Case Study 3: "Overtourism" on Scotland's North Coast 500? Issues and Potential Solutions

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Introduction: The Scottish Highlands and Overtourism

The Scottish Highlands are the mountainous, sparsely populated region making up the North-Western part of Scotland, and the very North-Western corner of the United Kingdom mainland. The Highlands are characterised by open, often tree-less landscapes comprising mountains of up to 1300 m in height, wide valleys (known as *glens*), large inland lakes (*lochs*), and a rugged coastline featuring large and often fjord-like inlets (*sea lochs*). A much celebrated and romanticised region, the Highlands are a long-established destination for tourists with a variety of interests, from outdoor pursuits such as hillwalking and climbing (Glass 2010), to visiting castles and whisky distilleries (VisitScotland 2018a). Tourism, then, has long been a cornerstone of the Highland economy,

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sustaining thousands of jobs and small businesses in an area with otherwise limited employment opportunities.

Recently, however, certain parts of the Highlands have begun to experience issues that resonate with the wider phenomenon of "overtourism": "the impact of tourism on a destination, or parts thereof, that excessively influences perceived quality of life of citizens and/or visitors in a negative way" (UNWTO 2018: 4). Given well-established conceptual frameworks such as "tourist carrying capacity" and "tourism saturation", concerns around excessive visitor numbers are not a new phenomenon (Milano et al. 2019). Recent years, however, have seen increased reporting of perceived overtourism in the media, as well as increased use of the term (along with "tourismphobia") in academic literature as part of a renewed interest in the adverse impacts of tourism (Koens et al. 2018).

Overtourism is most commonly characterised by a rapid rise in visitors to a particular location, owing to factors such as marketing campaigns, the falling costs of travel—for example, the rise in low-cost airlines—and the overall growth in tourism globally (Goodwin 2017). This, in turn, can be attributed to a relentless focus by governments and tourism authorities on increasing visitor numbers and revenue derived from tourism (Higgins-Desbiolles et al. 2019). The issue appears to be exacerbated by associated problems such as increased congestion and overcrowding in public spaces, and the displacement of other commercial activities, as well as affordable accommodation, by businesses aimed solely at tourists (Séraphin et al. 2018; Koens et al. 2018).

Up to now, studies relating to overtourism have tended to focus on urban areas attracting many millions of visitors, with articles focusing specifically on cities such as Venice (Séraphin et al. 2018), Amsterdam, Barcelona, Prague, and Dubrovnik (Koens et al. 2018). In highlighting related issues in the Scottish Highlands, this chapter widens the scope of studies on overtourism through a focus on a predominantly rural area whose overall visitor numbers remain small compared to those in major cities (VisitScotland 2018b). While examples from the Highlands clearly resonate with the phenomenon of overtourism, the key issue explored in this chapter is not with visitor numbers *per se,* but with increasing concentrations of visitors, at certain times of the year, in particular locations that lack suitable infrastructure. With reference in particular to the North

Coast 500—a popular "road trip" route around the North Coast of Scotland—this chapter seeks to highlight these issues, before exploring the strengths and limitations of potential solutions, and highlighting the need for further related research.

Tourism in the Scottish Highlands

While "tourism" is difficult to precisely define, leisure visits to the Highlands date back to at least the mid-nineteenth century (Durie 2017). Government-backed promotion of tourism in Scotland began around 1930, with UK government provided funding for a new Scottish Tourist Development Association. This preceded the Scottish Tourist Board, which became a statutory body in 1969, and was re-branded as VisitScotland in 2007 (Frew and Hay 2011).

A key trend in Scottish tourism is its development from an experience enjoyed by a wealthy elite, to one involving a far wider demographic. Prominent among early recreational visitors to the Highlands were wealthy individuals engaged in hunting deer or grouse on privately-owned "sporting estates", an activity that continues in the present day (McKee et al. 2013). Processes such as the development of railways in the second half of the nineteenth century, however, were central to the expansion of Scottish tourism (Grenier 2017), and it is now an experience "shared – with varying degrees of participation – by all levels of society" (Durie 2017: 2). Indeed, a wide, overlapping range of activities, interests, and modes of travel draws people to the contemporary Highlands. Popular activities include hillwalking (Glass 2010) and skiing (Holden 1999). Specific interests include whisky (VisitScotland 2018a), with various distilleries across the Highlands offering tours of their premises. More recently, VisitScotland (2019) has highlighted how the use of Highland landscapes in films and TV series—including *Outlander*, *Game of Thrones,* and four of the *Harry Potter* films—have attracted visitors to the region. For Durie (2017: 2), this ongoing emergence of new attractions demonstrates Scotland's ability to "constantly add to its portfolio" as a tourist destination.

High Concentrations

Despite ambitious targets set by the Scottish Government (2006) for a 50% increase in tourism spend by 2015, a Scottish Government (2018) report points to an overall 9% *decline* in the total number of overnight visitors to Scotland as a whole between 2011 and 2016. This overall trend, however, conceals a number of counter trends with important implications for this chapter.

Firstly, reports in the media indicate that, while overall visitor numbers may have fallen, numbers of visitors to particular attractions across Scotland—from Edinburgh Castle to various sites along Loch Ness—have *increased* in recent years (BBC News 2018)—suggesting issues with high(er) concentrations of visitors at particular sites, rather than overall visitor numbers. Secondly, the decline in visitor numbers to Scotland as a whole between 2011 and 2016 stems mainly from a 14% decline in visitors from within the UK, whilst the number of *international* visitors actually increased by 7% over the same period (Scottish Government 2018). Thirdly, trends in visitor numbers to the Highlands do not reflect those of Scotland as a whole, with statistics again showing an *increase* in visitors to this region. While it should be noted that official figures cover the "Highlands *and Islands*" (an area including the popular Isle of Skye), available data show that overnight visitors to this area steadily rose between 2011 and 2017, with domestic visitors rising from 1,863,000 to 2,164,000 in this period, and international visitors to rising from 444,000 to 623,000 (VisitScotland 2018b).

Overtourism in the Highlands: The example of the North Coast 500

A number of destinations within the Highlands—both long-established and newly emerging—are now experiencing issues with high and rapidly increasing numbers of visitors. The railway viaduct used in the *Harry Potter* films, for example, has gained immense popularity as a tourist attraction, causing major traffic congestion issues in the adjacent village

of Glenfinnan (The Oban Times 2019). Ben Nevis, the UK's highest mountain, has seen significant increases in the numbers of people setting out to climb it in recent years, largely owing to the popularity of charity challenges (Bill Taylor Associates 2015), and resulting in increasing problems with discarded litter (McNeish 2019).

The most striking example, however, is perhaps the NC500—the name given to a scenic route around the North Coast of Scotland. Starting and finishing in the city of Inverness, the NC500 is 516 miles (825 km) in length and typically undertaken by car or campervan. Billed as "one of the world's most iconic coastal touring routes" (North Coast 500 n.d.), it passes through some of the country's most celebrated mountain and coastal scenery, often via narrow, twisting single-track roads. The route was officially "launched" in 2015, although it is effectively a re-branding of an existing road network linking numerous villages and small towns, many of which were already fairly popular tourist destinations. While the brand was developed by the North Highland Initiative—a Private Limited Company focused on the development of the region—North Coast 500 has since become a private company. The re-branding of the route that is now the NC500 has been a "phenomenal success" (North Highland Initiative n.d.), resulting in an almost immediate upsurge in visitor numbers.

The continuing success of the NC500 and the apparent speed with which its popularity has increased means that data on visitor numbers quickly become outdated. The most recent reliable numbers are those listed in an "Economic Baseline Study" of the route carried out by Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) (2017)—the Scottish Government agency for economic and community development in the Highlands and Islands—over the first year following its launch (2015–16). The figures are based on numbers of visitors to the four VisitScotland Tourist Information centres on the route, and demonstrate a 26% increase across these centres in 2015–16. The route, according to HIE's report, brought 29,000 more visitors to the Highlands and added £9 million to the region's economy during this first year. While more up-to-date figures are not yet available, there is a wealth of anecdotal evidence pointing to further increases in the route's popularity since HIE's initial assessment.

While HIE (2017: 1) recognise the "potentially significant economic benefits" to the region brought by the NC500, a steady stream of newspaper reports has also highlighted the negative impacts of the route on local infrastructure and on the lives of local residents. It should be noted that these issues are highly seasonal, with the majority of tourists travelling the route in summer. Issues are predominantly with traffic. The HIE (2017) report suggests that the volume of traffic around the route rose by 10% during 2015–16. Newspaper reports, however, suggest that the issue is not simply with the volume of traffic, but the nature of the roads, and the types of vehicles in which people typically drive the NC500. As previously mentioned, many stretches of the NC500 are narrow, twisting and single-track, with regular signposted passing places, and a recent interviewee in a *Guardian* newspaper report describes the issue as follows:

> *There's an extraordinary number of campervans on the roads. They're mostly rented in Inverness, so people have no idea how to drive them, and particularly no idea how to reverse, and are understandably nervous doing so. Then you have four or five of them driving in convoy, and if they meet something coming the other way the whole road comes to a halt. It's the one road out of the village, so local access is effectively blocked.* (Brooks 2019)

As well as everyday disruptions to local residents, reports suggest that the popularity of the route has also placed considerable strain on infrastructure. *STV News*, for example, reports considerable wear and tear on road surfaces and roadside barriers (Ramage 2019). A report in the *Press and Journal,* meanwhile, cites calls from local residents for improved roads, toilets, waste disposal and parking along the route (Press and Journal 2019). The large and sparsely populated nature of the Highlands, however, makes funding road maintenance particularly challenging. The Highland Council (2019) explains that it is responsible for four times as many miles of roads as the City of Edinburgh Council, but has less than half the population from whom to raise council tax.

Additionally, the NC500 includes a number of sites where it is common for people to park their cars and go for a short or longer walk, including beaches, waterfalls, gorges, and ancient stone circles. While current newspaper reports focus on issues concerning traffic on

roads, it follows that erosion of footpaths and other infrastructure is also accelerated on sites such as these. Maintenance of footpaths and other visitor facilities, as Glass (2010) points out, also incurs significant costs.

A further issue with "road trip"-style tourism is what one newspaper article describes as a "hit-and-run tourist habit", whereby "the vast majority of visitors are whizzing past and ticking (places) off the list, rather than spending time and money in the local community" (Brooks 2019). By contrast, the longer-established holiday format in the Highlands, of staying in one place for a week or more, ensures that money is spent in local shops, pubs and restaurants, as well as a more predictable income source for the owner of the property. Although the HIE (2017) report cites increased occupancy, these are now much more often "single-night stays (which) can be crippling for B&B owners". This refers to the extra work and running costs associated with such a high turnover of guests in bed and breakfast accommodation, including the need to change beds and clean rooms every day, as well as to the unpredictability of rooms being booked on a night-by-night basis. Given the already seasonal nature of income derived from tourism in the Highlands, these factors can contribute to a somewhat unstable environment for the owners of small accommodation businesses.

Solutions

While the NC500 has provided a significant economic boost to the Northern Highlands, there have also been significant negative impacts on residents and an increased strain placed on infrastructure. This section explores potential means of (at least partly) offsetting these issues, and generating additional revenue in the process. These are primarily solutions that have already been proposed or partly implemented in the Scottish Highlands. With reference to wider related literature, the strengths and limitations of these solutions are also explored, and the potential for more radical solutions acknowledged. This section first points to the availability of government funding for the purpose of offsetting the impacts of tourism, but notes that this has significant

limitations, and therefore explores three additional or alternative solutions: car parking charges, a "transient visitor levy", and the promotion of alternative destinations and exploration of alternative solutions.

When exploring these solutions, two important context-specific challenges must be considered. Firstly, Scotland and especially the Highlands have a uniquely high concentration of land in private ownership, with land divided into large "estates" (McKee et al. 2013). Consequently, land along the NC500 route is mostly in private ownership. The NC500 therefore impacts on both infrastructure that is funded by local authorities (such as roads), and that is on privately-owned land alongside the route (such as footpaths). The solutions presented here, then, differentiate between the generation and expenditure of revenue by the local authority, and by private landowners. This division presents a challenge in itself—that is, in determining *who* should set up the means for, and benefit from, revenue derived from tourism. This stands in contrast to studies in the United States, for example, which look at raising revenue from state-owned recreation areas (Bowker et al. 1999).

Secondly, the Scottish Outdoor Access Code, a key aspect of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2005, guarantees free access on foot, bicycle or horse to all land in Scotland (with some exceptions, such as cultivated fields and land immediately surrounding private dwellings) (Scottish Outdoor Access code n.d.). While research in other contexts has looked at the pros and cons of charging for access to recreation areas (e.g. Chung et al. 2011), the Access Code means that owners of such sites in Scotland, including those along the NC500 route, cannot charge access fees.

The Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund

The main government support available for alleviating tourism-related impacts is the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund (RTIF). Administered by VisitScotland, £6 million was allocated to this fund in October 2017, accompanied by an admission that "marketing successes such as the North Coast 500… (have) resulted in some areas, at certain times of the year, experiencing pressure on infrastructure and negative impacts on some local communities" (VisitScotland 2018c: 1). The RTIF has now

been extended to 2021, with an added £2.9 million (Scottish Government 2019).

VisitScotland's guidance to RTIF applicants suggests that the "types of project that could be supported include parking, camping facilities, disposal points (especially for camper vans) and toilet provision" (2018c: 1–2). It also states that "only Local Authorities and National Park Authorities can apply for funding", although "Community Groups and other agencies can apply to their Local Authority or National Park if they have an eligible project" (2018c: 1). In practice, there have been examples of successful applications to the fund by both local authorities and by landowning organisations applying through them—for example, funding for a community-run car park near the "Harry Potter" viaduct at Glenfinnan (The Oban Times 2019).

There are, however, two significant limitations to the RTIF. Firstly, VisitScotland's guidance states that the fund can provide applicants with "up to a maximum of 70% of approved project activity" (2018c: 2), meaning that they must raise the remaining 30% themselves (although this can include in-kind contributions). Providing this additional funding or support can be challenging for landowners and local authorities, especially since they are unable to charge for access. Secondly, the guidance states that "major road improvement works" are not supported (2018c: 2). Since many of the key issues with the NC500 are with the nature of the roads themselves, and the damage caused to them by increased volumes of traffic, this constitutes a further significant limitation. Parking charges, however, are introduced below as a potential solution, particularly where used in combination with the RTIF.

Parking Charges

While the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2005 prevents landowners from charging for *access* to their land, income *can* be raised through charges for facilities such as parking. This is because such facilities constitute the provision of a service, and because the access rights guaranteed by the Act do not apply to motorised vehicles.

Parking charges have long been regarded as one of the fairest ways of generating income for the maintenance of land and infrastructure. Well before the 2005 Act was passed, McCallum and Adams (1980: 364) cited parking charges as preferable to charging for access since this "put the burden on the users" of the land who could afford to travel there by car. Subsequently, a study in the Cairngorms by Phillip and MacMillan (2006) indicated a willingness among visitors to pay a small fee for car parking, as long as this was clearly being re-invested into visitor facilities and the maintenance of the site.

Parking charges are now increasingly being implemented in various parts of the Highlands. At the large car park at the CairnGorm Mountain ski area, for example, a £2 per day car parking charge was introduced in summer 2018 after a voluntary donation scheme reportedly failed to raise enough revenue to cover maintenance costs (Bailey 2018). Visitors' willingness to pay, however, is of course also influenced by *how much* they are charged, as demonstrated by a recent example in Arrochar in the Southern Highlands. There, Argyll and Bute Council increased the parking charge from £1 to £8 per day in summer 2018, prompting strong opposition from Mountaineering Scotland, the membership organisation representing climbers and hillwalkers in Scotland (Mountaineering Scotland 2018). These examples all refer to the sort of sites where people park in order to engage in some form of outdoor recreation. As previously mentioned, there are numerous such sites around the NC500. At these sites, a small fee for car parking would appear to present an opportunity for generating revenue that could be put into the maintenance of infrastructure, at least at these specific sites.

There are also, however, limitations to the solution of car parking charges. Firstly, it is not always a case of simply introducing a charge at existing car parks, as has been the case at CairnGorm and Arrochar. Instead, at many sites around the NC500, car parking facilities are currently insufficient, necessitating the construction or extension of such facilities before subsequent revenue can be raised. If funding for such construction could be obtained through the RTIF, then parking charges may provide a means of recouping the costs of the required match funding, and once these have been covered, to provide income in order to

maintain the site. This does, however, demonstrate that introducing parking charges cannot always provide an immediate solution.

Secondly, previous studies indicate that parking charges may be more suitable as a means of paying for the car park itself, or perhaps site-specific maintenance on the estate where it is built, rather than for roads and other publicly funded infrastructure. It is possible that a local authority could, having gained funding from RTIF to build a car park, charge for car parking in order to raise money specifically for road improvements. Phillip and MacMillan's (2006) study, however, suggests that visitors' willingness to pay increases when they can easily imagine how revenue will be spent on a particular site. "Road maintenance" may not be specific enough as a stated use of funds and, as the responsibility of the local authority, may also be perceived as something that should be raised through taxation.

Thirdly, the large distances and sparsely populated area covered by the NC500 mean that payment of parking charges will be challenging to "police". This adds further weight to the importance of ensuring visitors' willingness to pay, through specifying how revenue is spent, and by ensuring the price is not set too high. Without this willingness to pay, there is a danger that visitors will be tempted either to avoid paying altogether, or to park in unsuitable places alongside roads, thus exacerbating some of the issues already discussed and raising concerns regarding safety on the roads.

Transient Visitor Levy

"Tourist taxes" have been proposed, and implemented, in various contexts as a response to tourism-related pressures (Biagi et al. 2017). Transient Visitor Levies (TVL) are a locally specific form of tourist tax, through which visitors pay an additional charge in tourism businesses in a particular region. This has recently been proposed by the Highland Council (2019), who estimate that a TVL would generate between £5 and £10 million per year, with a view to offsetting the impacts of high concentrations of tourists in the region.

Similarly, to discussions around car parking charges, pre-consultation meetings with local stakeholders (Highland Council 2019) found that they wanted clarity around what the extra revenue would be used for, and were clear that this should be for "tourism purposes" rather than as part of the general council budget. There was also general agreement that the TVL should not be limited to accommodation providers, as this would not capture other visitors, such as those driving campervans. In fact, there has also been an alternative proposal for a tax specifically targeting campervan drivers—namely, a toll for "non-local large vehicles" (Munro 2019) around the NC500 route.

An argument often put forward against tourist taxes is their potential to discourage visitors, especially when they are already paying significant taxes through—for example—fuel and VAT. Indeed, a study in Italy by Biagi et al. (2017) found potential for a visitor tax to impact negatively upon *domestic* tourism demand (but not on international demand). This suggests a need for caution in the Highlands, where the majority of visitors still come from elsewhere in the UK (VisitScotland 2018b). In a consultation on the introduction of a £2 per night tax on overnight stays in Edinburgh, however, seventy-five percent of visitors (domestic *and* international) said the charge would not discourage them at all (STR 2018). This tax has now won council support (Adams 2019). These responses suggest that, as with parking, a *small* charge is acceptable to most visitors, and ought not to discourage domestic or international visitors. A wider study exploring visitors' willingness to pay (WTP) for accessing areas of natural beauty such as National Parks, nature reserves, forests and waterfalls could be helpful in estimating the economic value attached by the visitors to such attractions (Tisdell 2006).

A further caveat, however, is what exactly constitutes the "tourism purposes" cited above. Does this include roads, or is it restricted to additional tourist-specific facilities such as parking, signage, and toilets? A related study in Istanbul (Cetin et al. 2017: 21) found that, similarly to studies focused on parking charges, tourists were more willing to pay an additional tax where this was "earmarked for improvements in their experiences". This suggests that further discussions would be required around how the Highland Council would allocate revenue from the TVL. However, even if it was used exclusively for tourism-specific

facilities, TVL revenue would potentially free up other funding raised through council tax to spend on road improvements.

Alternatives

While the solutions explored above represent ways of at least partially offsetting the issues associated with excessive traffic on the NC500, more radical and overarching solutions must also be acknowledged. Milano et al. (2019: 355) remind us that solutions to the negative impacts of tourism employed by policymakers tend to take place "within a neoliberalism framework and an abiding tourism growth paradigm", and as such, do not counter the root *causes* of the issues they are designed to combat. That is, approaches like these simply attempt to improve conditions in order that authorities can continue to focus on attracting ever-increasing numbers of visitors, rather than exploring alternatives to this "growth" imperative.

This point can be illustrated as follows, with reference to the case explored here: One overall limitation with both the solutions discussed above concerns the unchangeable nature of the terrain that characterises much of the NC500. Small additional charges are unlikely to alter the volume of traffic on the roads and, even if they provided sufficient levels of additional income to fund major road improvements, the topography around much of the route still makes the *widening* of some of these roads extremely challenging. In other words, campervans on single-track roads will likely remain an issue as long as the NC500 remains popular. Another potential solution, then, is the promotion of alternative destinations in order to spread traffic and visitors over a wider area, and ensure equal economic benefits across Scotland. VisitScotland (2018d) is already acknowledging the potential need for such measures, and alternatives to the NC500 are already emerging, with a "South West Coastal 300" being promoted in the Dumfries and Galloway region (Visit South West Scotland n.d.), as well as a "Heart 200" route recently launched in the Southern Highlands (VisitScotland 2019). This solution, however, still does not challenge the "growth" imperative, and the same potential issues abound. Indeed, a local councillor in the Heart 200 area (Brooks 2019)

suggests that care needs to be taken to ensure the avoidance of similar negative impacts to the NC500.

It may therefore not be enough to simply attempt to alter visitor distribution, and measures could instead be taken to promote different *types* of tourism—for example, those that are more easily served by public transport, and that promote the Highlands as a "long stay destination" rather than one attracting more transient visitors (Tourism and Leisure Solutions 2018: 15). Further and more overarching solutions to be kept in mind, meanwhile, include the questioning of the "growth" imperative of the tourism sector by Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019). These authors suggest de-centring the processes by which destinations are marketed to allow local residents to decide upon the type and scale of tourism that would benefit their area.

Summary and Future Research

This chapter has explored emerging issues in the Scottish Highlands, with particular reference to the NC500, that appear in keeping with the wider phenomenon of overtourism. While previous studies have focused on perceived overtourism in urban areas, the chapter has shifted the focus to a sparsely populated region, highlighting issues with high concentrations of visitors rather than visitor numbers *per se,* as well as with the specific impacts brought by "road trip"-style tourism. The chapter then explored several available solutions: the Scottish Government's Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund (RTIF), parking charges, a Transient Visitor Levy (TVL), and the promotion of alternative areas. These are solutions already available, or that have already been suggested, in the context of the Scottish Highlands. This chapter has also, however, explored the potential limitations of these solutions, and acknowledged the possibility of more radical solutions, such as restoring local control over the type and scale of tourism in particular regions.

A further limitation of this chapter is that evidence of the issues discussed has been largely anecdotal and based on newspaper reports, while the solutions have all been only recently proposed or implemented. Consequently, there is ample potential for further related research. Three

potential directions for such research are outlined here. Firstly, there should be a new study of the economic impact of the NC500, complemented by interviews exploring its positive and negative impacts with a wider range of local residents and business owners than those appearing in the newspaper articles. Secondly, this research could be extended to include further consultation with local stakeholders to explore further potential solutions to the impacts of tourism on the NC500. This follows complaints of a lack of consultation from residents in one previously-cited newspaper report (Press and Journal 2019). Finally, across a wider area than just the NC500, it would be insightful to carry out interviews with owners and managers of popular recreation sites where parking charges have been implemented, in order to determine *how* the resultant revenue is being spent, and whether this has been successful in achieving its desired effects. Similar evaluative research could be carried out in relation to visitors' willingness to pay for accessing popular tourist destinations and a TVL, if and when this is introduced in the Highlands.

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