

PILGRIMAGE TOURISM FOR RURAL COMMUNITY REVITALISATION IN WALES

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Abstract: We found that local stakeholders believe pilgrimage tourism can contribute to rural economies and cultural/heritage revitalisation including the Welsh language. Some stakeholders emphasised that tourism and hospitality businesses related to pilgrimages can help with regeneration of some of marginalised and rural communities in Wales. Pilgrimage tourism can help revitalise cultural heritage and language; and diversify livelihoods and income sources in rural communities. The main challenges of pilgrimage tourism include the lack of attention and funding, poor infrastructure and a lack of awareness and support from the authorities and local communities. As rural communities in Wales do not have sufficient and diversified income sources, pilgrimage tourism can help revitalise cultural heritage and diversify livelihoods. We suggest that there is a need for collaborative work and partnership among stakeholders and policy makers to optimise the potential benefits of pilgrimage tourism development in rural Wales. The presentation will include comprehensive recommendations focusing on how to engage with communities, to benefit rural/remote communities' both economically and culturally.

Keywords: Pilgrimage Tourism, Rural Communities, Cultural

1. Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, pilgrimage tourism, which includes everything from half day to long distance walks have thrived all over the world, including Wales. Many people have been engaging in pilgrimage walks for psychological recovery, spiritual recharge, as well as religious reasons (Lin & Hsieh, 2022). Rural destinations have seen new opportunities to develop this form of tourism, both for economic recoveries/benefits and cultural and heritage revitalisation (Pourtaheri, Rahmani & Ahmadi, 2012; Prozano, 2018; Shinde, 2021). To explore the pilgrimage phenomenon during the COVID-19 period and examine the potential for sustainable futures, we conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with pilgrimage stakeholders in rural Wales, including pilgrimage tour operators, church representatives, local café owners, and accommodation providers, as well as local people in communities surrounding pilgrimage routes, during January and February 2022.

2. Literature Review

Pilgrimage in Wales became popular from the 5th and 6th centuries, with saints such as St David, the patron saint of Wales. Saints play a major role in Welsh history and numerous sites associated with them have become pilgrimage sites, including the shrine of St Teilo in Llandaff

Cathedral. Wales is also home to the oldest unbroken pilgrimage site in Great Britain, which is the shrine of St Winefride at Holywell. Pilgrimage in Wales has Celtic Christian roots, and each pilgrimage route/site has its own historic background and significance. For example, the North Wales Pilgrim's Way 'The Welsh Camino' is a 130+ mile route that links ancient churches to 6th century saints, as well as natural landscapes. The historic significance of this pilgrimage route lies in the heritage of Celtic saints that is reflected through the ancient churches and holy wells along the route.

There are many ancient and medieval pilgrimage routes throughout Wales, such as the Cistercian Way or the Penrhys Pilgrimage Way, as well as several new projects currently in development. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an increasing number of tourists participating in pilgrimage walks and visiting pilgrimage sites in Wales, which could potentially help rural communities' economic recovery and heritage revitalisation including bringing the Welsh language back to life after it has been dying for years due to the 'Welsh not' sign in schools. The communities around the pilgrimage sites appreciate having tourists/walkers try to speak Welsh as they read the bilingual signs in and around the pilgrimage sites and routes.

3. Method

Utilising a bottom-up approach, the first author initially made informal conversations with three local pilgrimage stakeholders in January, 2022. We learned that while the stakeholders believe pilgrimage tourism can help rural community regeneration and heritage protection in Wales, it has not met its potential due to the following issues: (1) the lack of overnight accommodation across much of rural Wales; (2) the lack of cafes, toilet facilities and public transport for pilgrims/tourists/walkers; (3) the lack of practical information and advice such as where to stay, where to eat, useful transport links and guides on how to break down the routes for those seeking to walk short stretches e.g. weekend pilgrims, etc; (4) the lack of awareness and support from governments and authorities as well as local communities for supportive infrastructure and marketing.

Data Collection Procedure

Developing from the informal conversations, in February and March 2022, the first author and two research assistants conducted formal qualitative interviews with 16 local stakeholders in pilgrimage tourism in Wales. The first author is a pilgrimage and spiritual tourism researcher and a lecturer at a local university in Wales; and research assistants are Master's students in International Tourism Management. Research participants include pilgrimage tour operators, church representatives, local café owners, accommodation managers, government representatives, as well as local people in the communities on and surrounding the pilgrimage routes. All interviews were conducted via Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Interviews were scheduled at the participants' convenience. Each interview took about 20-60 minutes. We used a snowball technic for data collection. Participants often introduced their colleagues and project partners, etc. We conducted interviews via Zoom video for better interaction with the participants, but only stored and used audio recordings as the research data. We primarily asked how they perceive the benefits of pilgrimage tourism, what kind of support they need for their businesses, and seek suggestions for sustainable futures. We also asked how local communities can actively engage with and benefit from pilgrimage tourism. We also modified and added more (specific) questions as interviews were 'evolved'.

4. Result and Discussion

As this is an on-going project, we report some of the preliminary findings and implications in this presentation abstract. We found the local stakeholders believe pilgrimage tourism can help rural community regeneration and heritage protection in Wales. However, they believe, it has not met its potential, given the lack of funding, poor infrastructure, and little promotion activities. We learned that there is also a lack of overnight accommodation, cafes, toilet facilities and public transport in rural communities. There is also a lack of maps, notice boards, signage and of practical information and advice on where to stay, where to eat, up-to-date transport links, etc. The research participants emphasised that there is the lack of awareness and support from the Welsh government and Westminster authorities as well as local communities.

Most participants recognised that pilgrimage tourism can create livelihoods in rural areas, including accommodation and café/restaurant businesses, especially small businesses. Several church representatives also emphasised that the pilgrimage sites, such as churches, require costly maintenance and upkeep due to their often ancient history, and therefore could benefit from further monetisation in connection with pilgrimage tourism.

However, there were more interests on cultural protection, preservation and revitalisation from the participants. The majority of the participants expressed that pilgrimage tourism development can help protect and revitalise the Welsh culture, heritage, and language. A stakeholder leading a pilgrimage tourism programme that includes a story telling session where the Welsh folk tales and poems are presented; he finds that it is important to keep these in the pilgrimage tourism programme to preserve and share with the community. A church representative also noted that local churches and its communities have used pilgrimage tourism as a tool to create awareness of the importance of churches and other pilgrimage sites to younger generations and tourists. Some participants emphasised that pilgrimage tourism can be a useful tool to revitalise the Welsh language. They mentioned that they love when tourists and walkers ask questions about the Welsh language that are used on pilgrimage routes. They expressed that this gives them a sense of pride.

The majority of the participants pointed out that pilgrimage sites and routes in Wales are poorly advertised with little attention and support. There has been also little effort to communicate the pilgrimages' potential benefits for local communities, so there is a lack of awareness among rural communities. They emphasised that active collaboration between relevant stakeholders is required for addressing the need for tourism planning in this sector

5. Conclusions

We found that local stakeholders believe pilgrimage tourism can contribute to rural economies and cultural/heritage revitalisation including the Welsh language. Some stakeholders emphasised that tourism and hospitality businesses related to pilgrimages can help with regeneration of some of marginalised and rural communities in Wales. Pilgrimage tourism can help revitalise cultural heritage and language; and diversify livelihoods and income sources in rural communities. The main challenges of pilgrimage tourism include the lack of attention and funding, poor infrastructure and a lack of awareness and support from the authorities and local communities.

As rural communities in Wales do not have sufficient and diversified income sources, pilgrimage tourism can help revitalise cultural heritage and diversify livelihoods. We suggest that there is a need for collaborative work and partnership among stakeholders and policy makers to optimise the potential benefits of pilgrimage tourism development in rural Wales.

The presentation will include comprehensive recommendations focusing on how to engage with communities, to benefit rural/remote communities' both economically and culturally.

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