Introduction

Tourism and accommodation businesses from across the South Downs National Park came together on 15 May to hear how they could benefit from operating within a National Park and celebrate their sustainability. The event was the first of its kind jointly hosted by the South Downs National Park Authority and the Campaign for National Parks.

Over 80 operators and tourism specialists were introduced to new marketing tools and platforms, funding opportunities and sustainable tourism campaigns. Businesses were also introduced to the latest information about new visitor economy policies aimed at developing the South Downs National Park as Britain’s newest sustainable tourism destination.

The event was held at Farbridge Barn in West Sussex.

Sue Saville, Member of the South Downs National Park Authority - Welcome

Sue Saville, Member of the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA), welcomed attendees to the event and thanked the Campaign for National Parks, the South Downs Society and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation for their support for the event.

Sue Saville spoke with a wealth of experience as a past Regional Director for the National Trust and as the current Managing Director of Tourism South East. Sue stressed the importance of the visitor economy to the South Downs National Park as it provided significant benefits for both people and
place. Sue urged those in attendance to play to their strengths in these tough economic times and to help make the South Downs National Park a success for all.

**Oliver Lawder, Furterra Communications – Communicating Sustainability**

Oliver Lawder from Furterra Communications came with an important message on how to communicate messages of sustainable development using marketing techniques. Furterra is a communications company specialising in sustainable development messaging – their mission is to “make sustainable development so desirable it becomes normal”.

Oliver stressed the importance of knowing the audience. He noted that most people did not use logical thought when reacting to marketing materials, they respond emotionally and contextualise messages to their own experiences; responses to marketing also altered with changing moods. People generally fell into one of three categories: biocentrics, humanists and egoists; the thing that connected all three categories is that people like nature because of how it makes them feel. For this reason, positive messages were more likely to work.

There were also three tips for what doesn’t work so well:

1. Using guilt – most people like to conform to positive messages
2. Nagging people – if people are unsure of what is expected, they will conform
3. Don’t be boring – make messages exiting, interesting and engaging

Furterra also had some good advice for branding biodiversity, available free on their [website](http://www.furterra.com). Oliver suggested that our interest in nature tends to start when we are children; he suggested trying to remember how you felt as a child and use this in messaging. Marketing materials should be personalised and tell a personal story, make it local and try to place it in people’s lives. If using images of animals, try to humanize the image, as this allows people to put themselves in the situation or place.

Oliver’s final message was to publicise, to get the message out there, make it colourful and engaging, but most importantly make sure you’re having the most fun!
**Alison Tingley, Rural Economy Strategy Lead, SDNPA – Visitor & Tourism Policies**

Alison Tingley, Rural Economy Strategy Lead, introduced attendees to the visitor and tourism policies being developed by the SDNPA. Alison put the policies into context by outlining the two statutory purposes of the National Park: to protect and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage; and to promote opportunities for recreation and enjoyment. It was noted that there was also a statutory duty to seek to foster the social and economic wellbeing of the area. The South Downs National Park, as with all National Parks, had a Management Plan, which included details of the seven special qualities of the National Park and the vision, outlining what the park will look like by 2060. The SDNPA Management Plan was, in essence, a partnership plan, which invites those with an interest in the future of the National Park to engage and help deliver shared outcomes.

The SDNPA was seeking the following outcomes for visitors and tourism:

- An outstanding visitor experience
- Understanding of the special qualities of the National Park
- Direct action and responsibility by visitors to the South Downs, as a sustainable destination
- Promotion of traditional skills and culture, as well as contemporary arts and crafts

Alison noted that the policies of the SDNPA worked towards achieving these outcomes, particularly in the areas of transport, tourism and visitor enjoyment. The SDNPA also wanted to reduce the impact of visitors, in particular to reduce the number of people arriving by car. Recent surveys indicated that most people came to the South Downs by car, but also that those who left the car at home spent more money while in the National Park. The take away message being that it was in the interest of businesses and the environment to encourage visitors to act sustainably when visiting.

**Steve Ankers, South Downs Society – An NGO Perspective**

Steve Ankers introduced the South Downs Society to attendees. The South Downs Society was celebrating its 90th year, and its 2,000 members continued to campaign for the conservation and enhancement and quiet enjoyment of the South Downs. The Society played the role of a “critical friend” to the SDNPA.

Steve said that the Society wanted to take people on a journey from enjoyment to understanding and from understanding to action and support. The Society had produced a range of Open Access Walking Maps, which would be a boon to any businesses promoting visits to the South Downs, and were freely available on their website. The South Downs Society also had opportunities for promotion through corporate membership, networking and communications through their publication.
“The Downsman”. Steve noted that the Society’s publications went directly to those who love spending time in the South Downs.

Ensuring the conservation and protection of the South Downs National Park meant that the Society monitored all planning applications lodged within the National Park. Steve stressed that they both supported and objected to development proposals, and that it was not the aim of the Society to prevent development, but to ensure that it was done sustainably. The South Downs Society wanted to see developments that would enhance the National Park, particularly to ensure that the National Park remained a living, working landscape and a place to find tranquillity for responsible visitors.

Alison Thorpe, Access and Recreation Strategy Lead, SDNPA – Sustainable Transport Funding and the South Downs Travel Awareness Campaign

Alison Thorpe, Access and Recreation Strategy Lead, announced that the SDNPA with local authority and New Forest National Park Authority partners had been awarded £3.8m from the Department for Transport’s Sustainable Transport Fund.

The fund would hopefully encourage some of the 83% of visitors who arrived by car to use alternative and more sustainable transport. The fund would be used to improve accessibility, encouraging people to get active and to protect the special qualities of the National Park. The aim of the programme was to get 370,000 people coming to the National Park by public transport.

The Sustainable Transport Funding would be allocated to improving public transport gateways, installing new National Park signs at railway stations, improving accessibility, increasing cycle hire at stations, maps, enhanced information and real-time bus information. Developing easy to reach attractions was also a priority. The SDNPA would be working with businesses on travel plans and destination maps for public transport uses. A proportion of the funding would also be used for a small grants scheme to which businesses could apply for small scale infrastructure improvements and information services.

Alison also introduced a new travel awareness campaign entitled “Discover another Way” which would be promoting key messages on sustainable transport and introducing some new products, such as a Family Explorer tickets which could be purchased from businesses; these would be launched in the summer. The campaign would also be training key transport operations staff to become ambassadors for the National Park.
The key contacts at the SDNPA for the campaign:

- Veronika Moore – Project Manager
- Lisa Mayer – Sustainable Transport Officer
- Nick Stewart – Campaigns and Identify Project Manager

**Stephen Sibbald, SDNPA – South Downs Landscape: Sense of Place Toolkit**

Stephen Sibbald, Interpretation Officer at the SDNPA, introduced the soon to be launched “South Downs Landscape: Sense of Place Toolkit” to the audience. What was meant by “sense of place” had been difficult to pin down, but in essence, it was the local distinctiveness of an area. Giving visitors a “sense of place” would help them to make and build upon a connection to the area. In the toolkit, the SDNPA was trying to produce something that would be a valuable marketing resource with consistent and accurate messaging about the National Park. It was hoped that businesses wanting to attract visitors could use the resource to inspire and interest people in the landscape so that they could start to build a relationship with visitors.

Stephen hoped that the information provided would help to build awareness and understanding of the special qualities of the National Park and lead to long-term engagement. The toolkit provided advice and guidance on how visitors could enjoy the National Park sustainably and could begin to care about the impacts and future of the landscape.

**Justin Francis, Our Land - Putting the landscape at the heart of the visitor experience**

Justin began his introduction to the Our Land initiative by highlighting that the landscape should be viewed as an asset to tourism businesses, but that the only place it can exist is in the minds of each of us and that businesses should try to get people to think about what it means to them.

Our Land provided a portal for businesses that believed they had a positive social and environmental contribution to make. Justin stressed that businesses should see themselves as part of the landscape, and that when telling their stories they should personalise them and demonstrate how they are an integral part of the local landscape. This approach would make marketing materials more personal and successful.

Justin noted the competitiveness of the short-break tourism market, and that Britain was not winning. Figures from Visit Britain indicated that there was a £13.8bn tourism deficit in 2012. However, British tourism was in a good position to provide services that visitors were looking for. These included authenticity in tourism - many visitors had a desire for the “back-stage” life of others, the
past and different cultures. This type of experience offered a deeper connection, understanding, intimacy and sense of place; all very important for return visits.

Justin’s advice for making the landscape part of the experience was to:

- Learn about the landscape
- Co-design an experience around local ways of life, culture, food etc. and then show visitors
- Share personal stories

Lastly, Justin reminded those attending that if they wanted to open their doors to the landscape, then they must also respect it and be sure to look after it.

**Sasha Chisholm, Project Manager - Our Land**

Sasha Chisholm, the Project Manager of the Our Land initiative gave some practical insights into the platform and how attendees could use it to grow their businesses.

The Our Land initiative was a collaboration initiative for those supporting protected landscapes in the South East. In essence, Our Land was a marketing and development platform, which included a visitor database with around a quarter of a million registered users. Sasha noted that 70% of the businesses with a page received a booking via Our Land within the first three months of registration.

The Our Land platform was not for everyone, and for a business to be included it must deliver a sense of place and visitor experience. Our Land was working with businesses to develop an “Our Land Promise” which had three main areas of focus, these being environment, community and landscape. Businesses were encouraged to share their personal experiences, including why they are there and their connection to the landscape.

Our Land was also working on a national level to extend the tool and to make it more widely available. Other benefits to Our Land included an organising a free review service from the first booking made via the portal, proven to improve booking performance, and an e-newsletter which is regularly sent to over 170,000 email addresses.

**Katherine Hale, Sustainable Tourism Officer, SDNPA - Closing**

Katherine Hale, the Sustainable Tourism Officer and organiser of the event thanked everyone for their attendance and the speakers for their generous contributions. Katherine hoped that this was the first of a series of networking events that would help to support and promote sustainable tourism in the South Downs National Parks. Katherine would be in touch with members of the network again soon with further details on the Toolkit and future events for the network.
Acknowledgements and contact for further information

The Campaign for National Parks and the South Downs National Park Authority would also like to thank the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation for their financial contribution and South Downs Society for their help and support in organising the event. For further information please contact Lisa Bainbridge, Campaigns & Engagement Director at the Campaign for National Parks lisa@cnp.org.uk.