Editorial

Rural Tourism and Sustainability: A Special Issue, Review and Update for the Opening Years of the Twenty-First Century

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1. Introduction

Rural Tourism became a worldwide and growing activity during the late 1970s and early 1980s. At first, it was seen by many commentators as a relatively unimportant activity, perhaps likely to fade away in the near future [1]. It has, however, proven to be extremely important in tourism’s overall development, leading the way in creating radically new forms of tourism based on fast growing niche markets. It has also become a cornerstone in the growth of sustainable tourism, and now has a vital role in regional regeneration schemes in many countries and many situations.

This introduction explains the development of rural tourism [2–4]. It also reviews the papers published in this Special Issue. It looks forward to possible futures for rural tourism in the opening years of the twenty-first century.

1.1. Rural Tourism’s Functions and Impacts

Perhaps most importantly, rural tourism’s growth helped break the grip of property developers and major tourism resorts on the growth of tourism. Rural tourism was, and is, a decentralised, small-scale form of tourism allowing many existing buildings to be repurposed and reused, a now recognised feature of sustainable development.

The post-1950s world witnessed the successful rise and geographical spread of national and international mass tourism, based on sea, sun, and sand resorts and spa tourism, using rail, car, and, increasingly, air transport. The statistics from the World Tourism Organisation (WTO) are well known (https://www.unwto.org/tourism-statistics-data (accessed on 10 May 2022)). International tourism arrivals grew from 25 million in 1950 to 405 million by 1989 and then peaked at 1.4 billion in 2018 (COVID-19 reduced, presumably temporarily, that figure to 400 million by 2020). Domestic tourism is estimated to be, in total, 10 times the size of international tourism. Tourism became a very big business in many countries and worldwide. However, the post 1960s world also witnessed the end of the total monopoly of large purpose-built resorts.

The post-1970 world added a new form of tourism: niche market tourism. That included tourism to heritage cities, food tourism, wine tourism, cultural tourism, adventure tourism, and river and sea cruise tourism. Within that new form, rural tourism, to the
countryside and to small rural towns, emerged strongly [5]. It was driven by tourists wishing to escape from crowds, to holiday healthily and individually, and enjoy nature through walking, climbing, and countryside experiences. A range of new, educated, individualistic markets supported rural tourism. There were also new suppliers, centred at first on agricultural enterprises keen to diversify their farming activities into tourism. Rising access to cars made rural areas easily accessible. The telephone, and later the Internet, made instant communication between markets and rural suppliers possible at almost all times of day or night. Rural tourism did not need new resorts: countryside regions began to become large, highly decentralised resorts, converting existing buildings to accommodate tourism [6].

At first, agri-tourism led the way, with farmers diversifying into both serviced and self-catering accommodation. Agri-tourism was especially strong in the early days in the European Alps, and, perhaps surprisingly, in many states in the USA [7]. However, quite quickly, other small-scale types of accommodation in villages and towns joined in. Again, societal changes were involved. Rural women, especially farmers’ wives, were keen to start businesses in their own right and increasingly felt able to do so (see [8] and others). Together, tourism suppliers of many kinds helped create and support many new rural tourism products available to rural visitors, including heritage tourism, short educational residential courses, and visits to craft producers. Many of those new suppliers were setting up businesses in rural locations for financial and inspirational reasons (see [9,10]).

Underlying all the above, there were new and broader concepts emerging that were critical of unregulated mass tourism and sometimes of major developments generally. Many people looked to rural tourism to be free from the problems and impacts associated with mass tourism. The age of sustainable development generally, and sustainable tourism in particular, was dawning. It would lead eventually to recognition and action about climate change, slowly rising numbers of vegetarians and vegans, to “flight shame”, and a growing interest in localism, organic foods, slow food, and slow tourism. All of these developments have assisted rural tourism’s growth and can continue to do so, but that continuation will not be automatic (see below).

The concept of sustainable tourism emerged first in the Alpine lands of Europe during the late 1970s, although discussion quickly followed elsewhere in Europe and in North America. German, Italian, and French speakers led the way. English speakers followed. These early debates led to a growing number of pilot projects: the issues raised by both discussions and projects are now seen to be of crucial importance for tourism businesses, planners, and environmentalists, as well as for travellers themselves. Rural tourism was seen as especially susceptible to the problems that are now known as “overtourism” (see [11,12]).

1.2. What Is Sustainable Development/Sustainable Tourism and Why Is It Important for Rural Tourism?

The post-second world war period was one of major economic growth, powered largely by oil, along with all the transport mechanisms that cheap oil enabled—notably, cars and aircraft. At the same time, worldwide population numbers soared thanks to medical improvements. Fear of the problems that were being created by perhaps unstoppable economic and population growth became widespread. Pressure groups sprang up to discuss and to criticise aspects and consequences of that growth. The Club of Rome (www.clubofrome.org (accessed on 10 May 2022)), founded in 1968, was an especially effective critic, and remains active today. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), based in Geneva, pushed the concept of conservation to the fore, joining others in 1980 in issuing The World Conservation Strategy (https://www.iucn.org/content/world-conservation-strategy-living-resource-conservation-sustainable-development (accessed on 10 May 2022)). The Brundtland Report of 1987, “Our Common Future”, named after the Chair of the World Commission on Environment and Development, Gro Harlem Brundtland, a former Norwegian Prime Minister, further developed and internationally dis-
seminated the ideas of sustainable development (see https://digitallibrary.un.org (accessed on 10 May 2022)).

Four basic principles were seen to be crucial to the concept of sustainability: (1) the idea of holistic planning and strategy making; rather than unplanned development (2) the importance of preserving essential ecological processes; (3) the need to protect both human heritage and biodiversity; and (4) the key requirement: to develop in such a way that productivity can be sustained over the long term for future generations.

Brundtland’s often quoted simple definition of Sustainable Development is: “Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.

Sustainable tourism is a positive approach that intended to reduce the tensions and friction created by the complex interactions between the tourism industry, visitors, the environment, and the communities which are host to holidaymakers. It is an approach that involves working for the long-term viability and quality of both natural and human resources. It is not antigrowth, but it acknowledges that there are limits to growth, which will vary considerably from place to place, and according to management practices. It recognises that for many areas tourism was, is, and will be a valuable form of development. It seeks to ensure that tourism developments are sustainable in the long term and, wherever possible, help in turn to sustain the areas in which they operate. For good measure, sustainable tourism also aims to increase visitor satisfaction. This last point is not an idle one. Satisfied visitors are usually also visitors who are more likely to develop place attachment and become concerned and caring for the places they visit. They often provide long-term and repeat business.

The idea of the triple bottom line emerged at an early stage—that sustainable tourism pays attention to the environment, the local community, and to the local economy. That last phrase is essential. While rural areas had both fragile environments and communities, and needed protection from the possible problematic impacts of tourism, local economies, and the funding of conservation also needed financial help (see [13,14]). Tourism’s multiplier impacts, not least through the enhanced value of local food and wine and other local products, also prove its contribution to sustainable regional development [15]. Rural tourism should actively work towards the conservation of the environment and local life and services. That part of the sustainable tourism concept has brought support from many protected areas, especially from National Parks (see [16,17]). After early opposition, far thinking protected area managements gave support to their community’s sustainable tourism, often helping in marketing and in governance. Sustainable rural tourism became a way of regenerating the rural economy, cutting down depopulation, bringing skilled urban people back into the countryside, sometimes as lifestyle entrepreneurs (re)discovering the appeal of living in nature and rural areas, as opposed to stressful, nature-distant, congested urban areas [10], frequently driving the tourists themselves to the countryside [18].

By the mid-1990s, many regional and national European governments had recognised sustainable rural tourism, defined it, and financially assisted in its creation, a role also taken on by the European Union, often via its LEADER programmes (https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld_en (accessed on 10 May 2022)). A relevant discussion can be found in [19]. Western European rural areas were joined in these developments by many former communist Eastern European states and eventually by countries emerging from the former Yugoslavia. Many other countries in North, Central, and South America; in Asia, especially in China, Japan, and Korea; and in Australia and New Zealand have also embraced the concept of sustainable rural tourism in various forms, often associated not only with alternative rural development in times of agricultural change but also as a means of maintaining local resources and culture.

Given official approval and help, and finding a ready market, rural tourism grew rapidly until quite recently. The media spoke in its favour. It was good news. Academics worked with it. In Europe, many academics worked with local people to set up local partnerships. In the USA, many of the oldest and strongest Universities, the so-called
“land grant Universities”, had historic links to agricultural lands and derived much of their income from local land. They produced guidance notes and worked with rural communities via their “extension departments”, which offered adult education and training in rural tourism. Michigan, for example, is just one classic and well-researched example [7]. See also: https://www.canr.msu.edu/search?siteContext=&siteTitle=Agritourism&searchbox-type=&q=rural+tourism (accessed on 10 May 2022).

Importantly, rural tourism was very much locally owned—unlike major sun, sea, and sand resorts, which were typically owned by distant property developers. Local ownership and community involvement remain strong features in sustainable rural tourism management.

1.3. Second Generation Rural Tourism

In the early years of the 21st Century, academic commentators began to write about the need for a new “Second Generation Rural Tourism”, which should be more effectively and more professionally managed. In part, that was because of a need to encourage providers to work together in partnership, especially because that would help them understanding why and how to make tourism in their area more sustainable. In part, it would also help their marketing work, especially now that web-based marketing is popular, technically demanding but very effective way of marketing if done well [20]. It would also help them work together on product development schemes to enable modern heritage interpretation schemes to be implemented or food/wine trails or slow tourism routes to be created. The creation of second-generation rural tourism would offer some of the advantages of resort status, while retaining rural tourism’s small scale, local ownership, and decentralized structures. The process would bring a governance system that was able to negotiate and work with other governance systems locally, regionally, or nationally.

2. The Special Issue on “Sustainability and Rural Tourism”: New Research and New Ideas

This Special Issue on ‘Sustainability and Rural Tourism’ presents both a rich and a wide perspective on the sustainability of rural tourism, in terms of the quality of the papers included and the diversity of stakeholders, methods, and geographic contexts considered. They are valuable additions to the discussion about rural tourism’s future.

This Special Issue provides a broad overview of still relevant rural tourism topics, encompassing research carried out in multiple contexts worldwide, from several countries in Europe—Germany [21], Italy [22], Spain [23], and Portugal [24,25]—passing through the Americas—namely, the United States of America [7,26] and Chile [27]—and also including a study from Asia—South Korea [18]. This Special Issue also includes studies undertaken with a high diversity of methodologies, more qualitative (e.g., [24,26]) or quantitative (e.g., [18,21,22,28]), using secondary data (e.g., [7,25,27]) or primary data (e.g., [18,21,22,24,26,28]), and applying multiple data collection methods. As for the latter, data collection methods encompass a literature review [29], questionnaire surveys (e.g., [18,21,28]), interviews [24,2021], content analysis of websites [25], and analysis of spatial behaviours [23], among others.

The diversity of contributions may also be observed at other levels. While various papers analyse rural tourism as a whole, some specifically analyse the tourism products within it, such as agri-tourism (e.g., [7,18]), or associated with it, such as wine tourism (e.g., [24,26,28]). Several perspectives on the sustainable development of rural tourism are provided, with a focus on both demand and supply, or on several types of stakeholders, considering various components of the whole tourism system, as well as its governance. Moreover, in this context, several dimensions of sustainability—economic (e.g., [30]), sociocultural (e.g., [27]), environmental (e.g., [25]), technological (e.g., [25]), and political (e.g., [7])—were addressed, with several studies highlighting various aspects of these dimensions. Two papers stand out as providing distinct contributions that may be relevant for several approaches on the study of rural tourism and its connection to sustainability: (a) [28], with their debate on methodological challenges and ways of addressing them.
when collecting valid visitor survey data in niche-tourism market contexts, and (b) [29], a literature review that highlights the most important patterns of research published in the field and identify research gaps and relevant avenues for future research.

While supply cannot be disconnected from demand, several papers put a greater focus on a supply-side analysis. Dimitriadou et al. [30], in their paper entitled 'The efficiency score of small accommodation businesses in non-coastal rural areas in Greece', analyse the factors that may affect the efficiency of this type of supply, using a data envelopment analysis (DEA) model. The study, carried out in Central Macedonia in Greece, analyses how business size (number of rooms), the number of operating days, the variety of activities offered (simple/complex), the establishment’s age, and their managers’ engagement in agriculture affect their business efficiency, with a larger number of rooms, fewer activities, and more operating days all contributing to higher efficiency.

Pato and Duque [25] study rural tourism accommodation providers’ ‘sustainability communication in rural tourism’, analysing the content of the establishments’ websites in the Viseu Dão Lafões Region of Portugal, focusing on environmental sustainability concerns and practices. The authors show that, despite the consensual relevance attributed to sustainability in tourism, many rural tourism stakeholders still neglect it. More specifically, it seems that investing in sustainability or, at least, communicating sustainability procedures carried out, is still a challenge to some rural tourism accommodation managers. The research highlights important issues to consider when communicating environmental sustainability, such as the type of products offered and sustainability certificates awarded.

Curtis and Slocum [26] identify and discuss resiliency and sustainability strategies in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic policies adopted by wineries in California, a well-known wine tourism destination, looking at pre-COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 stages. The paper well illustrates the challenges faced by these businesses, but also the strategies adopted to differentiate them from competitors, to satisfy the increasingly demanding market in an innovative and customised way, as well as to cope with crises generated by events such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sustainable rural tourism development depends on both supply and demand, with sound market knowledge being a central condition for success of any business strategy. Some of the Special Issue’s papers focus on the tourist market, studying travellers’ needs, motivations, behaviours, experiences, and experience outcomes. Scuttari et al. [22], for example, analyse rural tourists’ planning behaviour regarding holidays in Italy’s South Tyrol, specifically in the COVID-19 context. They analysed the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic to rural tourism, mainly examining changes in tourists’ needs and behaviour patterns. Two clusters of tourists were identified, based on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on holiday planning. Differences between these two clusters, concerning their needs and behaviours, highlight the importance of designing distinct strategies to different market segments and provide guidelines for implementing them in times of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Carvalho et al. [24] also focus on the market, analysing ‘interaction as a central element of co-creative wine tourism experiences’ using data collected in a Portuguese wine-producing region. Based on interviews with visitors to the Bairrada wine region, in Central Portugal, the authors highlight the relevance of fostering co-creative wine tourism experiences in which visitors play an active role in value creation during their visits. Particularly, the opportunity of visitors’ immersion in a complex rural wine destination’s experiencescape is addressed. Wine tourism suppliers are accordingly advised to boost visitor engagement through interaction with both physical and human environments, encouraging highly valued encounters between visitors and local people—winery staff, owners, and local residents.

Looking at experience outcomes, Rezaei et al. [18] explore how rural tourism, more specifically agri-tourism, may contribute to visitors’ mental health and wellbeing in South Korea. This research, undertaken with visitors to agritourism sites around Seoul and a control group who stayed at home, provided relevant insights regarding the significant
impact that agri-tourism activities have on the emotional state of respondents, contributing to improving individuals' mood and combating the negative effects of their stressful daily urban life.

Cunha et al. [28] discuss an important methodological issue that is frequently the basis of marketing action in rural tourism and pose a series of challenges. The authors first stress the importance of market research for developing sound business and destination strategies. Based on an example from rural wine tourism research in Central Portugal, the authors not only debate challenges for collecting questionnaire-based onsite survey data in a niche-tourism market context. They also suggest appropriate solutions to cope with these challenges, taking into account the specificities of different individuals involved in the survey context, as well as diverse survey settings. The paper focuses on methodological approaches that may be adopted when carrying out research in rural tourism, which often addresses small-size, niche, and dispersed markets. The challenges faced in these contexts are discussed, related to the (sometimes lacking) support and (more or less) efficient intervention of supply agents, research subjects (the visitors), and researchers, illustrating the debate with research experience acquired from three wine routes in Portugal. Strategies to cope with these challenges are associated with the characteristics of questionnaires, the physical setting of their administration, the researchers, and the visitors surveyed, not to forget social influences occurring during the data collection process.

Other papers assume a systemic perspective, which is particularly relevant in the sustainable development debate, highlighting the relevance, but also the challenges, of dealing with the tourism system as a whole, considering and managing all its stakeholders and components. In this line, a relevant discussion of the importance of branding rural destinations, based on a tourist market perspective rather than a purely administrative one, is presented in Paulino et al.'s [23] article, entitled ‘Breaking brands: New boundaries in rural destinations’. These researchers analyse visitors’ spatial behaviour, with the help of GIS and compare the patterns of visitors’ flows with the existing destination brands to promote a rural mountain destination in Spain, Els Ports. The authors then discuss the importance of networks and of considering the visitors’ perspective for delineating the destination branding strategy, also integrating the influence of topographic elements and transportation infrastructure in shaping visitors’ flows.

Discussing the role of residents in developing rural tourism strategies, Job et al. [21] analyse the relationship between the residents of National Parks in Bavaria, Germany, and the managers of these parks. The authors highlight the relevance of analysing the attitudes of the population towards the management of these important rural tourism attractions, finding that residents’ views were particularly affected by their trust in the work of the park, the perceived potential of the protected areas to bring more tourists to the region, and their perceptions of restrictions. The findings illustrate the importance of analysing factors that determine the attitudes of the population towards policy designs, including appropriate communication strategies, to ensure positive long-term relationships with residents, which are a significant part of the rural tourism system.

From a supply-side perspective, rural tourism requires qualified staff, which in some rural areas is hard to find and sometimes competes with agriculture. Mancilla and Ferrada [27] study this phenomenon in their article entitled ‘Labour reconversion from the agricultural sector to rural tourism: Analysis of rural areas in Chile’. Recognising the important role that tourism may have in generating jobs and increasing income, the probability of agrarian workers converting to work in rural tourism is analysed through a probit model using data from Chile. It also examines how this probability differs across the different regions of the country, as well as noting how some socio-demographic characteristics—e.g., gender, age, education—influence this probability of converting to tourism, providing some curious findings.

Jin et al. [7], in their paper ‘Agri-tourism Development in the USA: The Strategy of the State of Michigan’, focus on the processes of agritourism development in Michigan/United States and on the role of several agents in promoting this development, including the
government, universities, and industrial associations. The authors illustrate how the agri-tourism development process critically depends on the quality of interactions, leadership, design of shared strategies and continuous, mutual support of the previously identified parties, underlining the relevance of governance for successful and sustainable rural tourism development.

In Karampela, Andreopoulos, and Koutsouris’s [29] literature review of 252 articles on the relationship between ‘agro’, ‘agri’, or ‘rural tourism’ and sustainable development, the authors show that more complex, in-depth approaches to this tourism format’s role for sustainable local development do not abound. They find that results are discussed mainly on qualitative grounds, featuring single cases, approached from a supply-side perspective and with limited policy recommendations. They, therefore, call for more complete, relevant, and integrated approaches, for more comparative studies and studies that highlight relevant strategic implications that go beyond a single case.

3. The Future Challenges and Developments for Rural Tourism

The Special Issue demonstrates new developments in research and in the analysis of change in rural tourism. But what is happening on the ground—and what are the problems for rural tourism providers, now and in the future?

Until the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the world, the future of all forms of tourism seemed secure: continued growth was likely. By 2020, those ideas had been seriously challenged. At first, many commentators felt that COVID-19 would bring change, and often for the better, in an exciting new world where rural tourism’s links to open-air healthy activities would encourage growth. However, that now seems like false optimism. Surveys show that a number of farm-related tourism businesses have decided to leave tourism and concentrate on farming again. Other rural tourism business owners have retired. Many are worried [31], others have adapted and somehow managed the crisis, also learning from it the importance of collective action for resilience in rural tourism destinations [32]. Importantly, few rural tourism businesses have dared to market their important open-air healthy advantages. However, what does seem likely is that tourists will, for the most part, simply return to the same types of tourism as they took before, unless there are fashionable, fulfilling, and affordable alternatives readily available to them.

Perhaps the greatest immediate challenge is that of building rural tourism back after the pandemic to its earlier levels, and increasing its business confidence. There are, however, several problems.

Most small, locally owned tourism-related businesses—offering accommodation and meals or other attractions—have suffered financially during the pandemic. It will take those businesses time to recover, and few will have the capital to invest in “improvements”. That process will not be helped by the ongoing recurrences of COVID-19, which some areas/countries are experiencing. While the fear of getting COVID-19 worries overnight guests, it also worries their hosts.

Secondly, there are a number of “technical” issues likely to affect the rural tourism sector, especially in Europe. Much of Europe’s rural tourism takes place in upland or even highland landscapes, and in areas where hiking through open country is very attractive. That type of landscape is maintained by grazing animals. Most of those animals are slaughtered to feed meat eaters. However, the number of vegetarians/vegans is growing, albeit slowly in many countries. Vegetarianism has been boosted by people who now eat less or no meat for ethical reasons, because of distrust in growing “factory farming” techniques, and, increasingly, to reduce their responsibility for greenhouse gas production: grazing animals, especially cattle, generate large amounts of greenhouse gas. Grazing animals may be replaced by trees, especially conifers, which are much less attractive for walking, an important rural tourism activity. Even lowland grazing landscapes are under threat: dairy cow numbers are beginning to dip as non-dairy milk products, based on oats and potatoes, slowly become more popular.
Another potential threat to traditional rural tourism providers could be the growth of Airbnb, founded in the USA in 2008, which operates an online marketplace for low-cost, short-term accommodation, with availability in both rural and urban locations. (https://www.airbnb.co.uk/ (accessed on 10 May 2022)). Growth has been very rapid because of the low costs for users and a lack of regulations for suppliers. Fears are expressed by “traditional” rural tourism accommodation suppliers that they will be undercut by Airbnb, that its existence will encourage urban people to buy rural properties as second homes, paid for by Airbnb, and, because of Airbnb’s low charges, little money will flow into the rural economy [33,34].

There are also difficult rural issues to be faced, one of which is the increasingly discussed idea of “re-wilding”. Rewilding, or re-wilding, activities go beyond conservation’s traditional efforts of protecting natural processes and wilderness areas from future change to turning the clock back to more “natural” conditions, usually to pre-farming times (see [35]).

Some of these processes can make rural tourism more attractive. The felling of single species planted coniferous forests and their replanting with mixed species to increase biodiversity creates more attractive and “walkable” landscapes (see, for example, the Wild Ennerdale Partnership at https://www.forestryengland.uk/ennerdale (accessed on 10 May 2022)). Another positive aspect relates to re-instating once drained marshlands, which can increase biodiversity and reduce flood risks downstream. Once straightened, rivers can be given back their original meandering courses with similar effects.

In terms of mammals, re-wilding may include providing connectivity between a series of “wild” areas and protecting or reintroducing “apex” predators and keystone species. That last part of the rewilding concept is proving to be very controversial. In Europe, it can imply re-introducing wolves, bears, and/or wild cats. Rewilding is often opposed by farmers with animals who fear that their animals will be killed. It is also often opposed by local people, who fear for their own safety—and that of their visitors. It can be welcomed by others, who see their crops being damaged by increasing numbers of deer; in earlier times, deer numbers were kept in check by wolves acting as apex predators. It is unclear if tourists are attracted by re-wilding in all circumstances. Beaver reintroduction can be attractive. Wolf/bear reintroduction may not be. There is a case for very careful research here.

Another controversial issue is “Slow tourism”, which emerged from the slow food movement founded in Italy by Carlo Petrini in 1986 (https://www.slowfood.com/about-us/our-history/ (accessed on 10 May 2022)). Slow tourism is linked to other “slow” concepts, such as slow food, slow living, and slow cities (see https://www.cittaslow.org/news (accessed on 10 May 2022); and http://rethinkingprosperity.org/cultural-vision-what-is-the-slow-movement/ (accessed on 10 May 2022)). In a rural context, it implies minimizing travel distances; maximizing the time available for a trip; relaxing the mind; eating and shopping locally; minimizing mechanization, technology, and the tourist carbon footprint; and seeking authenticity. Slow tourism was and still is largely an academic concept. It can be controversial amongst tourists and tourism providers. This writer, acting as a consultant, has found it to be a hard sell in several destinations. It is, above all, rarely understood in a world where speed is traditionally thought to be forward looking and inevitably successful. However, it could be a very important key to cutting carbon emissions [36] and highly attractive for new, socially and environmentally concerned and culturally interested, types of tourists [37].

Finally, and in times of growing interest in diverse experiences, it must be said strongly and often that rural tourism is in strong competition with all those cruise ships, conventional resorts, and the cultural attractions of great cities. Those other attractions usually have more money, have skilled and experienced marketing systems, and hold huge investments in tourism, especially in real estate, that they must not lose.

Now, adding to all these challenges, early 2022 brought another crisis to Europe and, given its worldwide economic implications, to many other countries—the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a violent war shocking a society used to decades of peace, progress, comfort, and
well-being. The uncertainties of COVID-19 are affecting rural tourism providers’ business decisions and tourists’ holiday planning. Public sector investment, always important for the rural economy, is being diverted into arms and war equipment; new fears of high inflation are growing. The near future is again more difficult to foresee: uncertainty rules.

3.1. How Can Rural Tourism Fight Back, Survive, and Possibly Grow?

There are a number of practical ways forward, described in detail in [38]. The fundamental answer is in four parts:

(1) It must satisfy the market’s changing needs. This implies better market information, marketing, and new, fashionable products;

(2) It must retain its original Unique Selling Points—small scale, personal service, locally owned, and set in a healthy and natural or farmed/forested rural environment;

(3) It must, however, change so that it is a rewarding and even an exciting activity for visitors;

(4) It must, therefore, be managed more professionally and on a multi-business basis—almost as a regional decentralised rural resort. This implies new forms of management and governance at the community and regional levels if success is to be secured.

One of the tried and tested ways forward is that of informed and well-led partnerships between local governments, including protected area managements where present, rural tourism interests, community interests, and stakeholders such as public transport operators, heritage interests, and the lifelong learning interests. That last group may surprise some, but it draws on the experience of the powerful and effective role of educators and researchers in the USA, where University Extension Studies departments have been involved with rural tourism for over 50 years. University staff have learned much from their involvement, but equally rural tourism itself, its businesses and their communities, have all benefitted a lot, too. There is also a private sector partnership for initiatives in the pharmacology industry that might have useful lessons for rural tourism: see, for example, Biophorum (https://www.biophorum.com/ (accessed on 10 May 2022)). Founded in 2004, BioPhorum has become an open and trusted environment where senior leaders of the biopharmaceutical industry come together to openly share and discuss the emerging trends and challenges facing their industry. It now brings together in partnership 120 manufacturers and suppliers deploying their top 5000 leaders and subject matter experts to work on 8 focused issues. Its website lists some themes, some of which are also very relevant for rural tourism.

3.2. But Where Should Rural Tourism Start to Recover Post-COVID-19?

The first task of any rural tourism partnership—or even individual businesses—at this stage in history has to be to tackle tourism’s involvement in the climate change discussion and to implement emission reduction procedures. There are many ways to do that, most with valuable marketing and business benefits.

The major opportunity in many cases is that rural tourism largely relies on regional and domestic markets and relatively rarely on the international markets reached only by flights. Although air travel—if used for longer holidays—may not be as environmentally damaging as many would claim, in the eyes of the market, air travel is bad. Car travel is seen as being bad but not quite as bad. Public transport is, from the emissions standpoint, much better, but it can be inconvenient. Therefore, one way forward is to reduce that inconvenience. How can that be done?

If there is a rural tourism partnership in the area, it may be possible to work with railway and/or bus companies to create special deals or arrangements for marketing and/or travel (see, for example, the Devon and Cornwall Rail Project, https://dcrp.org.uk (accessed on 10 May 2022) and the UK’s Community Rail Network, https://communityrail.org.uk/ (accessed on 10 May 2022)).

The websites of partnerships and local accommodation providers should have details of public transport provision and, if possible, up to date timetables. Accommodation providers should offer to pick up guests from stations and/or bus stops, and the reverse
of that offer on their return journeys. Mobile phones reduce the fears of running late on the outward journey. Accommodation providers should also provide guests with easily accessible timetables for local public transport generally.

Overall, marketing materials should stress that rural tourism is well placed to reduce emissions and, therefore, global warming. It does that by usually being not far from its markets and because of its ability to use low-emission transport to, from, and during the tourism experience. Marketing should also work on the health and well-being opportunities that rural tourism offers, which is an apparently growing market (see [39]).

There are other linked growth opportunities for rural tourism, too. In 2020, there were an estimated 727 million persons aged 65 years or over worldwide. This number is projected to more than double by 2050, reaching over 1.5 billion persons. Research tells us that rural holidays, if well designed, are especially interesting to the 60–80 years old group, requiring additional attention to the accessibility of both services/facilities and rural destinations.

3.3. Designing New Rural Tourism Products

Many attractions in the countryside—wildlife, landscapes, etc.—do not need designing. However, they can be made more accessible and be better presented and interpreted to make them more interesting, fashionable, rewarding, and exciting. This process, often called product development, draws on knowledge of the needs of various markets and age groups.

Walking is a major visitor activity in most of Europe’s rural areas. For the older groups discussed above, short circular walks of between 6 and 12 kms should be specially signed, routed to avoid long steep hills, and to avoid stiles (a structure or opening that provides people passage over or through a hedge or wall via steps, or ladders). Many older people find stiles difficult. In addition, if possible, a full audio interpretation of the route should be provided online, which can easily be listened to on a mobile telephone (for an urban example, listen to: https://soundcloud.com/culturenight/stream-of-consciousness-by-tom-lane-with-olwen-fouere-self-guided-walking-tour (accessed on 10 May 2022)). Many walkers are, however, young. Many are fit. They require and enjoy more demanding walking. A parallel set of longer, steeper, and challenging walks should be created, signed up, and marketed, i.e., differentiated product development and marketing strategies should be used to best fit the needs of distinct segments, based on sound market research [6].

Heritage Interpretation is an under-used and, sadly, in the past an often rather dull and academic way of presenting the history, geography, and culture of an area to visitors. It can be much improved by using modern, market-researched, and multi-media systems, including the online system noted above. Preferably, all rural tourism regions should have an interpretation strategy using sound, print, and heritage buildings—including churches and graveyards and museums and visitor centres. The strategy should be linked to marketing strategies and be set up to add interest and value to the visit, desirably also permitting engaging co-creative experiences [40].

3.4. Trails and Slow Tourism Corridors

The post-war experience has seen the emergence of the concept of trails, with walking, cycling, and canoeing trails and sometimes driving trails. Trails allow visitors to experience rural areas as a different, evolving experience (see below). They also allow visitors to see linked features, and to get a sense of achievement when they complete a trail. Trails based on food and wine have, in some regions, been especially popular. See for example: https://www.bestwineroutes.com/ (accessed on 10 May 2022) and www.visitribblevalley.co.uk/ribble-valley-food/ (accessed on 10 May 2022), or read Lonely Planet Food [41].

Slow Tourism corridors offer a potential variation on the trail theme. Using a heritage railway, or rural bus route as a “spine”, they have walking routes radiating off that spine, with access to accommodation, hospitality, and attractions. They are under consideration.
by a small number of the more go-ahead protected areas, and especially those that have “overtourism” and related traffic problems.

3.5. The Experience Requirement

This section ends on an important change to visitors’ overall requirements. Rural tourism, like other forms of tourism, was once based on visiting a place or places or regions. It still is based on places, but its ultimate driver is now that of providing a specifically and special rural experience. The rural experience is complex. It is based on tangibles, such as landscapes, farming, and wildlife, and it is a set of almost intangibles: wind, fresh air, space, light and shade, smells, sounds, and the meaning of heritage. We are selling long-lasting and short-term experiences. We are now living in the experience economy. Place is not enough [42].

In the past, there was the agrarian economy, then the industrial economy, and, most recently, the service economy. Businesses must orchestrate memorable events for their customers, and that memory itself becomes the product: the “experience” [43]. The experience economy is growing in part because the world’s consumers now have too many “things”. Getting “things” no longer satisfies. It is also argued that experiences can be had without burning fossil fuels and producing more emissions. That has to be a good development.

3.6. Administration and Governance

To make the changes necessary for delivering experiences and to deliver new rural tourism products usually requires that businesses work together. Succeeding in competition with cruise ships, conventional resorts and great cities, is very demanding in terms of skills, money, marketing and political expertise. Success requires knowledge of the markets available, how best to market any new experiences created, and how to work with other businesses and with the public sector. The public sector typically controls key buildings, roads, tourist information points, the granting of planning permissions for new developments, protected area managements etc. And it is skilled at influencing public opinion.

The public sector, although not offering rural tourism services directly, is thus a key stakeholder in administrating rural tourism. To create effective partnerships between public and private sectors requires great political skills. Once partnerships have been created, they require leadership and funding to succeed. Advice on what to do then becomes essential. The EU’s Leader Projects were classic examples of active private–public sector rural development partnerships. “Leader” stood for: in French—Liaison entre actions de développement de l’économie rurale. In English—Links between actions for the development of the rural economy). Leader began life in 1991, and in recent years was operationalized locally by Local Action Groups (LAGs).

Three other sources of help must be mentioned:

- The Universities in the USA have already been mentioned: a number of them have active extension studies programmes for rural tourism. Michigan has already been mentioned. The University of Minnesota is another example of best practice: (https://extension.umn.edu/community-development/tourism (accessed on 10 May 2022)).
- Many other universities worldwide may be able to help via their Tourism or their Geography Departments. They usually have access to research journals, which now have well over 1000 papers on various aspects of rural and sustainable tourism. In addition, they may have students able to help researching your visitor markets.
- Local, regional, and national rural tourism partnerships exist in most countries. At a national level, Austrian Farm Holidays is a best practice example: see https://www.farmholidays.com/en (accessed on 10 May 2022); Or, for a different approach, try the national rural tourism development service in Ireland: https://www.teagasc.ie/rural-economy/rural-development/rural-tourism/ (accessed on 10 May 2022).
3.7. The Elephant in the Rural Tourism Room

The phrase “an elephant in the room” refers to something that is so big, so difficult and yet so important, that in meetings it is not discussed. The elephant in the rural tourism room is the problem of reduced housing opportunities for local people in attractive rural tourism areas, especially in countries with important so-called neo-rural movements.

For the last c. 100–150 years, most European rural areas have lost population numbers to the growing towns and cities. Rural areas saw the number of jobs in agriculture fall, and they have not had many non-agricultural jobs to replace them. Towns and cities grew at first because of industrial developments and then because of jobs in services. Towns and cities have profited and grown, a growth supported by their centrality, transport systems, and from their rich and expanding cultural and educational opportunities. This is still so in some European countries and regions (e.g., in the Portuguese hinterland).

However, rural tourism and other factors began to introduce city people to rural life from the late twentieth century onwards. Many tourists liked what they experienced. Cars had changed the countryside’s transport problems for the better. Telephones and the Internet made it possible to conduct many forms of business from rural locations. Better-off people began to move to rural locations, some to retire, many for better air and recreation in natural surroundings, and many to work from their homes. Some also moved to the countryside to start rural tourism enterprises. Housing prices rose as the new immigrants brought money from the cities with them and/or had higher wages than agriculture could provide for local people, who were often priced out of the rural housing market. There were often pro-countryside planning regulations in place that prevented, for good reasons, new mass housing developments, and much of the countryside was part of a range of protected areas.

There has been, in many rural areas, strong opposition to tourism because of the impact of rising house prices on local people, particularly its impacts on lower paid people. This can be an intensely discussed political issue. There has been little objective research into how to solve the complex issues involved. Four possible ways forward might help, but all have problems, and should be carefully researched:

1. Increase agricultural prosperity to allow the payment of higher wages;
2. Build low-cost quality housing reserved for lower paid local people;
3. Build locally owned and managed eco-hotels. Back in the early 1990s, Switzerland made the Hotel Ucliva eco-hotel work well, using crowd funding and local control techniques (https://www.ucliva.ch/ueber-uns/ (accessed on 10 May 2022)). This website is in German but can be switched easily into English. Ucliva has been a great success, but it is rarely researched and/or reproduced;
4. Build small-scale locally owned housing for visitors. Ireland has given the world a number of interesting examples, including Glencolmcille in County Donegal, (http://www.glenfolkvillage.com/ (accessed on 10 May 2022)) and the small, traditional Eco-Booley, (a Booley is a name in the Irish language for a small, simple rural house, used in the past in Ireland by summer seasonal workers looking after animals grazing land which was far from the main farm house, often on a mountain side) in County Tipperary (https://passivehouseplus.ie/articles/eco-housing/booley-for-you (accessed on 10 May 2022)). In theory, this type of development could take some pressure off rural housing.

This problem adds to the case for the better management of sustainable rural tourism. It is a special challenge to protected area planning and management. Academics have known about it for at least 30 years (see [44]). However, few solutions have been adopted or tested widely.

4. Conclusions

Fifty years ago, farmers in many parts of Europe who diversified their businesses into tourism were often regarded as farming failures or people who were en route to being controlled by their wives—it was usually a wife who dealt with visitors. Nowadays, taking
visitors in rural areas is a norm, even a sign of clever management, and it is not unusual for once purely farming businesses to find that tourism has outstripped farming in terms of net income. Farm accommodation is often not cheap: simple national or even international hotel chains tend to supply the bottom end of the market. A wide range of attractions now offer things to do and experiences to engage in. The heritage industry has become a major player in rural tourism—ranging from heritage railways to castles to specialised gardens to 80-mile heritage cycle-routes (with cycle hire). There are nature reserves, theatres, and arts centres. Pick your own fruit and vegetable farms, open vineyards, and wine centres are regularly seen. Regular festivals and carnivals are held. Markets in small towns, villages, and on farms supply retail therapy and satisfy demanding foodies. There are restaurants and bars for all tastes and incomes. All these are now common place. There is now a lot to lose and much to gain, and there will be a lot of new research and analysis to carry out in the coming years.

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