

## Chapter 21

### **A ‘Dutch vision’ of Community Based Tourism: Dutch People in the Belgian Ardennes**

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#### **Introduction**

Community based tourism is largely supported in the literature as a way to increase the sustainability of local development (Jones 2005; Saarinen 2006). Because of its local roots it should be less subject to delocalisation, be more connected with other local activities and be more respectful of local identity and heritage. This chapter questions this concept with reference to tourist development in the Belgian Ardennes, a rural tourist destination for more than 100 years. From an academic point of view, the Belgian Ardennes is strictly the old Massif, at an altitude between 350 m and 694 m, where recently planted coniferous forest dominates the landscape; nevertheless the name ‘Belgian Ardennes’ is commonly used to refer to a broader tourist destination that sometimes encompasses the whole of Wallonia (Figure 21.1). In this paper, the destination Belgian Ardennes will include the area south of the Sambre–Meuse Valley. At the European level this is a regional destination attracting mostly Belgian (50 per cent) and Dutch (35 per cent) people (SPF Economie). The federal statistical data count 3 million commercial overnight stays and 2 million overnight stays in private rooms (SPF Economie). Second homes as well as one day recreational visits complete the tourist picture (Van Hecke *et al.* 2010). Mormont (1980) pointed earlier to the domination of external actors both in the formulation of development strategies and in the building of holiday resorts. He stressed the opposition between an artisan form of tourism developed by locals and the appearance, in the late 1970s, of industrial tourism development by companies from Flanders or foreign countries.

Based on key actor interviews and on in–depth analysis of the promotional material produced both by authorities and commercial companies, this paper examines the diversity of destination branding and the multiplicity of actors. These actors do not all originate from the Ardennes. The main hypothesis that will be discussed is: that, in the Belgian Ardennes, Dutch companies develop their ‘own’ community–based tourism. The analysis of this hypothesis highlights the predominance of the Dutch market in several tourist destinations and thus the better positioning of the clientele’s community than the host community to develop a tourist destination. This hypothesis leads to an important question with respect to local development: how may local authorities deal with this imported tourist development? The paper provides information about the actions of regional and local authorities concerning tourism development in the Belgian Ardennes and underlines a lack of concern about the origin of the actors who wanted to develop tourist activities. In future research, we would like to address more explicitly

the way local authorities do and may deal with the Dutch way of consuming the Ardennes.

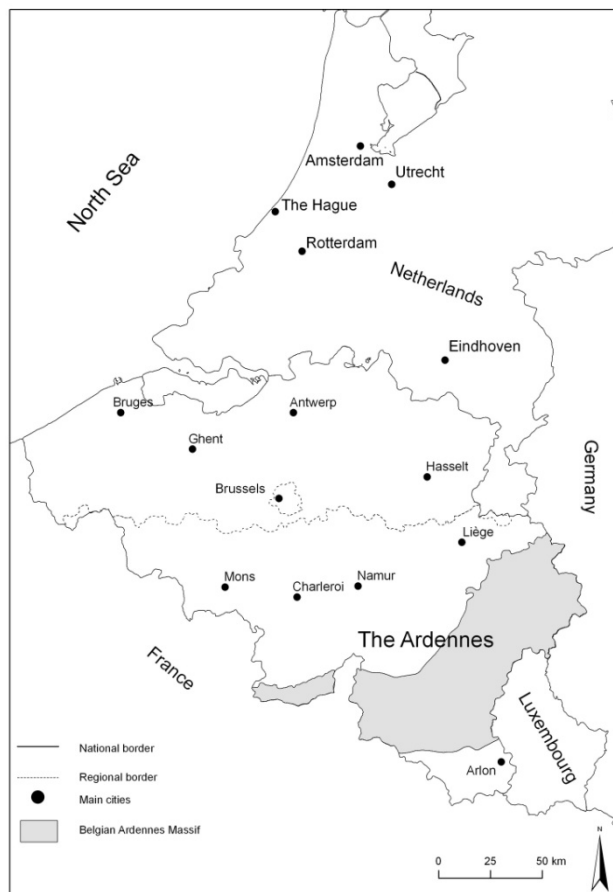


Figure 21.1 The Belgian Ardennes  
Source: Laplec

## Community based tourism

According to Russel (2000), community-based tourism should fulfil three criteria: 'it should have the support and participation of local people; as much of its economic benefit as possible should go to people living at or near the destination; and the act of tourism must protect local people's cultural identity and natural environment' (*ibid.*: 89). So, community based tourism should increase the share of tourist expenditure that benefits the local community (Sebele 2010). First, it should lead to better employment of local people from both quantitative and qualitative points of view. Second, it should be well connected with the local economy and should reinforce local economic development through networking. Third, it should contribute to local heritage protection

in order that this heritage can become part of the tourist destination. Fourth, due to the presence of wealthy people it will require and should lead to the improvement of the provision of goods and services in the area. This could be of particular importance in quite remote low populated countryside. Finally, it should increase tourist development.

Nonetheless, this theoretical vision is often difficult to apply in practice, because tourism is an activity that often connects two different cultures with their own codes and behaviours. Attracting tourists and coming up to tourist expectations require different skills that are not always present in the host community (Bartholo *et al.* 2008). In particular, there is often a lack of market knowledge and of marketing know-how (Agndal and Elbe 2007). Public authorities have a role to play in professional education as well as in the production and management of a destination. Moreover, it is not always easy to find money to start and develop a tourist activity because of the absence of a tourist development culture. Financial dimensions have to be tackled. Local entrepreneurship needs to be encouraged and supported especially in remote rural areas.

## The Belgian Ardennes

From an agricultural and historical perspective, the Belgian Ardennes is a poor area. The harsh climate, the slopes and the limited areas of productive soils explain why it has never been a suitable area for cereal production and why forest represents often more than 40 per cent of the land cover. The Ardennes was a place of the peasantry who shared their time between stock breeding and other activities such as forestry, quarrying, or pre-industrial ironwork. During more than a century, starting after the census of 1846, a rural exodus was marked due to both difficult natural conditions and proximity to major industrial centres such as Liège and Charleroi (Figure 1) (Christians *et al.* 1992; Schmitz 2001). Moreover the Ardennes was particularly affected by the Second World War; during the Battle of the Bulge most of the towns were destroyed. The Belgian Ardennes presents the lowest population densities of Belgium, with an average of fewer than 65 persons per square kilometre.

From a tourist perspective, the Belgian Ardennes was initially a destination to visit for its wilderness aspects (Lindley 1890). Hunting and the contemplation of scenery were some of the first tourist activities. It was also a second home tourist destination, especially for families who inherited a house but who lived in the main Belgian cities. Paradoxically, the Second World War contributed to the development of tourism because the Ardennes became a place of memory. Today, together with the 66 kilometres of seaside, the Flemish historical cities (such as Bruges, Gent, Brussels and Antwerp) and the tourist resorts in Campine, the Belgian Ardennes is one of the four major tourist destinations in Belgium. Analysis of tourist brochures and websites both from public authorities and commercial companies shows that seven ways of 'consuming' the Ardennes are presented: (i) The Ardennes as a quiet natural destination; (ii) as a family destination; (iii) as a perfect place for adventure tourism; (iv) as a good place for angling and hunting; (v) as a place of gastronomy based on forest products; (vi) as several spa locations; and (vii) as a place offering cultural and sporting events (for example, Spa Belgian Formula 1 Grand Prix, Liège–Bastogne–Liège World Tour cycling race, Houffalize Mountain Bike World Cup). These seven kinds of tourism attract different types of people, which may generate conflicts between

the different rural users. There are some issues attached to the combination of the different activities in the same areas including the difficulty of branding the destination clearly. Moreover the different clienteles of the Ardennes tend to consume the destination differently. For instance, while Germans are interested in nature, gastronomy, spas, and the Formula 1 Grand Prix, the Dutch have a special interest in family tourism and are by far the main customers of adventure tourism companies.

## **Dutch tourists in the Belgian Ardennes**

Anyone who visits the Belgian Ardennes in summer notices that Dutch people seem to be in the majority. This may be because Dutch tourists are more visible than other tourists, especially domestic tourists (though confusion with Belgian Flemish speakers is possible) and, last but not least, because several restaurants, camping sites, B&Bs and other tourist enterprises have Dutch owners. Dutch tourists are very numerous in the Belgian Ardennes. Data from OPT (Office for Tourism Promotion) registered 1,750,000 official overnight stays by Dutch people in 2010 and 2,000,000 in 2003. Yet, according to a Dutch market survey concerning the holiday destinations of Dutch people, around 5,000,000 overnights are accounted for by the Ardennes, with 42 per cent in holiday homes, 21.5 per cent in camping sites and 15 per cent in hotels (CVO 2003). Depending on how the tourist period is reckoned and the sources of information used, this gives an average of 25,000 or 70,000 Dutch tourists per day in the Ardennes during the high season. The huge difference between the two sources leads one to acknowledge that a parallel market exists. Our hypothesis is that a huge share of this parallel market may not be counted by the official statistics because some Dutch owners deal directly with Dutch tourists. For instance, a Dutch person who has a vacation house in the Ardennes may rent their house or some rooms directly to Dutch tourists. Another source of underestimation could come from campsites that do not register all the overnight stays.

The motivations for Dutch people to select the Ardennes as a tourist destination are, first, the short distance between the Ardennes and the main Dutch cities (+/- 350 km) (Figure 21.1) and the relatively cheap cost of living (OPT 2008). Second, from a Dutch point of view, the Ardennes is the nearest mountainous area, a place of 'wilderness', where it is possible to climb, cave, and raft as well as ski in winter. Moreover, the Ardennes with this wilderness and a 'Latin' way of life offers a place to compensate for the frustration of an over populated and over organised country (Schmitz 2008). Last but not least, another component is the Dutch network that gives confidence relating to meeting expectations and promotes very effectively tourist products adapted to the Dutch market.

## **The Dutch network: a 'community' based tourism**

In one sense, this Dutch network may be another form of community based tourism with the advantage that both supply and demand are Dutch. Indeed, several 'local' tourist enterprises are Dutch, especially camping sites, guesthouses, and adventure tourism companies. Moreover, Dutch people own a significant share of holiday homes to rent. For instance, in the area of La Roche en Ardennes, several campsites, several kayak

companies, and a third of the guesthouses are owned by Dutch people. In addition, Dutch Tour operators are powerful in the marketing chain, including for the Flemish market, because they know both the market and the language and are trusted by their compatriots (Henriksen and Halkier 2009). By using appropriate communication strategy and by offering little services that make the difference, they also often seem more professional than the Walloon tourist enterprises. These Dutch tourist companies are also successful in grasping financial possibilities both in the Netherlands and Belgium.

Compared with the advantages of traditional community based tourism, discussed earlier, this tourist development in the Ardennes provides: (i) better employment opportunities especially for Dutch people because Dutch entrepreneurs prefer to hire employees who speak the language of both the clientele and the company, who share the same culture, and who are more trustworthy; (ii) economic development, that takes place especially in the Netherlands. Due to the relatively short distances, the common culture between Dutch providers and the tourist companies and Dutch food preferences and dining habits, tourist establishments have strong links with Dutch enterprises; (iii) a risk of altering local cultural heritages, because this tourist development is strongly adapted to the Dutch market. For instance, as Dutch people associate the Ardennes with wilderness, Dutch enterprises have developed rafting, tepee campsites and paintball fighting, so that the Belgian Ardennes looks a little like the American Far West; (iv) limited improvement in the local supply of goods and services because the tourism enterprises are not well connected with the local economy. In addition, several facilities are either not open to the local public or Dutch is the only language spoken within them. Notwithstanding these issues, the impact on tourism development is, of course, important. The establishments increase the number of visitors and overnight stays coming from the Netherlands as well as from Flanders; however the local economic impact could be much higher. Another important impact is the changing nature of the destination. Because of their influence arising from the number of tourists as well entrepreneurs, these Dutch enterprises change the destination physically and also in terms of branding. Considering that the primary motive of businesses is profit (Andriotis 2002) and that the market is more important than local heritage, this may lead to the development of non land-based tourism, Disneyfication and Wildernisation.

### **Tourism policy of local authorities**

Dutch tourist development could be seen as a positive achievement for the authorities who would like to develop tourism in the Ardennes. There has been an increase in overnight stays and visitors; nevertheless authorities should also look to the tourist expenditure, especially to who benefits from this expenditure. This information is often missing and local and regional authorities are not informed about this important feature of tourism. It may explain why the question of expenditure is neglected and so under-managed. Until recently, there was a naivety concerning tourism development in Wallonia. It was thought that all tourism development led to employment and economic development for the host region. Natural and cultural heritages were not seen as fragile resources that needed to be conservatively managed, especially in the distant, poor, war damaged, and abandoned Ardennes. A method of developing tourism as a tool for

regional development was unknown as was the importance of connecting tourist developments with other local economic activities. On the other hand, private local initiatives were rare and it may also explain why Dutch investors were so welcomed.

At the local level, finance was allocated to the promotion and especially the support of local development associations and tourist offices, and to facilitating tourism investment including physical planning issues. There was competition between local authorities to attract investors including Dutch companies. These investors could then bargain and go where it was more profitable for them. For instance, in the case of a holiday village in Vielsalm at the beginning of the 1990s, the company received different forms of support including physical planning derogations and did not have to pay several taxes for a period of fifteen years. This period of time coincided with the paying off period for the chalets when it was opportune to sell them to private citizens in order to avoid renovation and taxes. This complex functions as a ghetto where tourists stay and spend money in the restaurants and souvenir shops on site without visiting the town.

At national and regional levels, government authorities invest in the promotion of destinations. They also regulate the facilities and give financial support. In Belgium, tourist policies were first modelled on the needs of coastal and urban tourism (Mormont 1980). This support and promotion did not take into account the origins of the entrepreneurs or the specificity of rural tourism. Regional authorities also tried to improve knowledge relating to tourist activities in order to develop the quality of the destination and perhaps the links between tourist development and regional development.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

This chapter has described briefly the development of a specific branch of tourism activity in the Belgian Ardennes that aims to meet the expectations of Dutch people. Because of the lack of local entrepreneurship in tourism and due to the dominance of the market in the development of the product, Dutch companies were successful in the Belgian Ardennes and are in the majority in specific locations and for specific activities. This may cause conflicts between different users who do not share the same visions of the countryside. This may also lead to a feeling of invasion by locals not only because of the over presence of Dutch tourists but also of Dutch operators. This also gives rise to questions about to whom the countryside belongs and who can financially benefit from its exploitation (Feng 2008). In this connexion, there are questions relating to the sustainability of imported tourism development with respect to local heritage and perspectives for the future.

A community based tourism framework underestimates the need for a tourism product to be connected with the market; it is an attractive framework that should be useful for local actors. Policies and supports in tourism development should attach importance to the real links between tourism development and the local economy. It is not enough to increase the number of visitors and overnight stays. Attention has to be paid to the expenditure by tourists and to who benefits from this expenditure. This paper, which is based on both past development and policies, points up several issues that are not specific to the Belgian Ardennes. Research on German tourism in the

Balearic Islands (Garin–Muñoz and Montero–Martin 2007), Spanish tourism in the Moroccan Rift Valley (Araque Jiménez and Crespo Guerrero 2010) or American tourism in Mexico (Brenner and Guillermo Aguilar 2002) also stresses the importance of the market and the presence of similar forms of imported ‘community’ based tourism to that of the Dutch investment in the Belgian Ardennes. A future research agenda will engage with the ways that local and regional authorities should deal with this form of imported tourism development.

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## Abstract

One theoretical recommendation to develop sustainable rural tourism is to base its development on local resources. This should embed the tourist activity into the local society, avoid easy relocalization of investment, and help to brand the destination. The Belgian Ardennes is a proximate recreational location for Dutch people. The paper lists the local resources that attract Dutch tourists and the ways in which regional and local authorities deal with this tourist development. Based on key actor interviews and in depth analysis of the promotional material produced both by authorities and commercial companies, the paper underlines the hotchpotch of ways used in selling and consuming the Ardennes. Due to the lack of local entrepreneurship and because the Dutch tourism enterprises have better knowledge of the Dutch market, these enterprises control a huge share of tourism activities in the Ardennes. These Dutch investments change the destination as well as the local identity. Initially, Dutch companies developed a form of tourism based on nature and the rural landscape, but they diversified their activities into non land-based tourism (not involving the use of land as in *agriculture hors sol*) and the 'disneyfication' of places. This Belgian case study follows more or less the well known 'tourist destination life cycle model', but the originality of the paper is to stress the difficulties posed for authorities to regulate tourism development and to maintain the quality of the destination.

**Keywords:** community based tourism; the Ardennes; destination; networks; local development