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Riding towards sustainable rural development? Promising elements of sustainable practices in equine tourism.

Rhys Evans and Sylvine Pickel Chevalier

Abstract:

Over the last 20 years equine tourism and leisure have been dramatically increasing, both in Europe and in the wider world (e.g. Equimeeting Tourisme, 2012; Pickel-Chevalier and Evans, 2014). As much of these equestrian activities are delivered in rural areas (horse riding tourism, but also festival and other forms of equine tourism), we explore whether their development has the potential to support sustainable development in the countryside. We ask whether equine tourism can be one of a range of positive responses to the challenges of sustainability, in terms of the sustainability triangle -- social, economic and environmental – and, if so, how? What are the policies, strategies and actors (public/private) involved? What might be the difficulties and limitations for equine tourism as an agent of sustainable tourism development? This chapter is based upon data gathered from a number of recent studies into equine tourism in France and the Nordic countries. These studies used the case study methodology (Yin, 2009) which allowed us to access data using a wide variety of tools, including statistical surveys (in France) and in-depth interviews with equine tourists, equine tourism practitioners, development officers and authorities with a regulatory function in equine tourism (all locations). The data was combined with existing data from literature searches, and was focused using the tripartite definition of sustainability, applying it to equine tourism.

Introduction

Rural places have long relied on tourism as a source of potential economic sustainability and recent innovations in the field have promoted the potential social, economic and cultural sustainability elements of tourism in cultural landscapes and other socio-natural constructions (Ray, 2000; Cawley et al., 2008; Lønning and Evans, 2010). This includes the use of cultural heritage designation and community-based tourism, and focuses on the economic potential and sustainability of public and private goods where landscape and heritage is a factor in attracting tourists.

One growing element of this phenomenon is equine tourism. Over the last 20 years equine tourism and leisure have been dramatically increasing, both in Europe and in the wider world (e.g. Equimeeting Tourisme, 2012; Pickel-Chevalier and Evans, 2014). As much of these equestrian activities are delivered in rural areas (horse riding tourism, but also festival and other forms of equine tourism), we explore whether their development has the potential to support sustainable development in the countryside. We ask whether equine tourism can be one of a range of positive responses to the challenges of sustainability, in terms of the sustainability triangle -- social, economic and environmental – and, if so, how? What are the policies,

strategies and actors (public/private) involved? What might be the difficulties and limitations for equine tourism as an agent of sustainable tourism development? To begin, we need to clarify the definition of 'equine tourism'.

The title of this chapter includes the words, 'promising elements of sustainable practice' because, although we will demonstrate how equine tourism can and does participate within the boundaries of what can be called 'sustainable tourism', we feel a need to at least initially problematise that term. Like the term 'sustainable development', the very idea of sustainable tourism offers some contradictions which must be engaged with in order to move forward. This is particularly so when dealing with mass tourism, where it could be seen, following Friend (1992: 157), that "combining the concept of Sustainability with that of Development creates an *oxymoron*". The term *oxymoron* could apply equally to the concept of sustainable tourism (Weaver, 2004), particularly the type of international destination tourism which is commonly considered to be the backbone of the industry. However, just as Friend (1992) raises the problem only to address it, so too we wish to demonstrate that there are, at least, 'promising elements of sustainable practice', first in tourism, and then, in equine tourism.

Just as definitions of sustainable development and sustainable tourism have evolved (and been contested), so too, a dialogue between researchers and service providers is beginning to produce a usable definition of equine tourism. Older definitions tended to equate equine tourism with long distance trail riding or journeys on horseback (Ollenberg, 2006). This has today widened to include: "all equestrian activities undertaken by equine-oriented tourists outside their normal place of residence for more than 24 hours and less than four months" (Atout France, 2011). Included within the definition are leisure riding, competition (amateur participatory, professional participation and spectator), events (fairs, festivals, shows), travel to purchase horses, trekking, beach riding, location-based riding, and training and tuition (Atout France, 2011; Castillon, 2012). The sector is very diverse, with horses being enjoyed both *actively*, through riding, competition and training, and *passively*, through spectating and involvement in religious and other spectacles.

As a result of this diversity, equine tourism can be viewed as part of several sub-sectors of the tourism spectrum, including nature-based or outdoor tourism; adventure tourism; rural tourism; sport tourism; tradition and heritage tourism; and event tourism (Evans, 2013). The first two of these are significant because the fields of outdoor/adventure tourism and nature-based tourism, are the fastest growing sub-sectors of tourism enterprise globally (Bessy and Mouton, 2004; Kunenzi and McNeely, 2008). Cultural heritage tourism is another sub-sector which is experiencing significant growth.

Can we say that equine tourism is sustainable tourism? Clearly, this depends upon the ideological orientation of the questioner. Given, however, the policy definitions which underpin sustainable development, we certainly argue that equine tourism takes a place in the constellation of land-based activities which comprise such development, as we demonstrate throughout this chapter.

Methodology

This chapter is based upon data gathered from a number of recent studies into equine tourism in France and the Nordic countries. These studies used the case study methodology (Yin, 2009) which allowed us to access data using a wide variety of tools, including statistical surveys (in France) and in-depth interviews with equine tourists, equine tourism practitioners, development officers and authorities with a regulatory function in equine tourism (all locations). The data was combined with existing data from literature searches, and was focused using the tripartite definition of sustainability, applying it to equine tourism.

In France, the study areas included: The Natural Regional Park of Camargue (in Region Languedoc-Roussillon –South of France); the Region Pays de la Loire (West of France), and the Marquenterre natural park (Region Picardie, North of France)¹. Interviews were undertaken with five private associations of equine tourism: the Association du Cheval Henson; the Association Camarguaise de tourisme Equestre; the ATACA LR (Association du Tourisme Autour du Cheval et de l'Ane en Languedoc-Roussillon); the Association Vidourle à cheval and the Maison du Cheval.

In the Nordic region, data was gathered through two equine tourism business research and development projects – Riding Native Nordic Breeds (in Western Norway, Iceland and the Faroes. Funded by NORA); and the Nord Norskhest Prosjekt (in Nordland and Troms County Norway, funded by Nordland and Troms Fylkesmenn). Further information was gathered through strategic relations with key researchers, in particular the Interreg-funded 'Inno-Equine' project focused on the Baltic Region, and fellow researchers in the European Association of Animal Science who have worked on equine grazing regimes.

All data was analysed in an integrative way according to the data model, regardless of the sources, in order to address the question of the extent of sustainable tourism practice in equine tourism.

Equine tourism and sustainable economic development

One leg of the 'sustainability triad' is economic development. In rural areas, economic development is both an outcome of healthy social and cultural relations, and a necessary condition to sustain them (Wray 2000; Lønning and Evans 2010). Rural places are, by definition, peripheral and marginal, either by location, or by environment, and often both. The inclusion of farm tourism as part of sustainable rural development practice is a key contributor to the recent growth of nature-based tourism, particularly in remote rural locations where tourism infrastructure may be limited. Horse establishments, with their facilities for stabling, riding and learning, are often created in converted farm structures. Indeed, small farms which are unsuitable for operation within the large-scale agri-industrial system can be particularly

¹ Violier Ph, sous la dir., 2013, Le tourisme, un phénomène économique, La documentation française, Paris.

appropriate for redevelopment as equine businesses due to their existing environmental, manufactured and human assets which are as appropriate to equine enterprises as they were to small scale farming (Evans and Franklin, 2008). Farm buildings can be converted to stables; smaller fields with mixed landscape features converted to paddocks; farm equipment used to move hay and other products. Small farms in peri-urban locations can serve urban demands for horse keeping facilities and riding venues. Those located further from urban centres may be able to serve equine tourism markets.

Equine tourism operations offer some benefits for small scale farmers. Not only can they often keep costs low, especially if they can produce feed and bedding on their properties, but the additional income from equine tourism activities can supplement farm income to the point where the farm becomes economically viable through a strategy of multifunctional activities generating multiple income streams. Whilst labour is often performed by family members, for little or even no remuneration (Pussinen, 2013), this labour can keep family members on the farm, in the rural locale. Thus equine tourism as part of multifunctional farm activity can help counter rural depopulation and provide opportunities for vocational transition in areas where employment losses in agriculture are high.

Another aspect of equine tourism which contributes towards economic, as well as social, sustainability is the gendering of the sector. Within the Nordic countries approximately 80% of horse riders and owners are female, so equine economic activities such as tourism offer new opportunities for female entrepreneurship. A recent report from Sweden indicates that this is indeed so with an estimated two thirds of equine entrepreneurs being female (Lunner Kolstrup et al., 2013). Fosberg et al. (2012: 3) claim in a report on female entrepreneurs within the equine sector in Sweden that in old rural enterprises which focused on production of agricultural and other commodities, the norm of the entrepreneur was a middle aged man; however, "Within leisure and experience-based industries there is an emergence of 'new' or to some extent different businesses . . . To a considerable extent, these new forms are linked to women entrepreneurs". In France, 51 % of wage-earning persons in the equestrian field are women. These rates do differ by sector - more than 60% of employees in riding schools are women, while in racing, only 33 % are female (IFCE, 2011). The recent growth of tourism and leisure riding offers new economic opportunities to an often marginalised section of the rural population (women), supporting the sustaining of the rural economy through the creation of new 'consumption' activities which take place in the same landscapes that were formerly used for 'production' of rural commodities.

Recent research by Evans et al. (2013) on native breed equine tourism in the North Atlantic region demonstrates that equine tourism fits with the models currently accepted for nature-based tourism and adventure tourism. The use of native breed horses in tourism is not simply about supplying carriers-of-people through a landscape. Native breed horses are also carriers-of-cultural heritage as they are, in fact, cultural heritage artefacts which are the product of centuries of careful breeding and selection in order to be the most efficient help-mates in establishing the cultural landscapes in which they are located. Given that heritage tourism is also one of the faster growing sectors of tourism activity, native breed horses are an economic

asset which can help develop the economy in remote areas. The concept of riding the native breed horse in the landscapes in which it 'became' – of riding the Fjord Horse in the fjords, the Faeroes Horse in the Faeroes, Camargue horse in Camargue– offers a distinctive pull which can provide a powerful marketing tool to attract new customers.

Another key component of any tourism sector is the market it serves. Although the stereotype of equine tourism involves riding long distances over many days through spectacular landscapes, this is only a small proportion of the sector. Recent research into equine tourism in Iceland, Norway and the Faeroes found that the majority of customers for equine tourism are domestic. Even in Iceland – considered one of the top equine tourism destinations in the world - it has been estimated that less than 40% of all riders come from outside the country (Sigurddottir, 2011). The majority of riders are Icelandic families. Similar results can be found in France; even in the Camargue, which is located in one of the most touristic destination of France (Violier, 2013), 80% of the equestrian tourists are French².

Equine tourism thus offers some of the sustainability benefits of domestic tourism – affordability in local currencies; more frequent but shorter duration visits; interchanges in local language; and shorter journeys to reach the tourism site. This research also suggests that the emphasis on long distance treks which take many days is being replaced by shorter one or two day riding experiences. Operators claim that the market for these short trips is much larger as most customers only have time for shorter journeys. This is claimed to also offer better welfare for the horses and to allow operators to maintain multiple activities on the farm. The research suggests an emerging consensus that shorter trips which serve a mainly-domestic market produce better revenue, more frequent visits, and are easier for operators to manage in ways that provide a higher quality experience. In these ways, then, the economic sustainability of the activity is promoted.

Equine tourism and social and cultural sustainability

Horse-riding and equine tourism can also contribute to sustainable social and cultural development, with the latter taking an ever more important role in sustainable development linked to the phenomenon of 'heritage' (Sharpley and Telfer, 2002). Horses have become an emotional subject (Pickel-Chevalier and Grefe, 2014) and a vector for leisure activities (Tourre-Malen, 2006). They are also a living part of cultural heritage, helping to strengthen the social capital of rural areas through community integration, particularly through the association of horse-riding and horse-related services to a region (Atout France, 2011). Horse-riding can contribute to a double-headed process of regional organization, involving the cooperation of local communities with other outdoor activities (Bessy and Mouton, 2004), and of boosting local identity. In France, there are numerous examples of this use of horses and equine tourism as ways of developing sustainable tourism in terms of both land-management and cultural sectors.

² Schéma de tourisme durable du Parc naturel régional de Camargue 2010 – 2015, Version actualisée mai 2010.

This capacity was officially recognised by the agency for national tourism development (Atout France) in 2011, which said: “The horse is a part of our heritage, a symbol of its ecosystem, of its history, of the local and regional traditions of its area, and is considered a tool which helps people appreciate the land” (Atout France, 2011: 14).

This use of the horse as a unifying element of cultural identity through the development of equine tourism is particularly visible in the village of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, situated in the regional natural park of the Camargue, which stretches from the Rhone to the Mediterranean Sea. This village is in an area famous for the breeding of semi-wild Camargue horses in the wetland marsh, for its rearing and training of bulls for fighting, and also for its gypsy traditions. Saintes-Maries is a pilgrimage site for European gypsies who come in their hundreds every year for various festivals. Today, horses are associated with all of these events. For example, the pilgrimage on the 24th and 25th of May consists of a large procession, followed by herdsmen on horseback leading the statues of both of the village saints down to the sea to be blessed by the Bishop. In July there is an event called the Horse Festival which takes place over three days in the village. This includes demonstrations of various equestrian activities, including working-horse displays, parades and the presentation of breeding-stock which takes place in the village streets in front of the local population. Ranching is highlighted in November with the Abrivado festival, which has become famous due to a spectacular cattle-drive on the beach when two hundred herdsmen on horseback from all over Provence guide their bulls towards the village arena. This promotion of equestrian heritage serves as a means of social cohesion. It draws the villagers into the show by guiding the cattle-drive through the streets of the village. This festival, as well as the pilgrimages and other events, are part of the tourist calendar and are widely publicised by the local Tourism Office. The linking of local residents and tourists is accomplished by different shared activities, such as free breakfasts for all the participants on the beach during the event. The horse has thus become a very important component of Saintes-Maries’ cultural



identity. This village is one of the few places in France where the streets still have hitching points for herdsmen who continue to use their horses as a means of transport or for their work (See Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1: In Saintes-Marie-sur-Mer the cattle-drive is still a way of life for the herdsmen who manage the bulls while on horseback. Photo C.Lux, 2011.

Developing equine tourism gives the inhabitants a chance to protect and even strengthen their local individuality in the face of globalisation by giving the horse the status of a live heritage symbol and as such it is a key part of their cultural identity. A custom has developed which may seem old-fashioned and thus worthless for today's youth, but one which is revalorised every year by the enthusiasm of tourists coming from across France and beyond. The village has even opened a specific museum of the Gardian culture. This co-constituent phenomenon, characterised by the links between tourism, heritage and culture (Lazarotti and Violier, 2007; Pickel-Chevalier, 2014a; Pickel-Chevalier, 2012) contributes to the continuation of the traditional use of the horse in Saintes-Maries, and also boosts local economic development. It means that the village is seen primarily as a tourist destination based on equestrian traditions, and of course, beach and sea³. As a result, trips and visits are available for those wanting to accompany the cattle-drive on horseback, to be initiated into the ways of life of the traditional herdsman, to learn the herdsman's horse skills, to help sort the cattle while on horseback, and to explore the local culture. These trips are available directly through agencies which offer riding and accommodation. The equine tourism offer can also be organised via a specialised tourism agency such as *Cheval d'Aventure*, which market the tours under the name "In a herdsman's saddle".

Far from locking the village's inhabitants in the past, the horse has given them a window of opportunity by allowing them to welcome and meet a varied tourist population. Local people have been able to enrich their traditional celebrations with national and international events, such as the Equestrian Literature and Film Show. So, the horse and equine tourism are confederative agents, uniting the local and the global. They are vectors which transmit and reinforce social and cultural identity but are also open to the world.

However, while the villagers of Saintes-Maries have succeeded in associating their economy and culture with equine tourism, the model has struggled to spread across the whole area of the Camargue region, where the Camargue horses are bred. According to a survey (Fischer, 2013), tourists are often disappointed by the quality of equine tourism in Camargue, outside the village. The main reasons stated are the quality of riding and trails, and the fact that only 20% of the horses used in equine tourism in the region are real Camargue Breed, the remaining 80% being grey horses of various other breeds⁴. According to Fischer (2013), the horses are not always well treated; they can be left to stand under the sun for hours, waiting for tourists. The trails are not satisfactory because most are private roads, and much of the riding has to follow roads, rather than paths. The (rare offroad) paths are not connected, which forces the riders to continue on the road, alongside cars, causing anxiety related to safety⁵. This makes it hard to put together appealing itineraries over several days and thus reduces the attractiveness of the Camargue as an equine tourism destination (Lux, 2012).

³ Schéma de tourisme durable du Parc naturel régional de Camargue 2010 – 2015, Version actualisée mai 2010.

⁴ Schéma de tourisme durable du Parc naturel régional de Camargue 2010 – 2015, Version actualisée mai 2010

⁵ Schéma de tourisme durable du Parc naturel régional de Camargue 2010 – 2015, Version actualisée mai 2010

Horses and equine tourism can be agents of social cohesion and local development if they are integrated into a coordinated strategy of governance and management. By capitalising on both the animal as a living heritage artefact and on an activity promoting local culture, the horse can help restructure rural tourism development. It can contribute to a process by which rural communities reclaim their local heritage and revitalise their tourism potential. It can also strengthen social cohesion through *co-opetition* (Brandenburger and Nalebuff, 1996) wherein a network of small and medium-sized firms maintain relations which are both competitive *and* cooperative. When these companies work in the same sector - several hotels; several restaurants; several breeders or equestrian structures - their primary relationship is competitive. Nevertheless, because they are working within the framework of a common culture (here horses and equine tourism) they also develop non-trade relationships supported by social networks (Stopper, 1996), facilitated by beliefs and values as well as a shared history (Pecqueur, 2000). This phenomenon allows an activity to be anchored in an area through 'organized proximity', both geographic and relational. Each enterprise's competitive advantage is developed through networking and shared resources. This *co-opetition* model is well suited to equine tourism which builds on a link between the 'horse' and a specific area, combined with the presence of a set of activities (equestrian culture, shows, sports events, tourism on horseback), and the way these activities are physically networked (marked equestrian routes, hotels-restaurants, sites, shows). Although such co-opetition seems to work well in small areas such as the village of Saintes-Marie-de-la-Mer, it is more difficult to do on a wider basis because of problems of coordination between public and private actors, and due to a lack of professionalisation. Surveys with local associations of equine tourism in the Natural Regional Park of Camargue (Fischer, 2013) indicate that local public and private actors do not work closely with the national institutions (FFE, CDTE, CRTE), and the private actors still have lots of difficulties cooperating between themselves. The model of co-opetition is promising, but needs further development in these cases.

Equine tourism and environmental sustainability

For equine tourism, environmental sustainability is probably the most difficult and least addressed aspect of the sustainability triad. Issues of overuse, in particular the impact of large numbers of horses on plant species on ridden trails, has been a significant concern in the literature. Similar to the impact of large numbers of ramblers on sensitive mountain habitats, concerns have been raised about the negative impacts of equine tourism, primarily in terms of ground disturbance and diffusion of exotic seeds in manure (Newsome et al., 2004). Many of the objections to the riding of horses in national parks and outdoor recreation areas actually appear to be *perceptions* rather than facts, and many of these perceptions focus on aesthetic concerns. As documented by Newsome et al. (2001), other user-groups often disapprove of equine use of wilderness areas and this is often expressed as perceptions of negative environmental impact. As Newsome states in other research, however, whilst there is a definite issue over soil compaction and other impacts of hoof prints, the impacts of other aspects of

horses' presence are mainly aesthetic -- in terms of seeing/smelling muck, or excessively noisy parties of riders encountered on the trail. Interestingly, Beeton (2006: 49) claims that many walkers surveyed "had actually not encountered horseback groups, with many of their attitudes not based on actual experience. Those walkers who had encountered horseback tour groups had a more positive attitude towards them than those who had not". It remains clear, however, that there is a need for more research on how to set acceptable levels of equine use, both on dedicated bridleways and in open countryside. With this, the negative impacts of riding in natural areas can be managed in ways that minimise cumulative impacts.

There may also be a need to form coalitions between riding organisations and equine tourism businesses, and organisations which manage the environment of parks and other natural areas. Equine organisations and tourism businesses have tended to act on their own. Recent research in the Nordic countries has pointed to the benefits of working collaboratively with other organisations that have different expertise in, for example, tourism management (Evans, 2014). The same principle applies to managing the impact of horses on the tourism environments they ride through. A recent pioneering initiative in France has seen the ONF (National Office of the Forest) and the FFE (French Equestrian Federation) sign an agreement for better collaboration around horse riding in forests. The initiative undertakes to educate riders on how to ride with environmental sensitivity – e.g. sticking to the path, avoiding overgrazing the natural environment. This is done by the FFE. In return, the ONF builds equipment for riders in the forest – hitching points, water supplies, etc. (Pickel-Chevalier, 2014b.). Some agreements have recently been signed between the FFE and the Outdoor Activities Federation and an agreement has been made recently between the CRTE (Equestrian Tourism Regional Committee) of the Pays de la Loire, the CRRP (Pedestrian Trekking Regional Committee) and CRC (Cycle Regional Committee) in the region⁶. This suggests that awareness of better ways to manage equine impact is beginning to grow, at least in France, and that riders are taking their place alongside walkers and cyclists in attempts to manage the environmental impact of their activities on natural environments.

Native breed horses also represent a key genetic resource in and of themselves. We have already discussed their importance in terms of cultural heritage, but the genetic resources they represent are equally as important as 'heritage seeds' or other agricultural and wildlife resources. Most European nations are signatories to the *Bern Convention on the conservation of European wildlife and natural habitats* - a legally binding treaty in which the signatories commit to active preservation of the genetic heritage, in particular of vulnerable species. Some native breeds of horses exist in very small numbers. The Faroese Pony, for example, has just 62 members extant at the time of writing, and efforts are currently underway to develop a model of 'endangered species tourism' to generate funds to continue a breeding programme for them.

⁶ Interview of Colette Bourland, President of the CRTE (Comité Régional de Tourisme Equestre) of Pays de la Loire, October 2014.

Overall, there is a need for much more research to be undertaken into the actual environmental impacts of equine tourism. It is clear that there must be limits placed on use in fragile environments, but much recent research focuses on *perceptions* of negative impacts rather than actual scientific *measurement* of them. With further research, local limits can be set, and positive impacts can be harnessed to contribute towards creating a thriving and biodiverse local environment. Further, by providing an economic imperative to breed native breed horses, equine tourism can contribute to avoiding the loss of important genetic resources, and in this way, also makes a positive contribution to environmental sustainability.

Conclusion

As we have demonstrated, the question of 'is equine tourism sustainable tourism' generates many and complex answers. There are, depending upon one's intellectual or ideological perspective, clear questions about whether any tourism activity could be considered sustainable. If, however, sustainability is viewed as a process rather than a destination itself, then the evidence presented above suggests that equine tourism is indeed travelling along a path toward sustainable tourism, particularly in terms of tourism as sustainable development. Using the idea of the 'sustainability triad' as a framework for exploring the question allows us to isolate particular aspects of sustainability and interrogate progress made towards them. Across the three axes, progress can be observed, but it can best be characterised as at different stages on different axes.

Equine tourism, located as it is often in peripheral areas, can contribute significantly to the economic development of small rural enterprises through the additionality it brings to existing farms and other small holdings which cannot participate in the large-scale agri-industrial economy. The conversion of farm assets such as buildings, fields, and the farmer's knowledge to equine enterprises means that the income generated is intensely local – especially when feed and other equine services are generated directly by the operator. Even when employing resources beyond the immediate farm, they are often local resources which are used. Research on the economic impacts of equine tourism in Europe is, for the most part, quite recent. But the actual activity itself has a long history and can be seen to be growing, as the whole equine sector itself grows. Therefore, the economic impact of equine tourism on sustainable development can be said to be quite strong. There is, however, a clear need for more trans-national research to quantify this further and to capture the many and varied expressions of equine tourism.

The long history of the human-horse relationship means that horses have been present in European cultures for a long time. Their roles in the productive process (farming, forestry, transport) and in the military means that there are many cultural expressions of the relationship. We have shown how, in France and Norway, the cultural legacy of the human-horse relationship is an asset for the development of modern equine tourism – whether for education, for spectacle, or as iconic symbols of local landscapes and peoples. Further, the ever-growing fulfillment of modern leisure needs by horses is creating many opportunities for new

communities to be formed, new relations between city and countryside, and supporting new gender roles and entrepreneurship opportunities for women. Horses link the most contemporary cultural and social trends with many ancient cultural practices. As a link between the past and present, horses sustain traditional culture practices and at the same time, offer opportunities for innovation, adapting them for new circumstances and new social formations. In this sense, then, we might suggest that it is along this axis of sustainability – social and cultural - which equine tourism has travelled the farthest.

Although it could be said that equine tourism development is at its weakest along the axis of environmental sustainability, it can be seen that many horse breeds themselves are valuable genetic assets worthy of preservation – and equine tourism provides one economic imperative for doing just this. Early research suggests that horses, employed in a mixed grazing scenario, can contribute to more effective maintenance of biodiverse grassland habitats, although more research is certainly needed to develop this further (see Miraglia et al., 2006; Fleurance et al., 2012).

Like much of the tourism sector, equine tourism can be said to be in a process of moving towards sustainability. Diverse in activities and locations, some threads in the tapestry of equine tourism have clearly moved further through the process than others. Nevertheless, whether seen as contributing towards economic sustainability, social and cultural sustainability, or environmental sustainability, it is emerging that there are many promising elements of sustainable practices within the equine tourism sector. There is clearly much further to go, yet equine tourism can indeed be said to be riding towards sustainability, whether economic, social or environmental.

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Figure 1. In Saintes-Marie-sur-Mer, the cattle-drive is still a way of life for the herdsmen who manage the bulls while on horseback (Photo C.Lux, 2011)