



Sustainable experiences in Selwyn District

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1. INTRODUCTION

There are no foreign lands. It is the traveller only who is foreign (Robert Louis Stevenson)

The World Tourism Organization defines sustainable tourism as a type of tourism that maintains a balance between social, economic and ecological interests. Therefore, sustainable tourism takes into account the sustainable development of communities, not only in terms of income but also considering the socio-cultural and environmental impacts caused by the arrival of tourists, more sensitive in rural areas.

The experience industry is characterized by the relationship between hosts and guests, as part of a range of activities provided with a high degree of participation. This interaction is expected to be sustainable and must originate from collaborative community work, as has happened in some projects in the town of Lincoln (Jarvis, 2009), and always monitored so as to never lose our roots in the planning process (Boutler, 2012).

For example, food and wine are aspects of the lifestyle of territories, and they exercise a powerful influence in terms of involvement and identification (Fusté, 2015; Henderson, 2009). These are examples that reinforce the sense of identity of local communities, contributing to their sustainable development (Berno, 2006); the same happens in the case of tracks and greenways (Mundet & Coenders, 2010). Thus, this paper understands sustainable experiences as those experiences that have their origin in the identity of a place, and are strongly land-related. This means that they promote local and sustainable development of the communities. These communities, by providing experiences (and also enjoying them), are able to enhance their sense of place while hosting visitors who seek authentic knowledge of a foreign culture and its

surrounding nature. Cases from Selwyn District in the Canterbury region are used as examples.

2. SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES IN RURAL AREAS

Cultivation of land, restoration of buildings, recovery of tracks, among others, are part of the heritage of rural areas; this heritage is a synonymous with a typical countryside lifestyle. Urry (1990) states that there is a new consumer who feels as though s/he has lost her/his own roots; and as Pearce (1990) says, the universal attraction of rural tourism is found in the daily life routine of communities. So rural areas, as opposed to urban ones, and mostly occupied by flora and fauna, represent the opportunity to learn local ways of life and at the same time to connect with local residents, which give a special role to the rural tourism experience (Lane, 1994). Thus, rural areas constitute an opportunity to establish contact with nature and culture, feeling what is expected to be authentic, in a sustainable environment, and without the stressors associated with urban areas.

According to Díaz and Llurdés (2013), when a community identifies a number of tangible and intangible assets and recognizes them as their own and unique, these would compound their own landscape, a framework that does not exist anywhere else. Landscape, which is experienced through the five senses, is an essential factor for rural and sustainable tourism. In this sense, natural environment and cultural heritage are deeply rooted in a particular place, and are a key identifier of societies and territories. The enhancement of local pride from their unique identity is a process for promoting the development of sustainable practices in rural areas. This is linked to the slow tourism philosophy, a local-based tourism which takes advantage of the resources of the countryside.

Kastenholz, Carneiro, Marques and Lima (2012) point out that the way in which a rural tourism experience is

offered represents a challenge for local communities in their search for identity and integration. This is related to the development of new business opportunities for local suppliers of rural tourism, capable of generating sustainable profits; as well as for tourists, in their search of authentic and meaningful experiences. Residents are expected to share their knowledge of the region's history, culture and natural heritage, and may offer opportunities to establish closer contact with their way of life or local produce, for example through farmers' markets. Therefore, local communities have an active role in creating sustainable practices, which help visitors to discover a more intense experience of places, enjoy them, and also benefit their own development (Fusté, 2015d).

3. THE MEANING OF 'EXPERIENCE'

The word experience includes two meanings: the gradual and interpersonal accumulation of knowledge associated with daily routines; as well as the momentary and intense feelings associated with a "peak". Experience in the second sense of the word is the meaning expressed in the idea of sustainable tourism experiences. The importance of culture and landscape as a parameter in regional planning is further evidence of a trend towards a life highlighted by a high demand for experiences. This is also connected with the experiences of everyday life, because satisfaction with tourism experiences contributes significantly to life satisfaction (Deng et al., 2013; Fusté, 2015c; Neal et al., 1999).

A useful model in order to conceptualise the tourism experience was established by Quan and Wang (2004). This model has two perspectives: one, in relation to the "peak" tourism experience; second, related to daily life experience. The behaviour of tourists who only seek a change in relation to the routine and tourists who seek the novelty, differ from each other in that the latter refers to the situation where people are able to try experiences that are not yet known (Quan & Wang, 2004). Therefore, tourism experience can be an intense "peak", or it can be an extension of everyday life (Mkono et al., 2013).

As Wang (2000) suggests, tourism provides an alternative experience of time: it means time off, which appears as an alternative rhythm, free from the constraints of daily routine. Offering unique and imaginative products or services, destinations can obtain a competitive advantage over those who still offer the same and may have become obsolete (Azevedo, 2009),

due to a lack of creativity and innovation. According to Daugstad (2008), modern tourists want to experience first-hand the taste, feel and hear stories about the landscape, since direct experience implies an interaction and involvement of both actors; for example, through agricultural products that provide practical experiences and where tourists could participate in cooking, weaving or milking.

4. SUSTAINABLE EXPERIENCES IN SELWYN DISTRICT

Selwyn District is a rural area in central Canterbury whose economy has been based on agricultural activity such as grain and sheep farms, and horticultural production. Regarding its geographical position, the Waimakariri River is its northern boundary. The eastern borders comprise, from north to south: the city of Christchurch, Banks Peninsula, and also the Pacific Ocean, beyond Lake Ellesmere. The Rakaia River is the district's southern boundary. Selwyn, then, with a population of 44,595 inhabitants (New Zealand Government, 2015), includes two very different environments: the plains and the high country, where the Southern Alps are the western border. Rolleston is the most populous town in Selwyn; other large towns are Darfield, Leeston, Lincoln, Prebbleton, and Templeton. Selwyn District covers 649,000 hectares, and up to one third of the district consists of protected areas.

Sustainable experiences offered in Selwyn are divided into three main activities. These activities are capable of providing a proud identity of this place thanks to their closeness to the landscape. All of these are sustainable practices that have their origin in the authenticity of a place, and promote the local and sustainable development of communities. At the same time, they allow people to get a deep knowledge of the idiosyncrasies of Selwyn District.

First, sporting activities happen in an open-air context where sceneries and vegetation can be enjoyed. Although the main landmark is Arthur's Pass National Park, a wide range of experiences are available throughout Selwyn. There are many opportunities to enjoy walking, biking, climbing, skiing or snowboarding. Golf is a popular open-air activity as well. It is also possible to attend local competitions for sports such as rugby and netball, or equestrian events throughout the district.

Second, the lifestyle of Selwyn District includes

several cultural experiences. The gardens together with the historical buildings are constructions that show the identity of Selwyn's people. Villages display their own local lifestyle which can be experienced; for example, through historical walks in Darfield and Lincoln. Gardens are an example of creativity through land use and sculptures which convey the history and stories of their handcrafters. Selwyn gardens have different distinctions and classifications, and there are up to twenty-nine gardenscapes to be enjoyed.

Third, culinary heritage - food and wine - is part of daily life experience, and this is transmitted to visitors in different ways. Farmers markets are a suitable place to get a taste of the land delivered by their own artisans. Even if these take place weekly (Darfield and Lincoln) or monthly (Prebbleton and Rolleston), they do not include just food produce but also crafts in a community environment. Visits can be made to farms and facilities where vegetables are grown, wine is produced, or cheese is made. There are also a number of local stores, cafeterias and restaurants spread throughout Selwyn District.

5. CONCLUSION

Planning of innovation and the ability to generate unique experiences are challenges that tourism destinations need to face. Fortunately, creativity and community development are not limited to big cities. Rural settlements, as providers of authenticity in the context of sustainable development, can also become places for the implementation and experience of the most innovative tourism activities (Fusté, 2015b). Sustainable experiences aim at the enhancement of local culture and environment; moreover, these experiences can contribute to the success of a sustainable relationship between locals and visitors. This is accomplished through land-related practices that play the role of tourism attractions, but are focused on visitors and locals at the same time. It is also important to note that providing places with a higher degree of experience can be achieved with simple items like a dessert, a plant, or a small path.

In this context, where there is constant encouragement of innovation in the planning world, one of the most important elements that can guarantee sustainability is community involvement (Reynolds, 2015). Some authors have dealt with the case of planning and sustainable development in urban areas

such as Christchurch (Tavares, Swaffield, & Stewart, 2013; Wesener, 2015). The planning, development and promotion of new experiences anywhere must include several objectives: to value both natural and cultural resources, and to enhance a respectful framework for environment and traditions. However, rural areas are a great pathway for sustainable experiences that help many aspects of local development. Future research, also in the framework of the environmental planning, needs to look deeply into the impact of these activities in terms of communities' involvement and satisfaction. A focus on *live*, *work* and *play* is needed (Selwyn Times, 2015).

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