

Neo-Liberalism, Tourism, Leisure and Access to the Countryside in England.

Andrew Church - Brighton

The countryside of England is a key element of the tourism product but access to land in the countryside for tourism and leisure in England has a contested and complex history. The last five years have seen a government-led attempt to increase access on foot. Access agreement mechanisms established under legislation in the second half of the twentieth century failed to achieve large-scale increases in access to private land. The New Labour government in 1997 made a commitment to secure greater access to open countryside and in 2000 *The Countryside and Rights of Way Act* established a new statutory right of access on foot for open-air recreation to mountain, moor, heath, down and registered common. Outside these mainly upland areas, a wide variety of government agencies with interests in the countryside have been seeking to increase access through voluntary agreements with landowners, and financial incentives often as part of agri-environment and diversification schemes. These actions have been taking place in a political and internationalised economic climate that, along with Foot and Mouth Disease, has resulted in the 'crisis of the countryside'. This paper will present the findings of new research into the attitudes to access to land of landowners and recreational users of woodland and inland water environments. The research suggests that the interaction between new policy initiatives, the neo-liberalisation of the economy and the cultural attitudes of landowners and recreational users has resulted in an increased 'marketisation' of access to the countryside. In addition, the sustainability and nature conservation policy agendas have often been drawn into the contradictory processes that have seen the continuing commodification of the English countryside for leisure and tourism.