



Dutch tourism team finds UK parks 'strong and confident'

Senior Dutch politicians, government heads and business leaders took a detailed look at the workings of Britain's parks and tourism industry on a special study tour in November last year

The delegates were all associated with the Dutch Innovation Programme for Recreation and Landscape, and their special focus was the way in which businesses and government bodies use the natural environment to help market their tourism product whilst making a positive contribution to the landscape.

The top-level visit was arranged by the Dutch Leisure Institute, the national agency in the Netherlands which advises government bodies and organisations responsible for recreation policies, and which monitors changing trends in leisure.

With the help of BH&HPA, Hadrian's Wall Heritage, and the Northumberland National Park, the 25-strong delegation concentrated their four-day itinerary on the north of England. Here they met with owners of well-established tourism businesses which have interests in sustainability issues, including holiday park owners and BH&HPA Branch Directors.

Their mission was to discover how the UK industry was successfully meeting a range of challenges with which tourism providers in Holland are all-too familiar. These include the need to innovate their product in order to satisfy changing holiday expectations, and the imposition of ever-burgeoning rules, regulations and paperwork.

Members of the group were also keen to learn how Britain's park owners are enhancing the natural environment in recognition of the important role it plays in their tourism offering, and the increasing concern of holidaymakers to stay in attractive, natural surroundings.

Among the delegation was Joep Thönissen, the CEO of the Dutch parks industry organisation, Recron, which represents some 2,000 members operating camping park and

bungalow-letting enterprises plus visitor attractions.

Other guests included the head of the Dutch government's ministry of rural areas, the chief of the Dutch National Trust, and senior figures from Holland's equivalent of the UK Environment Agency. Tourism policymakers from two Dutch provinces were also present, together with owners of a number of major tourism attractions and holiday parks in the Netherlands.

The need to adapt leisure services to meet the needs of modern holidaymakers was put under the spotlight on the first day of the visit when delegates arrived in England's North East.

Park visits

In addition to a series of park visits, the party took part in a seminar in Newcastle where speakers from Natural England and the NE Development Agency gave presentations.

They were joined in a discussion panel by Verona Woodhouse, owner with her husband Mike of Allendale Caravan Park in Hexham, Northumberland, which won a special distinction in the David Bellamy Conservation Awards last year.

The 40-plus holiday home park, delegates were told, provided an excellent example of how the countryside could be managed to benefit both holidaymakers and the natural world.

Moving across to North West England, the group continued their park tours which also took in a number of major visitor attractions in the Lake District.

Innovation and the environment once again came into focus when the Dutch officials attended a presentation and workshop in Westmorland, Cumbria, led by two BH&HPA



Parks were on the agenda at a special BH&HPA seminar for the Dutch study group held in Cumbria. Picture shows (l-r) Joep Thönissen, the CEO of the Dutch parks industry organisation Recron, Tanja Emonts, Senior Project Adviser at the Dutch Leisure Institute and Henry Wild of Skelwith Fold Caravan Park in Cumbria who spoke to delegates about how parks both promote and protect the natural world.

Branch Directors, John Stephenson and Henry Wild.

John Stephenson of Bradley Mill Caravan Park in County Durham provided another example of a park enterprise marrying commercial success with policies which benefit the natural world. Bradley Mill is part of a 400-acre mixed arable farm centred on the historic Bradley Hall, and which was acquired by John's father, Thomas, in 1939.

Today, delegates heard, it provides a picturesque setting for 110 privately-owned caravan holiday homes - and has as its main sales platform the unspoiled surroundings and abundant wildlife.

Henry Wild gave a presentation about managing a park for both profit and environmental gain. He said parks such as his, Skelwith Fold Caravan Park in Ambleside, required virtually all of the skills and responsibilities needed to run a district council. Everything from water, waste and energy management to road maintenance and even education - through staff training - came under his remit, he explained.

Big burden

But unlike a local authority with good human and financial resources, he said, the private enterprise version necessitated the owner or manager shouldering an enormous burden. The advantage, though, was that the park did not have to cope with a council's lumbering bureaucracy, and could implement commercial and environmental policies far more rapidly.

Henry outlined the additional planning restraints of working within a National Park, but said that by actively

engaging with its officers, Skelwith Fold had developed a positive working relationship.

Dutch delegates representing private sector organisations said that there were a number of valuable lessons which could be drawn from how BH&HPA represented itself to planning authorities.

In Holland, many felt, holiday parks failed to convey to decision makers the wide-ranging role played by the sector, and benefits it brought to rural communities.

In contrast, they said, BH&HPA and its member-parks presented a more confident and persuasive case by quantifying their positive impact on the local economy, the jobs market, other businesses, and the principles of sustainable development.

According to Tanja Emonts, Senior Project Adviser at the Dutch Leisure Institute who helped arrange the study tour, delegates gained many valuable insights from their discussions with UK park owners and other tourism leaders:

'Our industries share many common challenges, and our members gained a very positive impression of how UK holiday parks and visitor attractions have successfully adapted their product over the past two decades.

Many tourism leaders are passionate about their businesses, and care for the quality of the surrounding environment. It shows that recreation and tourism can act as a driving force in sustainable regional development.

Their contribution to Britain's tourism economy is widely recognised and gives the sector a strong negotiating position at local and central government levels', said Tanja. ●