



Introduction: What is Rural Tourism?

We are aware of the attraction to overseas visitors of our "clean, green" image, but this description does not adequately distinguish rural tourism from other forms of tourism that currently exist in New Zealand.

Rural tourism is a form of special-interest tourism¹ which derives its appeal from the contrast between the rural activities or attractions New Zealand operators make available to tourists, and the tourist's day-to-day, urban, life. There is more, however, to this type of tourism than simply tourism in the countryside. Its appeal relates to the relative sparseness of the rural population, the dominance of agriculture, horticulture, and forestry as land uses, and to the retention of older ways of life (buildings, values, practices) which might not be present in urban life. These qualities translate into a number of selling points which characterise the rural tourism product:

- closeness to nature
- absence of crowds
- quietness
- personal attention
- a sense of continuity with the past and of stability
- smallness of scale
- focusing on the improvement of the person - body, health, intellect.

These are relative qualities which contrast with the absence of nature, crowds, noise, mechanisation, anonymity, loss of links with the past, and large scale development which are commonly associated with life in large cities. Although many parts of the New Zealand countryside could hardly be described as non-mechanised, or even quiet by our standards, the extent to which these qualities and the others listed above contrast with the urban experiences of our overseas visitors are crucial to the development of rural tourism enterprises.

Rural tourism applies to a great range of activities that are taking place in the countryside on farms, lifestyle blocks, rural towns and settlements. These include ecotourism (attractions and activities involving birds and other wildlife, marine, river, wetland, and estuary life, forest and plant ecology, organic farming, geology, mountains, glaciers, caves, and other landforms), adventure tourism (bungy jumping, heli and Nordic skiing, guided walks, horse treks, hunting trips, rafting, paragliding), garden tours, cultural heritage trails, and the provision of accommodation (farmstays, countrystays, homestays in rural towns, camp and caravan sites, self-catering and back-packing accommodation).

All of these activities might take place in rural areas, but the extent to which the tourism operator adopts the seven characteristics highlighted above will determine whether the activity is a genuine rural tourism operation, or simply conventional tourism in a rural setting. The scale of the operation, in particular, will determine this. Tourism planners and individual tourist operators in rural areas need to take note of this distinction as they plan to maximise resource use in their regions or districts, and to ensure that modernisation and development does not proceed at a rate that is likely to jeopardise the rural tourism resource should they choose to follow that option.

Sustainable Tourism

Unplanned, boom\bust, mass tourism in other countries has shown that tourism has the capacity to place tremendous stress on host communities, and natural habitats and landscapes if it is not controlled. It can kill the goose that lays the golden egg.

Sustainable tourism growth in New Zealand takes a long-term approach to development. It is not only concerned with protecting the attractions of the natural physical environment² - it aims to meet present tourists' expectations of value for

¹ The definition of rural tourism is currently subject to debate among tourism academics who refer to it under a variety of names - green, soft, alternative or sustainable tourism.

² The 1991 Resource Management Act is the tool by which natural resources, ecological systems, and environmental quality are maintained for the use of future generations.



money, to contribute to the economic development of host communities without undermining their cultural identity, and to be commercially sustainable.

To meet the requirements of sustainability, tourism development should be:

- planned, gradual, finite
- respectful of the natural environment
- respectful of traditional values and communities
- create a satisfying experience for the tourist which will generate repeat visits and brand loyalty
- produce an educational outcome for both visitor and the host community which justifies and explains the need for the ecological care of the tourism resource (the scenery, place, people, flora, fauna).

[Three Tourism Policy Group (formerly the Ministry of Tourism) publications on sustainability are available free of charge: "Environmental and Social Factors in Tourism Investment", "The Resource Management Act, a Guide for the Tourism Industry", and "Tourism Sustainability" (See Appendix 1).]

Sustainable Rural Tourism

The need for sustainable tourism development is especially strong in rural areas where rapid and major changes can have more impact on relatively fragile natural habitats. The character and values of rural communities can also change irrevocably or disappear in the rush to create jobs and economic growth.

Rural tourism by its very nature, however, *should be* sustainable in the ecological sense. The smallness of scale of rural tourism enterprises combined with the five factors outlined above, combine to make rural tourism a tool for conservation and sustainability (Lane, 1991). However, while many rural tourism operators may strive towards sustainability, lack of awareness of how to achieve sustainability may be an impediment.

The commercial sustainability of a rural tourism enterprise is another matter altogether, and it may not be the chief priority for a considerable number of rural tourism operators - the social satisfaction gained from some activities, particularly farmstays, often outweighs the commercial motive. Commercial sustainability, however, is not easy to achieve and depends on a great number of factors which this resource book attempts to identify.

As far as social sustainability is concerned, community acceptance of rural tourism development is fundamental to the development of the industry. Without agreement among the community of its benefits (and an appreciation of how to avoid the pitfalls) rural tourism is unlikely to develop in a sustainable manner.

The Commitment to Quality

While the attraction of rural tourism might be for a taste of a less sophisticated era, this is not to say that our overseas visitors are easily satisfied. On the whole they are well- educated, discriminating, and expect high standards.

Quality relates to rural tourism in two ways - the association of quality with the highest possible standard, and also in the relative sense of ensuring that the expectations of a particular market segment are met, regardless of whether the product or service is at the upper or lower end of the market. So, whether your product is a \$90 farmstay or \$15 backpacker accommodation, the quality should be of the highest possible standard but consistent with the expectations of the segment of the market or client group that is being targeted.

Learning what these expectations are requires considerable research and this resource book suggests appropriate sources of information. Merely guessing the tastes and needs of your prospective clientele involves risk to both the individual operator and to the industry as a whole: there is a saying in the tourism industry that if you get it right, three people will get to know about it; if you get it wrong, thirty will get to know. So there is a certain amount of responsibility attached to ensuring that the quality of the experience you provide is of an appropriate and high standard.



Trade organisations such as the NZ Association of Farm and Home Hosts, or the Adventure Tourism Council, and a great many other tourism organisations, as well as the development of grading systems such as Qualmark (*see Appendix 26*), exist to help tourism operators achieve appropriate standards by providing guidelines. In this way the risk of disappointing clients or guests is minimised.

With rural tourism products, meeting expectations often requires a delicate balancing act: meeting the demand, on the one hand, for a product of a bygone era (pre-contemporary/urban) with contemporary/urban expectations on the other. So, while a German tourist may be intrigued by the “primitiveness” (by German standards) of a New Zealand farmstay, he or she may not be prepared to compromise on the relatively high central heating temperatures that he or she is accustomed to. Guests might well place a high priority on an “authentic” farmstay experience, but there is a threshold to this desire for authenticity, and even though a typical New Zealand farmhouse may not have central heating, an equivalent standard for heating may well be expected.

To ensure repeat business, guidelines for quality need to be rigorously maintained, but these guidelines also need constant monitoring to ensure that they keep abreast of changes in clients’ tastes.