

# Realizing the Benefits of Rural Cultural Tourism

Walter Jamieson, Ph.D., ACP, MCIP

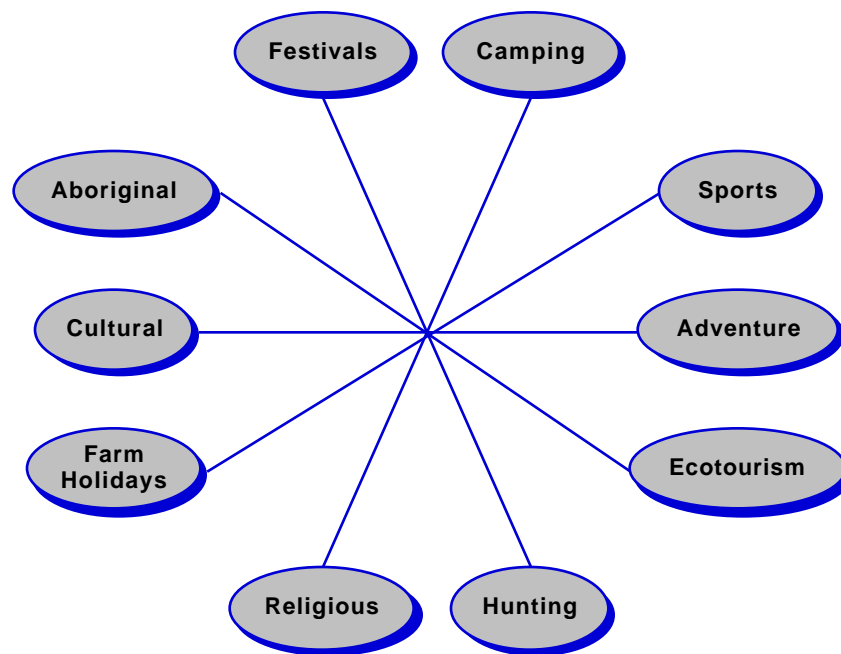
*This paper is based on a presentation made to the .....*

## **Introduction**

Many small towns in Canada are facing serious economic and social problems. These communities have lost population, have had their tax base reduced, businesses have closed or relocated, the physical environment is deteriorating, the community's spirit is low, and the agricultural base is challenged by world markets and technology.

Smaller communities especially those located some distance from larger urban centres, increasingly identify tourism as a major opportunity for economic development. This reliance on tourism as a tool for development is based in part on evidence from surveys of American tourism markets which conclude that rural areas and their way of life are of major interest to visitors from the United States. With this type of general information, a great many communities have adopted tourism strategies without any proof that there are markets for what their communities and regions have to offer.

It is important to take into account that there are many forms of rural tourism which communities can choose from as is illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Different Forms of Rural Tourism**

Within this menu of possible tourism types, communities have often chosen tourism plans based largely on the cultural heritage resources of the community and its region which they feel make their locale special and unique. While this recognition of the potential of cultural resources as a means of job creation and economic development

is encouraging, there are a number of potentially serious drawbacks to this reliance on cultural resources.

The first drawback relates to the lack of proper treatment of the cultural resources when these resources are seen as tools for development as opposed to important community dimensions with a cultural and community value and significance. The second drawback relates to a community's unrealistic expectations of the tourism potential of their cultural resources. Finally, negative social, economic, physical, and cultural impacts on the resources and the host community play a role on the reliance on cultural resources. These impacts will be identified in this paper.

While preserving and presenting any cultural resource is difficult, preserving these resources at the local level where economic development may be the primary objective provides the community and professionals with a special challenge. The community is faced with the normal constraints of economics as well as the need to develop strategies which will meet their tourism objectives. In a Viewpoint in Preservation News the task was described as

"The essence of heritage tourism lies in recognizing an area's unique qualities and making the best cultural and economic use of them." (1)

This paper will discuss the nature of small town cultural tourism and its impact on the host community. (2)

### **Small Town and Rural Cultural Tourism Planning Principles**

If rural cultural tourism is to be sustainable and meet a number of local goals and objectives, it must be based on a number of basic planning principles. Experience has shown that residents of the community must maintain control of tourism development by setting clear goals, identifying the resources to be maintained and enhanced, and developing strategies for development and interpretation. As important, the residents must be responsible for the implementation of strategies as well as the operation of the tourism infrastructure.

Any tourism development must see the provision of fulfilling jobs as an integral part of any tourism development at the local level. Part of the process of ensuring quality employment is to ensure that the tourism infrastructure (hotels, restaurants, shops) is developed at the local level. The training of local residents and access to loans are central to this type of policy. Plans must ensure that all residents should have equitable access to the fruits of tourism development.

The development process must also ensure that heritage resources are maintained and enhanced using internationally acceptable criteria and standards. An objective of community cultural tourism should be to ensure that the experience provided to tourists is an authentic one which accurately reflects the area's culture and does not attempt to present a false image of the community's culture.

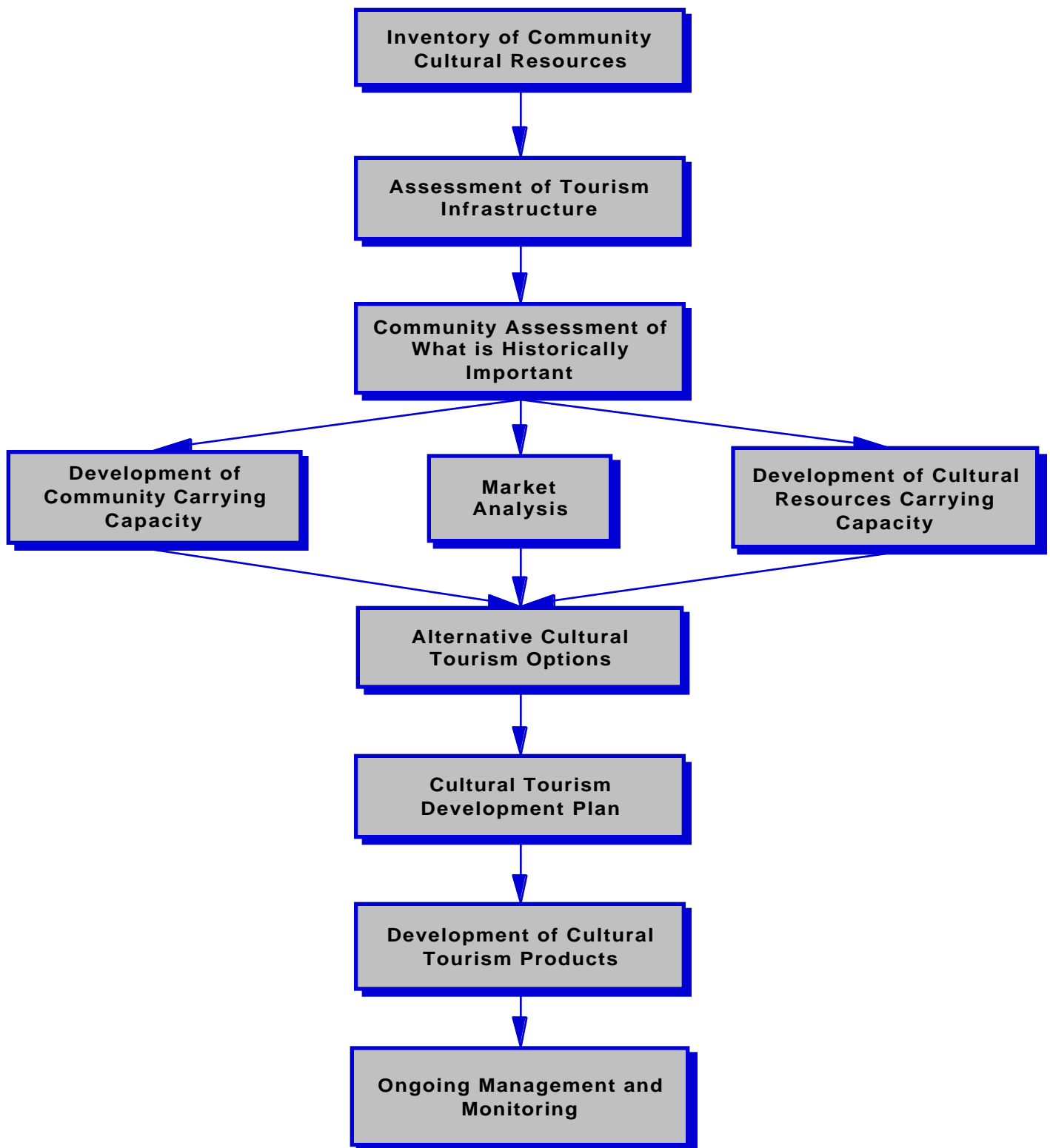
Tourism development ".....must be rooted in the reality of an environment, with all its natural, economic, and cultural characteristics." (3)

It is within this context that rural cultural tourism strategies must be assessed.

### **Small Town Cultural Tourism Planning**

If a community cultural tourism strategy is to adhere to the principles described above, the process followed must be community based, allow for the participation of a range of interest groups and must include access to expert advice in heritage resource management and interpretation as well as tourism planning and development.

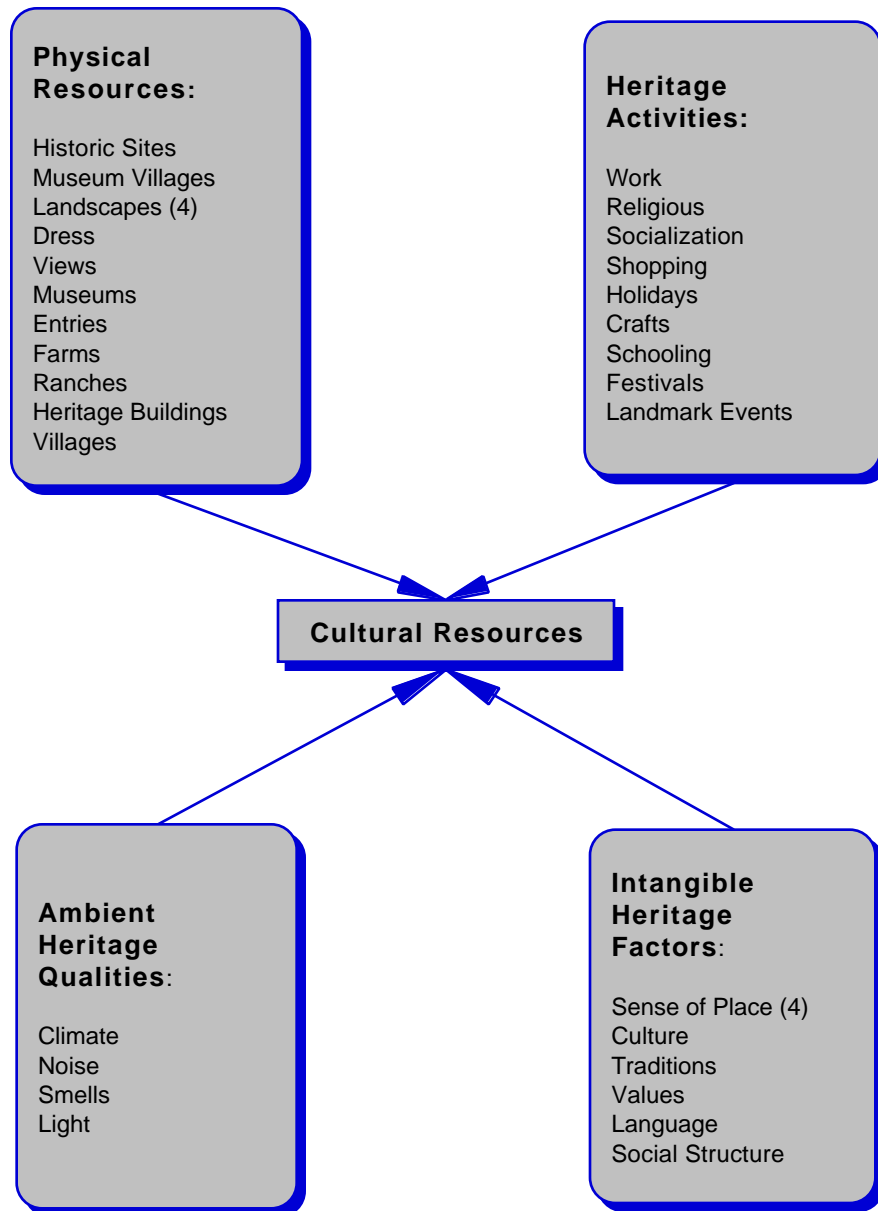
It is not possible to fully discuss the process that should be utilized in a community cultural tourism project. It must be recognized that the process involves a number of activities and must be comprehensive in nature if it is to succeed. A number of activities must be considered within the process as can be seen in Figure 2. It is important to note that this work should take place within a larger community planning process.



**Figure 2: Rural Cultural Tourism Planning Process**

### **Rural Cultural Resources**

Very often the cultural resources of a rural area are seen to be only physical in nature. However, many of the qualities of a rural area which have a significant amount of unique development potential are also those that are the most sensitive to tourism activity (e.g. values, social traditions). The range of these factors can be seen in Figure 3.



**Figure 3: Different Forms of Rural Cultural Resources**

Given this wide range of possible factors, the challenge for communities and their planners is to identify those areas that are unique and will contribute to community economic development while respecting the local environment.

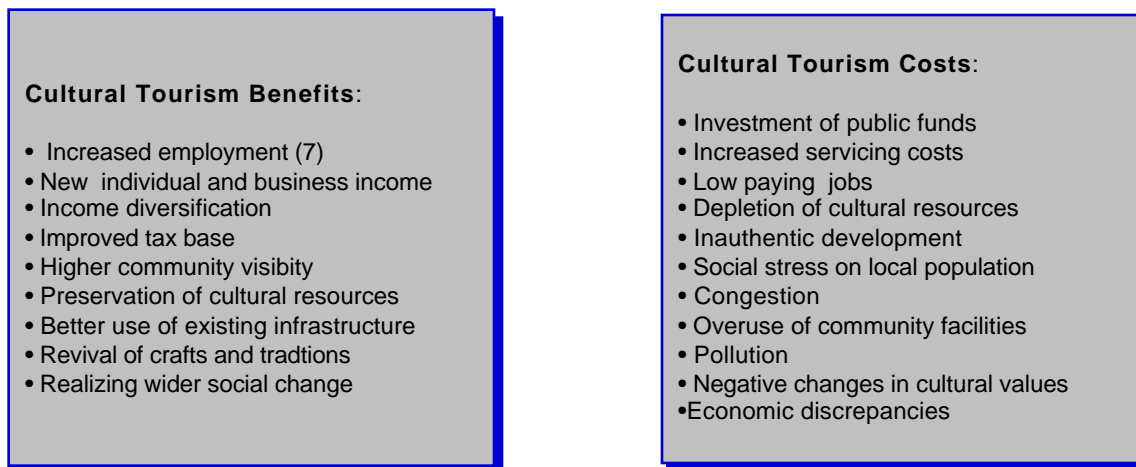
#### Determining Cultural Tourism Impacts on Host Communities

There is a growing sophistication in a number of areas in assessing the impacts of proposed plans and policies. However, this has clearly not been the case in tourism. There are very few well developed models and approaches for integrated impact assessment. (6) Too often tourism planning strategies are based on hope and false expectations as opposed to a reliable and technically sound evaluation of potential impacts. It is important for a community to be in a position to determine whether a development will have the hoped-for benefits or if there will be unintended consequences either on the local population or the environment.

The information on projected tourism visitation must be reliable and based either on government figures or preferably on specially commissioned studies. There is still very little information on small town cultural tourism and one has to be skeptical about any projections. It is often the case that in a small community the level of spending that actually stays in the community may be insignificant if the tourism infrastructure is inadequate or owned and operated by outside interests. The problems of economic leakage are part of a much larger community economic development problem but assessing what will stay in a community has to be seen as an important part of the decision-making process.

Given the ill-defined nature of tourism impact assessment there continue to be major issues in assessing impacts. It should be clear that if the principles presented earlier in this paper are to be adhered to, the local community must be the party that measures the impacts, for their own purposes using appropriate techniques over a period of time. Experience has shown that intangible factors and benefits can only be properly assessed by the local population.

There are a number of benefits and costs normally associated with cultural tourism development. The more common impacts are illustrated in Figure 4.



**Figure 4: Cultural Tourism Costs & Benefits**

Eventual outcomes will be the result of the quality of planning and development practice.

#### Achieving the Benefits of Cultural Tourism

While it must be recognized that cultural tourism development may not be the right solution for every community or region, there are situations where tourism can provide economic development to communities. If the true benefits are to be achieved and the downsides of tourism development avoided, the practice of tourism development must be changed and incorporate the strategies discussed below. Some of the major changes that should be considered include the following factors.

#### Integrated planning and management

In most instances tourism development and more importantly cultural tourism activity is seen as a separate activity to the larger processes of planning and economic development. Both those involved in cultural resource management as well as economic development must begin to work together. It will no longer be sufficient to have cultural sites developed in isolation of larger development plans and policies. Only when larger planning and development plans include cultural tourism concerns will we see the true benefits of cultural resource preservation and enhancement. In addition, the potential costs may be anticipated and dealt with by the relevant stakeholders thus unnecessary duplication may be avoided.

#### Integrated impact assessment

As has been discussed there are only rare instances in which the entire range of impacts is examined and monitored when it comes to cultural tourism. Relevant authorities and actors within the tourism process must be convinced to examine impacts in a holistic way allowing for sectoral interrelationships to be assessed and planned for.

#### Locally managed development

Sustainable development principles call for empowerment and local control whenever possible. The planning and development process must encourage local initiative and entrepreneurship. In many instances it may be preferable to have a number of smaller enterprises within a region rather than a few larger ones controlled from the outside. Experience has demonstrated that locally owned businesses are more likely to respect local concerns and observe local policies and regulations. In addition, locally owned businesses help to develop new human capacities for growth and development.

#### Job training

In most rural areas trained hospitality staff as well as cultural resource managers and interpreters do not exist. All planning and development work must include opportunities for residents to be trained. This may require that the development be slower than would be desired but a real improvement in the overall quality of life will not occur until local people profit from the tourism development. One obvious way to accomplish this objective is through direct participation in development through employment. Industry specific as well as life skill training must be combined to ensure the long term viability of any projects.

#### Community initiative

While private sector projects and initiatives must be encouraged and supported, community based activities are also important. Very often, community projects serve as the catalyst for other types of development. In addition, some projects such as an interpretive centre may not be commercially viable however, essential to the overall tourism development of an area. It is important for communities and regions to not get fooled by the recent popular efforts to privatize everything. It may be that at times communities must support a "loss leader" in order to ensure the success of an overall regional tourism strategy. Community enterprises if they show a profit can also contribute to other dimensions of tourism development. Community enterprises may also provide training grounds for new entrepreneurs.

#### Infrastructure development

As discussed earlier in this paper, many communities are suffering from a deteriorating environment and infrastructure. Too often these deficiencies are ignored in the tourism development process. Not dealing with these deficiencies will often lead to a failure to attract tourists who may be turned off by a malfunctioning environment or environmental degradation. The process of infrastructure development must deal with a wide range of community and visitor needs.

#### Tourism infrastructure development

While considerable effort is often spent on cultural resource enhancement and interpretation, communities often

ignore the hospitality side of the tourism experience. Visitor comfort is an essential element in determining visitor satisfaction. This comfort is a function of such factors as the availability and quality of accommodation, food and shopping. Dissatisfied visitors will often not return - no matter what the quality of the cultural resources unless visitor comfort is in evidence. As importantly, the required economic benefits will not be achieved if visitors are unable to spend time or money in a region. Investment in cultural resources without the attendant hospitality investment will not result in the desired economic growth.

#### Environmental and resource protection

The protection of the local community as well as environmental and cultural resources must be seen as a priority if the long term tourism future of the region is to be achieved.

#### Integrated attractions management

Communities and regions will need to develop skills and practices that allow them to professionally maintain and manage all their attractions. This will require initiatives such as joint marketing and promotion, events planning, environmental maintenance, and ongoing monitoring.

While this agenda may seem to be ambitious, each element is seen as essential for ensuring success.

### **Conclusion**

The object of cultural tourism in small towns requiring economic development must be "an overall improvement in the economic and social well-being of rural residents and the institutional and physical environment in which they live". (8) In addition cultural tourism development must be carried out in the context of a number of other types of economic development activity. Within the context of tourism development the community must work with other tourism products which emphasize natural and craft resources, water and land based leisure activities, farm holidays, etc.

The challenge of the process is a significant one requiring a number of at times conflicting objectives. Better tourism planning practices, inter community cooperation, better forms of impact assessment and education and training must be incorporated into the planning and development process in order to meet the cultural tourism objects of a community.

## Notes

1. Preservation News, November 1991.
2. The matter of rural cultural tourism was examined in a symposium sponsored by the Historical Resources Intern Programme at the University of Calgary. The proceedings are entitled : Planning for Cultural Tourism, Walter Jamieson (ed.), 1989. The issue is further explored by the author in "The Challenge of Cultural Tourism" in ICOMOS Canada Bulletin, September 1994.
3. Jim Molnar, "The Greening of Washington State Tourism", Newsletter of the Ecotourism Society.
- 4.. The issue of landscapes is explored in Conserving Rural Landscapes, Walter Jamieson (ed.), Historical Resources Intern Programme at the University of Calgary, 1994.
5. Sense of place is placing an increasingly important role in cultural tourism development. The issue was explored in a symposium sponsored by the Historical Resources Intern Programme at the University of Calgary. The proceedings are entitled: Maintaining and Enhancing the Sense of Place for Small Communities and Regions, Walter Jamieson (ed.), 1990.
6. A good example of a more integrated approach is presented in "Environmental Considerations and Public Involvement in the Assessment of the Impacts of Tourism Development in Third World Countries", Douglas McLaren, Impact Assessment, Summer 1993.
7. The matter of employment has been further developed by the author in a background paper for The International Institute for Sustainable Development entitled: The Employment Opportunities of Sustainable Rural Tourism, 1994.
8. I. Hodge, "The Scope and Context of Rural Development", European Review of Agricultural Economics, 13, 1986.