



Research summary 15: Growing natural tourism

'Investment in natural tourism benefits the local economy, enhances sustainability and improves visitor experience, which then generates more money for investment: it's a "virtuous circle" in which everyone gains.'

Key messages

- Natural tourism creates a cycle of benefits that allows the local economy to expand, while simultaneously enhancing sustainability.
- The stunning natural environment of the Northwest puts it in an excellent position to reap the benefits of natural tourism, providing it is prepared to keep developing the sector.
- The better the condition of the green infrastructure, the greater are the economic benefits it underpins.
- Residents as well as visitors benefit from an expansion in natural tourism, as it brings improvements in infrastructure and increased opportunities for recreation.

The context

Natural tourism is tourism that is based on, and motivated by, experiencing the natural environment. Natural tourism activities can range from relatively passive pastimes, like enjoying scenery, to adventurous pursuits such as rock climbing. It includes leisure learning – combining a holiday with learning new skills in areas such as photography and painting – as well as conservation breaks and events, and festivals with a natural environment theme. It is based on **natural assets** like lakes, mountains, forests and rivers, which together make up the **green infrastructure**.

Tourists in the Northwest, both day visitors and people staying longer, already spend more than £14bn per year. They support **220,000 jobs**, almost 36,000 of which are in rural areas. Regional and national research suggests these figures could grow substantially if the area were to make more of its natural assets, developing new products such as wildlife watching or activity holidays.

*Growing Natural Tourism*¹ is based on a report produced by Blue Sail for Natural Economy Northwest. It has been distilled from two years of research, discussions and support work by Natural Economy Northwest with the tourism, environmental and business sectors, and includes 10 case studies of natural tourism enterprises.

The findings

The growing interest in sustainable living can benefit natural tourism businesses and help them attract more visitors. This is just the start of a process that leads to a wide range of **economic benefits**.

Natural tourism also greatly improves **quality of place**. Visitors who are drawn to areas with beautiful landscapes expect such areas to have a public realm to match. Improvements to the green infrastructure benefit residents as much as visitors. As tourism expands, transport links, shops and pubs are also likely to improve. Jobs are created and outward migration reduced - all of which helps to sustain small, and sometimes fragile, rural communities.

As businesses become more successful, their value will increase and other businesses will be willing to pay a premium to set up in the area. Making properties more resource efficient will reduce running costs and simultaneously increase their value.

Increasing profitability will also enable businesses to invest more in their staff. This investment, together with the pleasant working environment that is characteristic of natural tourism businesses, can help to increase productivity as staff become happier and sickness and absence are reduced.

Natural tourism can also bring improvements to the environment as businesses see the importance of a high-quality landscape and varied flora and fauna for their clientele. Natural tourism clients will expect good environmental practice from the businesses they patronise. If those clients would otherwise have taken holidays abroad, their decision to stay in the UK will have a doubly beneficial effect on climate change.

The case studies illustrate different types of natural tourism businesses and the many benefits they can bring. For example, the **Forest of Bowland** adopted a sustainable tourism strategy in 2005. Early in its implementation it became clear that the area needed to develop a strong local identity to attract visitors.

Local produce played a key role in this, with many producers starting to use Bowland in their name. It is estimated that every £10 spent on local food is worth £25 to the local area. Buying local also reduces food miles and therefore congestion and pollution. In addition, the strategy has led to the promotion of environmentally friendly activities such as cycling and horse riding.

Another case study focuses on the **Bassenthwaite ospreys** as an example of how a rich natural environment can boost tourism. A pair of ospreys has been raising young in a purpose-built nest on the edge of Bassenthwaite Lake since 2001. The Lake District Osprey Project aims to provide a welcoming habitat for breeding ospreys, enabling them to recolonise the Lake District while giving people a chance to find out more about wildlife. Not only has the environment improved as a result, there have also been huge benefits for the local economy. Money is raised from car parking and sales at Whinlatter Visitor Centre, and it is estimated that each season sees a spend of £420,000 directly attributable to the 'osprey effect'. Transport links have also improved, benefiting local residents as well as tourists.

The challenge

In order to capitalise on the potential of the Northwest's stunning natural environment, tourism businesses will need to keep developing new products. These could be wildlife watching holidays, or 'get away from it all' escapes, for example. Realising the potential of natural tourism will also involve people from a range of sectors working together.

Tourism demand can exact a toll on the very environment that has attracted visitors in the first place. Lake District footpaths are an example of this, with an ever-growing number of walkers leading to potentially devastating erosion. The report looks at the work of **Fix the Fells**, a coalition of conservation and tourism bodies that organises volunteers to undertake vital repair work on mountain paths. The Cumbria based Tourism & Conservation Partnership raises funds from tourists and tourism businesses for reinvestment to sustain the environment and quality visitor experience.

Find out more

Natural Economy Northwest
www.naturaleconomynorthwest.co.uk

The Sustainable Tourism Gateway
www.gdrc.org

Information on green infrastructure in the Northwest
www.greeninfrastructurenw.co.uk

Forest of Bowland
www.forestofbowland.com

Lake District Osprey Project
www.ospreywatch.co.uk

Fix the Fells
www.fixthefells.co.uk

Tourism & Conservation Partnership
www.ourstolookafter.co.uk

Natural Northwest
www.naturalnorthwest.co.uk

Visit England's Northwest
www.visitenglandsnorthwest.com

¹ *Growing Natural Tourism*
www.naturaleconomynorthwest.co.uk/resources+reports.php



Walking holidays in the Lake District help support a thriving tourism economy.

