable contribution to the visitor economy.”

This paper summarises the aims and objectives towards achieving that vision and outlines potential synergies between the Visitor Information Strategy and the development of the natural tourism product.

Ideal scenario

The strategy outlines an ideal scenario in which:

- ▶ There is integration between marketing activity, information provided and the experience available to visitors;
- ▶ There is a clear understanding of what information visitors need at different points in their experience or journey;
- ▶ Face-to-face contact with visitors is used as an opportunity to reinforce the brand messages that reflect the essential qualities of the destination;
- ▶ The economic importance to the visitor economy is recognised and visitors are persuaded to spend money in the region on goods and services produced and delivered there;
- ▶ Information delivery is efficient and relevant;
- ▶ The culture of management is focused on delivery of key objectives and on meeting performance targets with a strong sense of pride from those involved.

Aims and objectives

The top-line aims of the strategy are:

- ▶ **Effective Information Management:** to provide high quality information, efficiently deliver through appropriate channels, when and where needed to meet the primary needs of the main visitor markets;
- ▶ **Strategic Direction:** to provide a strong strategic direction for investment in visitor information, focused on maximising the quality of the visitors' experiences, increasing visitor dispersal, achieving longer stays and increased spending and motivating repeat visits and recommendations;
- ▶ **Operational Excellence:** to achieve operational excellence, on a cost effective basis, in all aspects of visitor information provision.

The vision is to be achieved by implementing objectives related to each of the three strategic aims and these are summarised in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Aims and objectives for visitor information strategy

Information Management	Strategic Direction	Operational Excellence
Information Management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manage information in a professional and commercial manner 	Strategic <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Operate in a strategic regional framework with clear links to marketing activity 	Culture <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a customer focused culture for all information deliverers
Information Quality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop and implement a regional data quality management approach 	Structure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a clear structure for the provision of information 	Service <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement a regional service standard for all those delivering visitor information
Distribution <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify and use the most effective channels for distributing information 	Branding <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create and use regionally consistent information brands 	Performance Management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set clear performance targets and monitor their achievement
Call Handling <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide a single number virtual call centre for the region 	Customer Relationships <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop and implement a consistent, shared CRM approach 	Commercial Focus <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide & implement models of commercial good practice
	Maximise Impact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop guidance on how best to maximise impact and RoI 	Training <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide high quality training to all visitor information deliverers
		Design & Presentation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide guidance on tourist information centre design and other forms of provision
Research <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a programme of research into visitor information needs Carry out regular research into the impact of visitor information 		

Visitor Information Strategy and the natural tourism product

Though the above aims and objectives do not explicitly relate to natural tourism, there are several aspects of the strategy which link to the development of the natural tourism product:

- ▶ The strategy emphasises the importance of working in partnership with close co-operation between Local Authorities, Tourist Boards, National Park Authorities, tourism operators and other industry stakeholders. The promotion and development of the natural tourism product should also be developed through these partners;
- ▶ Promotional activity is becoming increasingly sophisticated by targeting markets that will be most receptive to the experiences on offer. The strategy states, therefore, that Visitor information services should focus on fulfilling the requirements of the market segments, within the framework of an integrated strategic approach to marketing. Consumers with an interest in the natural tourism product would be one such clearly defined target market. Clusters of similar natural tourism product should be marketed together;
- ▶ Within the framework of the Information Management plan, comprehensive and attractively presented web-based information that is relevant to visitors through all types of electronic devices should be ensured. Promotion of the natural tourism product should also be fully integrated using the latest developments in information management, and be kept up to date;
- ▶ Customer relationship management systems are designed to formalise and give structure to the collection and use of knowledge about customers. A well-designed, carefully constructed CRM system helps to increase the number of visitors to and within the region, and increase their value to the visitor economy. CRM should be adopted on a consistent basis across the region, providing both a better understanding of the requirements and interests of customers and the means to generate repeat business and recommendations. Information about visitors should be shared across the region to maximise repeat business for the region. The natural tourism product should be part of the wider CRM to promote similar products from one region to another to the appropriate target market, keep customers aware of new natural tourism products on offer, and encourage repeat visits. Information should be shared between the sub-region;
- ▶ The economic impact of visitors should be well understood and in particular the economic contribution of natural tourism. Guidance should be given to TICs on techniques to learn and understand specific visitor's requirements (such as those visitors participating in natural tourism), to maximise their spending in the local economy and encourage a repeat visit or recommendation;
- ▶ A common approach to the collection of information on the needs of existing and potential visitors at all stages of their journeys should be developed. This knowledge should be shared and action taken upon the insights this information provides. Attempting to provide information to visitors without a strong sense of what their evolving requirements results in wasted effort and in failure to serve their real needs. The research should focus particularly on the requirements of the target markets to be developed in the future and the needs of those visitors with an interest in experiencing the natural tourism product.

Priorities for 2010

Priorities for 2010 highlight a fully integrated destination information management and e-business system, a Visitor Information Network Management Group, 'one number' customer contact centres and a small number of strategic TICs. These TICs will:

- ▶ Be centres of excellence in their own right, but also co-ordinate and support the information network within their area;
- ▶ Be designed to create a sense of place and to showcase the key brands being promoted sub-regionally and regionally;
- ▶ Be managed to fulfil marketing campaigns (including the application of CRM) and maximise spending in the local economy;
- ▶ Offer excellence in customer service and instil a similar culture in their satellite TIC operations.

Again, this is not directly related to the natural tourism product. However, clear links can be made between the development of the natural tourism product and the priorities for 2010. In particular the strategic TICs should showcase the regionally and sub-regionally significant natural tourism assets and products and be aware of and fulfil the relevant marketing campaigns for such assets and products.

Funding

The implementation of the Regional Visitor Information Strategy commissioned by NWDA presents a substantial opportunity for developing web based information. A budget of £5.5M over 4 years (running until 2009-10) has been allocated to invest in information provision and infrastructure. This budget will be allocated on a bid basis for region-wide activity, sub-regional programmes and capital investment (primarily Tourist Information Centre development). The Tourist Boards are working up Action Plans which identify the vision for their area and the priorities for action over the next five years. It is clear that the gaps in the provision of information on natural tourism could be addressed by accessing this funding (indeed Cumbria Tourism's proposed CRM system with its mapping and itinerary planning embracing natural tourism will be a priority project for this funding). Tourist Boards will be able to bid for their own projects, of if there are common strands across Action Plans, these will be identified and addressed regionally. If for example a number of Tourist Boards identify natural tourism development on the DMS as a priority then this would be just such a project suitable for the regional allocation of funding which is in addition to any funding Tourist Boards might access for their own particular priorities. The Action Plans are due for completion mid-June.

NATURAL TOURISM AND THE REGIONAL FORESTRY FRAMEWORK AND ACTION PLAN

The Agenda for Growth, the Forestry Framework for England's North West, was published by the North West Forestry Framework Partnership in 2005 and is designed to help shape the regional woodland and forestry sector for the next 20 years. The NW Forestry Framework partners are:

- ▶ North West Regional Development Agency
- ▶ North West Regional Assembly
- ▶ Mersey Forest
- ▶ National School of Forestry (UCLAN)
- ▶ National Trust
- ▶ Health Development Agency
- ▶ Forestry and Timber Association
- ▶ Natural England (formerly the Countryside Agency and English Nature)
- ▶ Government Office for the North West
- ▶ Sustainability North West
- ▶ Woodland Trust
- ▶ DEFRA (Rural Development Service)

Woodland cover in the NW ranges from over 9% in Cumbria to between 4% and 5% in the rest of the region and generates an estimated £400M per annum to the regional economy. Trees woodlands and forests have an important role to play in creating an image for the region and are also an asset for sustainable tourism development, whether as a backcloth and key component of the landscape or as a resource for specific activities such as walking, cycling, adventure activities, camping, orienteering or nature study. In some specific locations woodlands and forests are sufficiently extensive to be the main feature and the basis of the attraction for visitors – the most obvious example being Grizedale Forest in the southern Lake District.

The Framework identifies six Action Areas to make the most of the regions's woodland and forest resources. These are:

1. Enterprise and Industry – developing businesses and cooperation
2. Regional Image – including the role for tourism and assisting local regeneration
3. Biodiversity and Landscape – enhancing the ecology and integration with agriculture
4. Health, Well-being and Quality of Life – linking with communities and enhancing access
5. Climate Change and Energy – wood as sustainable fuel, for construction
6. Supporting and Resourcing the Sector - a landscape scale approach and enhanced management

Following the production of the Forestry Framework an Action Plan was published in 2006 to cover the period 2006 – 2009. Under each of the 6 Action Areas a number of specific actions with outputs, outcomes and key partners have been identified. The main links to the development of natural tourism are related to Action Areas 2 and 4 concerning regional image enhancement and health issues.

Action Area 2 (Regional Image Enhancement)

“Our region should be strategically and practically promoting our woodland-based and woodland-linked tourism destinations to extend and enhance the visitor experience in the North West”.

The actions specifically mentioned are:

- ▶ Developing Links to the Liverpool Capital of Culture 2008
- ▶ Inputting into green infrastructure improvements
- ▶ Making more of the existing Forest Parks for tourism (Natural Economy Northwest mentioned specifically as partner). The Forest Parks in the region are at Delamere in Cheshire and Grizedale and Whinlatter in Cumbria.
- ▶ Developing new Forest Parks (the links to the community forests is potentially important here).

Action Area 4 (Health, Well-being and Quality of Life)

“We must work with woodland owners to develop a multi-purpose woodland management approach that caters for the needs of different recreational users, and engage with tourism and leisure bodies to increase the promotion of accessible woodlands”.

“The region should take every opportunity to develop woodlands and associated activities that utilise them as outdoor classrooms in which to build life skills”.

The specific actions mentioned are:

- ▶ Develop health, sport and activity schemes in existing woodlands
- ▶ Developing Forest Schools through pilots and training

Conclusions

There is a basis within the Framework for stronger links between forestry and natural tourism development, but there is little detail on how this can be made to happen. The most specific recommendations relate to the development of plans and strategies for existing and new Forest Parks. It may be possible for Natural Tourism Northwest to trigger a Forest Park orientated initiative in conjunction with the Forestry Commission and others, possibly by creating a forest park recreation and tourism development cluster. This type of initiative is taking place in the Argyll Forest Park in Scotland under the Heritage Lottery Fund's Landscape Partnership programme. Such a cluster could focus on either an existing Forest Park, such as Delamere or a potential new one (e.g. the greater Macclesfield Forest or the Pennine Edge Forest in Oldham and Rochdale).

Discussions with the Red Rose and Mersey Forest teams would also seem appropriate, but the provision of access and recreational facilities in these areas is more likely to be orientated to the local population and for day trip recreation rather than to the development of overnight stays and the involvement of the private sector in significant natural tourism related development. The proposal by Peel Holdings to develop a new Salford Forest Park in the Manchester green belt is also of interest.