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## **Niche tourism (birdwatching) and its impacts on the well-being of a remote island and its residents**

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**Abstract:** Birdwatching has been the predominant form of tourism on Fair Isle, the most remote of the inhabited British islands, since tourism began there in 1905. The paper discusses the impact of slowly increasing tourist numbers on the well-being of the island residents, using data collected in two surveys of the resident population 50 years apart. The information obtained allows a longitudinal examination of the impact of tourism on the well-being of island residents and resident attitudes towards, and involvement with, tourism, and reveals that attitudes have remained positive throughout the half century of study. The numbers, location, and nature of tourists and tourism are identified as key factors in the positive relationship between residents and visitors, and tourism is concluded to have been of benefit to the environmental, social-cultural and economic well-being of residents on the island.

**Keywords:** tourism; remote; island; birdwatching; resident attitudes; well-being; niche tourism; economic; environmental; socio-cultural impacts.

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### **1 Introduction**

The effects of tourist visitation on resident well-being and attitudes towards tourism and tourists have been studied for a long time by researchers in several disciplines (Nunkoo et al., 2013). There would appear to be a general consensus that tourist visitation inevitably has some effects on the well-being of residents and their attitudes (Mathieson and Wall, 1982), but the precise nature of these effects, and even whether they are positive or negative, whatever those terms may imply, is unclear and the subject of

different interpretations (Kim et al., 2013). One of the oldest hypotheses concerning such a relationship is that put forward by Doxey (1975) over 40 decades ago, who argued that increasing contact between residents and tourists and increased tourist numbers to a destination community would lead to a reduction in well-being and an increasingly negative attitude towards tourism over time, expressed in terms of an 'irridex'. Doxey postulated that attitudes would move from enthusiasm to ultimately antagonism, and even active opposition to tourism. Subsequent researchers have argued that such a viewpoint is too simplistic and unidirectional to be valid in all or even most cases (e.g., Pearce, 1993). Another proposal (Butler, 1975) suggested a wider option of changes in attitude which included the possibility of an increase in positive reactions to tourism as well as movement from positive to negative and negative to positive in terms of effects on residents. In general, however, it is acknowledged that the growth of tourism over time at any destination is likely to have impacts upon all aspects of that destination, both the human and ecological environments, and thus on the quality of life of the residents (Movono et al., 2017).

Particular attention has been paid in the literature to the development of tourism to island destinations, because in many cases islands have limited resources, a history of dependency on external agencies, small populations and thus limited economies, and high vulnerability to external forces (Briguglio, 1995; Campbell, 2009; Lockhart, 1997). Tourism has long been promoted as having particular advantages and relevancy for islands, and the popularity of islands such as the Canaries, the Balearics and others in the Mediterranean, and numerous Caribbean and Pacific islands is well known and at a very high level in terms of numbers of visitors and economic impact (Conlin and Baum, 1995). Such development has not always been successful (e.g., Bryden, 1973; Sofield, 1996) and tourism has brought about very considerable change in economic, environmental and social areas, particularly on small islands (Figueroa and Rotarou, 2013, 2016; Ridderstaat et al., 2016). Nevertheless, it has been argued that tourism can be a force for building resilience in island communities both in highly developed destinations (Alberts and Baldachinno, 2017) and also in small remote islands (Amoamo, 2017). Opinions are likely to remain diverse over the effects of tourism on islands, as much depends on the characteristics of the islands involved and the scale, nature and rate of tourism development experienced (Croes, 2016). Diedrich and Aswani (2016) noted that while Pacific communities had mostly negative expectations of change resulting from tourism, local residents generally supported tourism, primarily on grounds of anticipated economic benefits. Movono et al. (2017, p.1100) who examined the effects tourism had had on a Pacific Island indigenous community, concluded that there was an "interconnectivity of nature, society and culture within Indigenous communal systems."

Such links are of particular relevance in the case of small islands such as the one discussed here, and the often negative impacts of mass tourism on destinations have sometimes resulted in such destinations focusing their tourism efforts on what has become known as niche tourism. Robinson and Novelli (2005, p.1) note, "the concept of niche tourism has emerged in recent years in counter-point to what is commonly referred to as 'mass tourism', a tourism that is more sustainable, less damaging and, importantly more capable of delivering high-spending tourists." That viewpoint is reflective of the interests of tourism marketing and tourism development agencies, however, and it is probably more accurate to view niche tourism as emerging from the earlier 'special interest tourism' reviewed by Weiler and Hall (1992) in their book with that title. Ali-Knight (2011, p.30) supports this view with her comments that "Initially SIT

products were seen to focus on relatively homogeneous groups of consumers such as eco or cultural tourists and were compared to Stebbins (1982) specialised, serious leisure consumers.” She defines niche tourism as being “Special interests, culture and/or activity-based tourism, involving smaller numbers of tourists in more authentic settings” (op cit, p.22). So niche tourists may be seen as tourists with specific interests and motivations who visit destinations that meet their specific needs. Birdwatching falls clearly into such a category, as its participants, as well as sharing common interests and motivations, by necessity have to travel to specific locations which meet their requirements, namely, birds. Novelli and Benson (2005, p.248) discuss whether niche tourism is sustainable, noting that it is often operated by small businesses in fragile environments, which “require tailored management approaches that extend far beyond business practice and profitability and into stakeholder relationships.” This point is discussed further in the conclusions in terms of the relationship of tourism to the well-being of destination residents.

The majority of studies of attitudes to tourism impacts and of their effects on local residents, however, have been made at one point in time, and longitudinal studies of the impacts of tourism are rare, a point made by Pearce (1993, p.28). In discussing the relative absence of such studies he noted:

“Longitudinal studies ... have the potential to offer insights into the social and economic impacts which tourist developments may have...where it is possible to determine conditions before and after the development of tourism, links between the growth of tourism and associated impacts might be established more directly and fully than comparisons between places having differing levels of development and impact and, especially, ‘one-off’ studies in any given place.”

In this paper the author reviews changes which have occurred on a small remote island community that has seen a steady, albeit small, growth in tourism over the last half century. The perceptions of residents to tourism and tourists and the impacts of tourism discussed in the paper are based primarily on two household surveys, conducted in 1962/1963 and again in 2012/2013, using the same survey instrument. The result is a unique commentary on the way in which life has changed on the island and the role of tourism in bringing about those changes, and includes attitudes of some residents interviewed in both time periods, providing a true longitudinal view.

## **2 Context**

The island in question is Fair Isle, the most remote (in terms of distance) of the inhabited islands of Britain, lying midway between the two island groups of Orkney and Shetland, off the North Coast of Scotland. The island is approximately five kilometres long by three kilometres wide, and has a permanent population of around 60, living in 19 households, all in the southern half of the island. The traditional pattern of life on the island for much of the island’s history has been small scale agriculture, with incomes supplemented by fishing and trade in domestic craft products. It appears to have always been owned by absentee landlords, most of whom lived on Shetland and were not regarded as particularly supportive of the community (Thom, 1989). It has an internationally known bird observatory (Fair Isle Bird Observatory, FIBO) which commenced operation in 1948, located in the north of the island at the main anchorage of

the island and which is the main attraction and facility for tourists. The observatory, now in its third building, can accommodate up to 48 guests, the vast majority of whom are birdwatchers, a growing but still small niche tourism segment (Vas, 2017). Other accommodation on the island, in private homes, can cater for an additional 12 visitors; thus when all facilities are operating at capacity, the number of staying visitors is approximately equal to the number of residents. The island has been owned by the National Trust for Scotland (NTS), a charitable organisation, since 1954, and one of the primary concerns of NTS has been the stabilisation of the island population, a goal which it has achieved over the past four decades [Interview with Bennett (NTS) 18 August 2012]. The island is perhaps better known than many in a similar situation by virtue of three factors. One is that Fair Isle has given its name to one of the Shipping Forecast regions, and the name is read over BBC radio daily. Second is the fact that Fair Isle knitting patterns and designs have achieved international recognition since the 1930s when they were given royal approval by being worn by the then Prince of Wales. Finally, the island is internationally recognised as a major site for bird migration study, with rare migrants being recorded annually and the island having the longest list of 'first records' of species for any single site in the British Isles, which explains the existence of the bird observatory noted above.

Tourism has become a key factor in the economic well-being of the island community, although it has never been featured as a major agent of development in plans, nor been subject to active promotion. Partly because of this, growth in numbers of tourists has been small, although continuous, such that there are approximately 4,000 bed nights spent on the island in recent years (FIBO, 2016), an increase from around 500 in 1948. Such numbers are minute compared to the millions of visitors to island groups such as the Balearics, Canaries or many of the individual Caribbean islands (UNWTO, 2016), but the presence of tourists (particularly ones who, by nature of their specific interest in birds, can be more intrusive than many conventional mass tourists, as discussed below) over more than 60 years might have been expected to result in some inconveniences and disruptions to resident life on an increasing level. Such does not appear to have been the case, which it is argued, may reflect a combination of tourist behaviour and distribution, seasonality of tourism, and appropriate management of the island and its visitors.

Despite being over 40 kilometres from other land masses, Fair Isle has long been visited by passing ships, mainly for the impromptu barter of goods and provisions, and was also visited specifically, but rarely, over the past three centuries by a few celebrities such as Sir Walter Scott. Unlike many places, it is easy to identify the beginning of formal tourism to Fair Isle. The year 1905 saw the first visit by an ornithologist, attracted by the rare birds that visit the island. The observatory archives (<http://www.FairIsleBirdObservatory.com>) record a visit that year by the naturalist Eagle Clark, (followed subsequently by the Duchess of Bedford and Rear-Admiral Stenhouse in the first two decades of the twentieth century), as marking the beginning of bird watchers visiting the island. The local residents shared this interest in birds and regularly brought corpses of unusual birds they had shot to the visiting ornithologists for identification, a practice replaced in recent years by telephone calls noting the presence of a rarity to the observatory (Tallack and Riddington, 2010). The first major development in tourism was the establishment of the observatory in 1948 by George Waterston, the story of this being discussed in some detail by Nieman (2012) and in FIBO archives (<http://www.FairIsleBirdObservatory.com>). The first observatory, based in former naval huts at the North Haven, had a capacity of twelve guests, and has been replaced twice by

larger purpose built structures, the last one opening in 2012 with a capacity of 48 guests. It is rated as a three star establishment with en-suite rooms, a bar, a restaurant, comfortable facilities and research laboratories (FIBO, 2016). Residents are employed on a part time basis at the observatory for cleaning, maintenance and repair duties and were responsible for the construction of the last two buildings. Social events are held bi-weekly during the open period (April to October) and these are participated in by residents, guests and staff. These include demonstrations of craft production, traditional skills and music as well as more general presentations. The observatory is available for residents to use the bar and restaurant, and also provides facilities for crews of visiting yachts, a very small but increasing tourism segment.

From the beginning of visits by tourists in 1905 there has been a positive bilateral relationship between them and island residents, and this has been continued with the staff and guests at the observatory. This has been commented on in a number of the annual reports of the observatory trust and has been confirmed in the two surveys conducted by this author, and is not dissimilar to island visitor participation noted by Fu et al. (2013) in Fiji. The change in ownership of the island from Waterston to the National Trust for Scotland in 1954 has been seen as beneficial, while acknowledging Waterston's limits as an individual in terms of being able to subsidise development, particularly of housing and utilities, compared to the NTS, which, as a charitable organisation, has access to many other forms of support from a variety of sources, some international. The observatory, and thus almost all tourism, operates separately from NTS activities, but the island is promoted in NTS literature, features as a stopping point on NTS (and other) cruise ship itineraries, and both bodies are involved in the planning and development of the island.

### **3 Impact on resident well-being**

In the context of this paper, the well-being of residents as related to tourism is characterised by a lack of disturbance, an absence of any negative environmental impact, an ability to carry on traditional preferred lifestyles, economic benefits, transportation benefits, social benefits, population stability and improved overall quality of life. The evaluation of the effect of tourism on the well-being of residents is based on the two surveys of the island population conducted in 1962/1963 and 2012/2013 mentioned earlier. These surveys involved interviews with all households on the island in each time period, rather than a sampling of residents. The interviews were held in each house, at a time convenient for the residents. The first survey was conducted over two summers, 1962 and 1963, during which time the author spend several weeks on the island, staying at the bird observatory, and the interviews lasted between 30 minutes and an hour, although the household visits were often longer owing to the hospitality of the residents (Butler, 1963). In the second survey, 2012–2013, a similar procedure was followed, with interviews being held in the individual households over two weeks each summer. Some of the interviews in the second survey were conducted by a research assistant, a resident of the island at home from university. As with the first survey, members of all households participated willingly, and in the second survey interviews took from 45 minutes to close to two hours, as a result of additions having been made to the questionnaire used in the first survey and longer informal conversations after the interviews. The first survey focused on the economic activities of the islanders, their sources of employment and

income, the scale of agricultural activity, and personal and demographic characteristics such as age, place of birth, length of time resident on the island. There was also informal discussion on their involvement, if any, with the bird observatory and visitors and their attitudes towards the latter. In the second survey, additional specific questions were added on employment, changes in agriculture, knitting and other sources of income, and on engagement with and attitudes towards the observatory, bird watchers, and tourists in general. Additional material was collected from interviews with the late George Waterston, local government officials, former residents of Fair Isle, representatives of the National Trust for Scotland, administrative staff at the FIBO, and written material from Shetland archives, National Library of Scotland and records of various bodies including the Crown Estate and Commissioners for Northern Lighthouses.

Despite the fact that only three households on the island are directly involved in tourism, one through renting a self-catering house, and two by operating bed and breakfast facilities, almost all households benefit economically from tourism. Such a situation is somewhat unusual, for as Addinsall et al. (2016, p.1100) note, there are often minimal opportunities for rural smallholders to gain significantly from the tourism sector. On Fair Isle, however, tourism has created a significant number of opportunities for residents to benefit indirectly from tourism. Some residents are employed on a part-time basis at the observatory, mostly on domestic duties. All households benefit from the presence of the observatory, however, in that the island shop survives partly through a contract to supply the observatory with food and other necessities, without which it would not be economically viable (respondent 7/2). The knitwear and other craft producers on Fair Isle (Butler, 2015) also rely heavily on purchases of their goods by tourists, with much of their output being sold directly to this market. The availability of the air service between the island and the Shetland mainland (12 flights a week during summer months), while being provided primarily for the resident population, carries the majority of the observatory visitors. While it is subsidised by Shetland Island Council (SIC), an increasing proportion of seats are sold to non-islanders at higher fares than for residents, thus supporting the service. Without the tourist traffic, the subsidy would need to be higher, a problem already for SIC which is facing reduced income as oil generated revenues decline (SIC, 2012). A similar situation exists with respect to the *good shepherd*, the island ferry boat. Both the air and boat services provide very considerable employment, again part-time, to residents, along with related employment in fire and rescue services. All households have multiple jobs (at least 50 part-time positions exist between 17 households), and many of these are related at least indirectly to the presence of tourism on the island.

It is reasonable, therefore, to conclude that tourism has increased the prosperity of the island population, with minimal negative impact in this area. The fact that the NTS owns almost all of the housing stock has meant there has been no development of second homes on the island and thus no issue of rising house prices or lack of availability of housing for local residents. The availability of the facilities at the observatory has improved the social-cultural life of the community, and the visitors there and from cruise ships, provide a ready market for crafts, and help maintain the viability of Fair Isle knitting and other skills. In environmental terms, there is no visible evidence of any impact of tourists on the natural environment, such as footpath erosion, vegetation trampling or harm to wildlife (Goudie, 2013). It could be argued that tourism has had a positive impact on the island, in that its visibility and importance in ornithological circles has meant a widening group of supporters for the protection of the island environment as

a whole. This is reflected in the winning of a European Union award for stewardship (Bennett, 2012), the designation of a marine conservation area (following more than two decades of campaigning, a marine protected area for the island was announced by the Scottish Government in October 2016. <http://www.fimeti.org.uk>) and continued monitoring of sea bird populations by observatory staff. While none of these activities are directly related to the presence of tourists on Fair Isle, the increased attention given to the island by visitors and media coverage undoubtedly has helped support for environmental projects on the island. Thus it is fair to argue that tourism has contributed significantly, if indirectly, and to some extent, accidentally, to the overall well-being and sustainability of the island community, in a similar way to that recorded on another Scottish island, Eigg (Creaney and Niewiadomski, 2016). Such a conclusion is supported by the opinions of the residents, who have not expressed any negative attitudes towards tourism or tourists and are overwhelmingly supportive of the presence of tourism and tourists on the island.

Of the 19 respondents in the 2012/2013 survey, none expressed negative feelings about tourists in general. Only two residents (respondents 10/2, 15/2) expressed any criticism of general tourists at all, one relating to the fact that they were 'time consuming', although this was not elaborated upon, and the second that 'they can be a pain on the roads'. These two comments may be related as residents are used to no traffic or pedestrians on the single track roads, so visitors walking on the roads can result in brief delays to traffic. Attitudes towards birdwatchers displayed no negative responses but was a little more critical, with just over half expressing approval of birdwatchers and just under half of respondents indicating qualified approval, with criticism being mostly about intrusive behaviour of birdwatchers, with one concern (respondent 12/2) expressed over damage to crops, gardens and fences/walls and one more general expression of 'irritation' (respondent 14/2). Almost a third of respondents were enthusiastically positive about tourists in general, adding comments such as 'very welcome and interesting', 'all fine people', 'fantastic' and 'splendid' to their responses. Several noted the importance of tourists and birdwatchers to the island's economy, such as 'a necessary and welcome addition to income', 'necessary for a lot of people's wages' and 'sells knitwear to cruise passengers'. The only other cautionary comments related to the need for better organisation of cruise passenger visits and the comments that day visitors "do not get to know Fair Isle well and are very time consuming." Both of these comments, from one individual (respondent 16/2), may be indicative of how attitudes might change if numbers of cruise passengers and air-borne day visitors continue to increase in the future. None of the respondents in the 1962–1963 survey expressed any concerns or criticism of tourists or bird watchers specifically.

The single concern expressed about day visitors is an issue to keep in consideration. Day visitors tend to be universally criticised in tourist destinations because of their demands for services (garbage, parking spaces, specific facilities) with accompanying costs to local authorities, and an image of spending very little money in destinations (Garau-Vadell et al., 2014; Holladay and Powell, 2013; Wilkinson, 1996b). Visitors staying for a few hours or even one overnight on Fair Isle, by taking advantage of the air services, are likely to be regarded in a similar way on Fair Isle if their numbers increase, particularly if they reach such a level that they are competing further with residents for seats on the plane. As one resident (16/2) noted, there are not many opportunities for such visitors to spend money on the island. Unless they make arrangements in advance they may well not be able to visit or see any of the knitwear suppliers, as they mostly make

their wares available for the cruise ship visits or for on-line orders. Some adjustments could be made to have more knitwear and other crafts being made available in the island shop, at the Waterston Museum, and the observatory, but the museum and observatory shop are not staffed continuously although both would probably welcome additional income. As well, a significant increase in cruise ship visits may also generate some opposition, as making arrangements for visits are a considerable effort as noted earlier. Doing this a few times a year (currently less than ten) is still a positive experience but if this were to become even a weekly occurrence, (the neighbouring island group of Orkney, 40 kilometres south, now has 140 cruise ship visits each year), it is doubtful if this would be attractive and would represent a considerable time commitment away from other activities on the crofts and the production of the crafts for sale.

Thus residents' attitudes towards tourists (and birdwatchers) are clearly generally positive, and unlike Doxey's (1975) scenario, in this example, a long exposure to tourism does not seem to have resulted in the emergence of negative feelings or impacts to any noticeable extent. There is also no evidence that the residents have resorted to any of the potential behaviour responses recorded by Ap and Crompton (1993) or Dogan (1989) but there is little that residents could do to avoid tourists, beyond staying away from the community hall when cruise ship passengers come ashore, or not visiting the observatory. On such a small island, escaping the sight of tourists would be extremely difficult should residents wish to do so, however, several noted that they enjoy interacting with visitors, except, as one respondent (13/2) noted, 'journalists are not welcome'. This last comment is probably a reflection of increased media attention on the island in recent years as noted below, inevitably focusing on portraying the island and its way of life as 'unique, 'odd' and 'difficult'. Sharing their lifestyle with a small number of often apparently genuinely interested tourists does not appear to extend, at least in that case, to the media and a much larger distant audience, and may also suggest a major increase in general tourist numbers may not be welcomed.

#### **4 Discussion**

It is valid to ask as to whether the attitude of residents of Fair Isle is significantly different to that found in other tourist destinations (see for example, Lepp, 2008; Nunkoo and Ramkissoon, 2010; Ribeiro et al., 2017), and if so, what might have brought about the lack of development of negative attitudes to tourism and tourists often found elsewhere, and the apparent lack of negative impacts on residents' well-being?

One factor is almost certainly the small number of over-night tourists who visit Fair Isle each year, around 600 or so individuals to the bird observatory, spending a total of 3,500 bed nights in 2016 (FIBO, 2016), meaning most visitors are on the island for around a week. In addition, there are another 4–8 staff working at the observatory, all but two of whom leave the island at the end of the 'season'. A very few visitors, in relative and absolute terms, stay elsewhere on the island, in total probably less than 100 individuals a year, some of these are tourists, some involved in various work projects. Thus pressures from numbers of visitors are relatively minor. The only 'congestion' which may occur is in relation to seats on the air service to the island at specific times, particularly weekends in September, the peak bird migration time. However, this was not raised specifically by any resident as an issue, although a wish for additional flights was noted.

A second reason is almost certainly the spatial separation of residents and visitors. The observatory is located in the northern half of the island, almost a kilometre from the nearest residence and out of line of sight of all residences. Thus in evenings and overnight there are virtually no observatory staff or visitors in the southern half of the island. Residents are therefore spared noise and other disturbance for over half of each day, unlike the situation at some island tourist destinations where night-life and associated behaviour of tourists can be major problems and factors in causing negative attitudes of locals towards visitors (Andriotis, 2010; Carassava and Johnston, 2017; Monterrubio et al., 2015).

A third factor is the behaviour of most visitors. It is clear that the vast majority of overnight visitors to Fair Isle are bird-watchers [Interviews with Bennett (NTS) 14 August 2012, and Parnaby (FIBO administrator) 20 June 2013] and that their primary interest is in birds (Guimaraes et al., 2015; Scott and Thigpen, 2003) rather than any other aspect of the island or its human inhabitants. Bird watchers can be guilty of intrusive behaviour, some are over eager to see specific birds (Oddie, 1980), particularly rare migrants for which Fair Isle is a magnet. They can thus pose a threat to the birds in question through disturbance (Collins-Kreiner et al., 2013; Weston et al., 2015), and also create problems relating to trespass, property damage and invasion of privacy in searching for specific birds. When an extremely rare migrant arrives on the island the news is rapidly circulated by various media outlets to birdwatchers throughout Britain and even wider afield. On occasion, up to twelve small chartered planes have visited Fair Isle at one time to allow enthusiasts to see such an arrival (Butler, 2014). This inevitably means additional numbers of extremely keen birdwatchers laying siege to wherever the specific migrant has taken shelter. This could be a problem on Fair Isle, as the majority (28 of 44) of the key rarities have been found in the vicinity of the houses, in gardens and crops in particular (FIBO archives). However, the observatory publicises a set of behavioural constraints to visitors that have been created in conjunction with resident input, including not entering gardens or climbing on stone walls, not entering areas with livestock, and generally being conscious of resident privacy. These guidelines work well and the few resident complaints that are made, are taken seriously by observatory staff and invariably result in the problem being prevented from re-occurring.

The role of the observatory in island life has increased considerably over the 50-year period under examination. It now functions as a restaurant and bar for residents (although this is only taken advantage of to a limited degree), and more importantly, it serves as a social gathering point for residents and visitors. It provides a venue for such interactions weekly or fortnightly, depending on the occasions being offered, such as craft production demonstrations and musical performances. Observatory staff and sometimes visitors, also assist with some activities on the island such as the annual collection of hill sheep or occasionally in emergencies. Such participation undoubtedly assists in developing shared respect and cooperation as noted elsewhere (Fu et al., 2013). One other factor is the number of households (currently 4 out of 19) whose members began their contact with Fair Isle through working at the observatory and therefore have 'a foot in both camps' as it were. Such transitions from visiting observatory staff to becoming permanent or long-term residents also have benefits to the primary school enrolment if these families have young children.

Cruise ship visitors, often a cause for major concern in other islands (Wilkinson, 1996a) including Orkney (Horne, 2017) are also sufficiently few in number at present to

still present something of a novelty interest to islanders, as well as being perceived very clearly as an economic benefit to the island. Each visit is planned and choreographed in that cruise companies arrange in advance for access by visitors to the community hall, paying for its use and for the provision of hot drinks and baking for the visitors and the displaying of local craft produce. Local vehicles are available as taxis for hire by visitors not wishing to walk the short distances involved, particularly those wishing to go further north on the island to the observatory and the North Light. Most importantly, the visits result in the sale of a high proportion of the knitted goods and other crafts produced on the island, as well as providing publicity through photographs taken and put on line for further orders for knitwear and other produce (Butler, 2015). There are marked similarities here with the experience on Pitcairn Island with cruise ship visits (Amoamo, 2017), although there islanders bring produce to the ships for sale because of the lack of a suitable landing site. There are also sales of other souvenirs at the island shop and the observatory shop, and visits available to the Waterston Museum. Cruise visitors are seen as valuable in economic terms, somewhat enjoyable as curiosities and novelties, and an excuse for a social occasion by residents, with very little concern over their arrival, with an assured departure a few hours later. On the occasions when poor weather prevents a scheduled landing from a cruise ship, there is genuine disappointment amongst the residents.

Thus relative location, visitor numbers and visitor behaviour have been identified as the major factors behind the fact that negative attitudes towards tourism and tourists are rarely expressed by Fair Isle residents. That is not to say there will be no times when individual stupidity, inappropriate behaviour and other negative actions of individual visitors do not annoy residents, but overall the six decades pattern of slowly but regularly increasing numbers of tourists has not resulted in a corresponding increase in negative attitudes of residents or loss of quality of life, but rather, the opposite. On Fair Isle, tourism, even, or perhaps because it is of a niche form, has shown it can be capable of being a part of a sustainable livelihood strategy (Tao and Wall, 2009)

## **5 Future**

The niche tourism segment of birdwatching is a rapidly growing one in many parts of the world and thus its future presence would seem assured (Vas, 2017). Most visitors to Fair Isle are birdwatchers, the majority from the UK, reflecting a trait amongst birdwatchers to focus on life lists for specific (normally their own national) countries or regions. Unless engaged on enlarging one's total life list, few birdwatchers from other countries would take the time and cost to visit Fair Isle, particularly as it has few indigenous breeding species and none not found elsewhere. Its great appeal lies in its ability to attract rare migrants not seen elsewhere in the UK, but such an appeal also has a risk element of there being no rarities at any particular time and thus a visitor could return home with no new species added to their list. Irrespective of motivation, it is fairly certain that the bird watching segment of tourism will remain active and dominant on Fair Isle in the future. The new 2013 observatory offers vastly improved accommodation and service to earlier models; the air service, despite weather restrictions, is far faster and more comfortable than the ferry boat; and access to Shetland by both air and water has improved greatly in recent years.

A recently announced reduction of up to 40% in fares for passengers and vehicles on the ferries from mainland Scotland (<http://www.shetnews.co.uk>) is anticipated to result in increased numbers of visitors to Shetland as a whole. Such an increase may not be experienced on Fair Isle, however. While these reductions in charges to bring vehicles to Shetland on the car ferries from Aberdeen and Orkney may result in increased numbers of visitors to Shetland, relatively few of these are likely to go to Fair Isle. Fennell (1996) showed that Shetland tourists travel to specific places within the island group for specific reasons, thus it is most likely that it will remain primarily bird-watchers who will go on to Fair Isle, rather than large numbers of general visitors to Shetland. SIC, given its budget constraints (SIC, 2012), is unlikely to increase the subsidy to the air service, and therefore the number of flights to Fair Isle, thus the passenger capacity by air is not likely to increase significantly, if at all. The *good shepherd* is not likely to make a major, if any, increase in numbers of sailings because of cost and the time demands on the crew that reduce their time to work on crofts and crafts. Thus at most, a slight continued increase in numbers to the bird observatory is likely, but this is already operating at near full capacity in the migration months and is not likely to be enlarged in the foreseeable future. Any current surplus capacity is in the high summer and would be filled by short-term general tourists. Cruise ship visits may increase, and if any problem is likely to emerge from increased tourist numbers it is in this area. Fair Isle residents could easily decide not to agree to provide any services for cruise boats, whether on the basis of size of boat, frequency of visit, or for any other reason, and the appeal of stopping at the island would diminish markedly to operating companies. Thus if cruise ship visitor numbers did become a problem, a solution is easy and simple and unlikely to affect the continued acceptance of visits by boats currently seen as compatible in terms of numbers and arrangements.

Several other factors may also serve to increase the overall appeal of Fair Isle to general tourists. Shetland has been the setting for a series of popular detective novels by Cleaves, a former FIBO staff member, and several of these have been made into television programmes shown on national television during the last three years (2015–2017). In all of these the ‘hero’ is a Fair Islander, and one book, *Blue Lightning*, (Cleaves, 2010) is set specifically on Fair Isle and much of it was filmed in and around the observatory. BBC television also made a two part programme on Fair Isle, *Life on the Edge*, also shown in 2017, and there have been a number of articles in the written media on the island in recent years. All of these broadcasts are likely to increase interest in Fair Isle, some of which will almost certainly translate into increased tourist visitation. Such tourists, while they may not be conventional mass tourists, are unlikely to be niche tourists as in the past. What such tourists would expect to be able to do and see on the island raises some concerns. A recent 2016 exchange on Facebook illustrates the limited knowledge about the island by potential casual short-term visitors:

“Query we are going to Fair Isle by plane from Tingwall in about two weeks. Just for a daytrip due to limited time, and wonder if it is possible to buy some of the beautiful knitwear some place at the island? If the weather is right we will be there at a Wednesday (sic).

Response Yes you can. The bird observatory sells some bits, or there is a shop in town (sic).”

The issue of depopulation and possible abandonment of Fair Isle, which reached a crisis point in the 1950s (respondents 7/1, 3/2) remains a potential problem and is a major

consideration of both the National Trust for Scotland and the SIC. The observatory could continue to function and to attract visitors even if the island became unpopulated, but would almost certainly only be staffed for part of the year, as a year-round warden would be unlikely on an otherwise uninhabited island. FIBO would almost inevitably face higher transport costs for supplies, staff and visitors, and there would be a need for a few additional helpers to cover domestic duties currently performed by islanders. Repairs and maintenance would require non-island assistance, again increasing costs, but other island bird observatories (Isle of May, for example) do function successfully on islands with no resident population. SIC would almost certainly be unwilling to continue the current level of subsidy for the air service if there was no resident population and the frequency at least would decline as demand was reduced. Whether the *good shepherd* would continue as a ferry boat is unlikely, and with no crew based on Fair Isle, the reliability and frequency, as well as the cost, of the service would also inevitably change negatively. The disappearance of authentic Fair Isle knitting and other crafts would be a significant cultural loss to Shetland and Scotland in general.

## **6 Conclusions and implications**

While Fair Isle, like many remote islands, is unique in many characteristics, the study has raised some issues that may be applicable in terms of their potential implications for other islands which attract or have the potential to attract birdwatchers and other nature-focused and niche tourists. These issues relate back to the comments on stakeholder relationships made by Novelli and Benson (2005) mentioned previously. As noted earlier, birdwatchers, and by implication, all nature tourists who are desirous of seeing specific species, may be obtrusive in their behaviour, both for human and non-human residents of such locations. An increase in wildlife photography is one element of nature tourism that has caused concern because of the behaviour of some proponents (Birdwatch, 2018). Destinations should establish specific and firm guidelines on visitor behaviour that are made known to visitors to avoid problems of intrusion and disturbance to all residents, human and otherwise. These should go beyond simple comments such as not to climb on fences or trespass into private gardens, and should include specific advice such as avoiding crowding around houses or species, not blocking access through vehicle parking or standing on roads and driveways, and respecting requests from residents about behaviour.

Locating tourist accommodation and services away from local residences is also relevant. It is likely that the relatively distant and out-of-line-of-sight location of the observatory on Fair Isle relative to the houses of residents is a positive factor in avoiding any feeling of crowding or disturbance, e.g., the 'living in a goldfish bowl' syndrome. The seasonal nature of bird migration is also a positive feature, as visitation by birdwatchers is concentrated in migratory periods of April, May, September and October, meaning casual summer tourists come at a quiet time and are not competing for space at the Observatory or overtaxing the air and boat capacity and competing for places with residents. Shetland Island Authority provides subsidies for fares for residents from the island to Shetland and return which does much to alleviate discontent with non-locals using the limited services, a policy which could be adopted elsewhere.

The incorporation of the Observatory with the life of residents through employment (even though limited) and in being available for food and beverage, as well as being a site

for local presentations and attendance at lectures and shows is important, as it has undoubtedly made for the continued positive relations between residents and visitors (including Observatory staff), a feature since the establishment of the Observatory in 1948.

Birdwatching is only one form of niche tourism, Acorn Consultants (2008), in their study of niche tourism for the Caribbean, note some 20 potential niche tourism markets for that area, with birdwatching the first one considered. That study comments on the potential of birdwatching for product diversification, reducing seasonality, and dispersing tourist use to less visited areas. The general implications for managing niche tourism in similar destinations are essentially what is desirable for all forms of tourism which wish to ensure good relations with, and benefits for, residents, namely consideration of both parties' desires, clarification and mitigation of any problems, and positive involvement between the two groups, ideally from the beginning of tourism in the destination.

The future of Fair Isle is therefore likely to be little different to the present, unless there was a population evacuation and the island became uninhabited. Even then, cruise boats might still visit, as they do to St. Kilda and other uninhabited islands, and the observatory might continue to attract bird watchers, albeit perhaps in smaller numbers staying for longer periods because of reduced access arrangements. While it would be naïve to claim that the current nature of tourism is completely sustainable or perfect, it is closer to sustainability than in most tourist destinations, and overall achieves a measure of symbiosis with both the human and non-human environment with positive effects upon resident well-being.

## 7 Survey responses

In order to preserve assured anonymity of responses, survey respondents are shown as numbers only, with the second number, 1 or 2, referring to the surveys in 1962–1963 and 2012–2013 respectively.

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