

# Northumbria Research Link

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*This is part of our special feature on **Rurality in Europe**.*

Wind energy has not only been promoted as sustainable by officialdom across Europe, it has received broad public approval. In the UK, for example, a high of 76 percent support for wind energy among the public was recorded in a YouGov survey in April 2018 (Harper et al. 2019). Nonetheless, local resistance to onshore wind energy development is commonplace and can be fierce, with objections typically pivoting around landscape impacts, which, it is argued, negatively affect tourism (Cashmore et al. 2019; Ólafsdóttir and Sæþórsdóttir 2019; Silva and Delicado 2017; Gaspar de Sousa and Kastenholtz 2015; Rudolph 2014; Aitcheson 2012; Frantal and Kunc 2011; Riddington et al. 2010). This paper addresses this issue through its analysis of findings from research undertaken in 2014 on behalf of Northumberland County Council (NCC) in the UK that aimed to objectively establish the impacts of onshore-windfarms on tourism in Northumberland’s rural hinterland. Drawing on Mordue et al. (2020), we revisit that research and take a more nuanced analysis of some of its main findings, and assess its effectiveness on NCC land-use policy since the research was completed. In doing so, we raise important issues of democracy in relation to: landscape and environment, the efficacy of objective knowledge in local land-use decision-making, and the cultural and spatial relations of clean energy production. Though the paper is built around a UK case study, it speaks to other places and official bodies—in Europe and beyond—facing similar issues.

## **Northumberland: a place for tourists and windfarms?**

Northumberland is a very rural county nestled in the north east corner of England, with a population of just over 300,000. It is a relatively large county in English physical geography terms, with a National Park extending south from the Scottish border that includes Hadrian’s Wall, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. There are also two Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AOBs) within its bounds: the Northumberland Coast, and part of the North Pennines. Having been something of a hidden gem in tourism terms, Northumberland has become established on the tourist map in the last two decades, with tourism currently making up 11.8 percent of Northumberland’s economy (2.7 percent higher than the national average)—equivalent to £665 million per year (Northumberland Tourism 2019). It is also an ideal location for windfarm development because of its exposed highlands and windy rurality. As such, it hosts more than 200 onshore wind-turbines, with around 120 ranging in size from 61 meters to 130 meters, and another 80 plus below 60 meters in height (NCC 2018; Mordue et al. 2020). Significantly, the presence of these turbines has resulted in a groundswell of local opposition from people concerned about their impact on Northumberland’s rural landscape.

Although local objectors are invariably passionate about protecting the local landscape, they are susceptible to the charge that NIMBYism (Not-In-My-Backyard-ism) drives their objections (Mordue et al. 2020; Walker et al. 2018b; Silva and Delicado 2017; Devine-Wright and Howes 2010; McLachlan 2009). The concept of NYMBYism is, however, often challenged in the academic literature, with critics arguing it is self-fulfilling in the way it inaccurately and unfairly assumes local resistance is based on ignorance, parochialism, selfishness, and emotion. It is also argued that these assumptions can all too easily ignore or skirt over local circumstances that might justify resistance to a particular energy installation (see Fast 2015; Walker et al. 2014; Divine-Wright 2011 and 2009; Aitken 2010; Toynbee 2007; Wolsink 2000). Nonetheless, from a political standpoint, if an actual causal link between onshore-windfarm development and a decline in tourist numbers and/or revenues can be established objectively, any charge of NIMBYism could be sidestepped (Mordue et al. 2020).

This said, protecting the local landscape from the impacts of onshore-windfarms is not only a local matter. It is “an issue of bonding and dispersal in which successful resistance by one locality has potential implications for others, both in terms of siting onshore-windfarms elsewhere and pollution costs of not siting onshore-windfarms anywhere” (ibid.,1887), which is a complex and vexed issue that has received too scant attention in the academic literature (Simcock 2016; Walker et al. 2014; Brace and Geoghagen 2011), but more so with regard to the way wind energy and environmental interests interact and/or conflict with local landscape and tourism interests (Gaspar de Sousa and Kastenhol 2015; Rudolph 2014; Terkenli 2014). It is at these intersections and cross-currents that this paper is positioned, as it analyses the various evidences and discourses derived from the research conducted on behalf of NCC (see NU 2014, and as presented in Mordue et al. 2020).

### **What do key Northumberland stakeholders think of onshore-windfarms?**

We conducted a survey of 600 tourism-related businesses, from which 159 participants responded (a response rate of 26.5 percent). A headline finding was that although 63 percent of respondents reported that onshore-windfarms had not negatively impacted their businesses, 37 percent stated they had. This is a significant figure that sits alongside qualitative comments on the presence of onshore-windfarms blighting the landscape and damaging tourists’ enjoyment. When asked if the presence of onshore-windfarms had benefitted their business, 153 responses were received with seven percent of respondents saying that they had benefitted from the presence of windfarms and 93 percent saying they had not, with 59 (39 percent) respondents reporting negative impacts on their businesses (Mordue et al. 2020; NU 2014). Furthermore, 61 out of 129 responses (47 percent) said that the presence of windfarms was not at all likely or was unlikely to influence decisions, while 21 percent were neutral on this and 33 percent said the presence of onshore-windfarms was likely or very likely to influence future investment decisions (ibid.).

Overall, the findings were quite mixed, but with a significant core of negative responses on the impacts of onshore-windfarms on tourists and tourism, which were embellished by a majority of qualitative comments giving further voice to those concerns (see Mordue et al. 2020 for more detail). This, however, stands in contrast to the findings of research undertaken across the UK that clearly and consistently indicates that the vast majority of tourists are either neutral or positive about onshore-windfarms in UK rural landscapes (NU 2014). Such variance between the local and national picture potentially means that either Northumberland is somehow *exceptional* or that the subjectivity of opinions in this survey is an important driver of the mixed and sometimes inconsistent nature of the responses received. The overall balance of opinion however, in tone at least, was clearly toward being negative about the presence of onshore-windfarms in the Northumberland landscape (Mordue et al. 2020).

A focus group was then held with thirteen key informants from organizations in a variety of sectors in Northumberland to discuss, in-depth, issues of concern raised in the survey. The organizations included: the National Trust, the Northumberland National Park Authority, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs), English Heritage, tourism business proprietors, and representatives from what might be termed as local social movements deeply opposed to onshore-windfarms. It was made clear at the outset that opinions expressed would be taken as individual opinions and not representative opinions of the organizations themselves, and that all participants would be anonymized. From the outset, the focus group members agreed that the Northumberland landscape is indeed exceptional, and a uniquely valuable asset on which the tourist economy is highly dependent. Steve, a windfarm sceptic, said “the continued maintenance of the region’s high quality environment...[is]...central to tourism’s competitive advantage” and that tourists “come for the wide open spaces, the clear horizons... they don’t like the idea of being surrounded by the windfarms.”

In similar vein, Alan exclaimed that windfarms are “ruining such a beautiful county” and Ron interjected: “there’s no positives on tourism from windfarms.” Harry then contrasted what he saw as the excess of onshore-windfarm development in Northumberland with the much more modest placement of wind-turbines in the southern counties surrounding London. According to Stanley, this is because those counties are home to a

rich density of people who might be good at resisting planning applications... because every second village is stuffed full of retired barristers and planning consultants who know how to object to onshore-windfarm applications – we don’t have that population (Mordue et al. 2020, 1893).

What seems a rather sweeping statement is supported by Harper et al (2019) who provide firm evidence that distribution is indeed uneven across the UK regions in which “especially the South of England appear[s] ‘off limits’ to development” (962). They also found that the application of geospatial modelling to assess the physical suitability of locations for wind energy sites (for example, the presence of significant wind) is a relatively low order consideration compared to the political beliefs and educational levels of local people. Developers simply avoid areas with populations possessing high levels of educational attainment because this is where they are likely to meet with the most effective opposition to their proposals (also see Devine-Wright 2007; Mordue et al. 2020).

This theme also spilled into considerations of the types of tourists who would be more or less affected by the presence of onshore-windfarms in Northumberland. Stanley, for example, suggested that the many visitors to the Haggerston Castle Holiday Park in Berwick-upon-Tweed would likely be indifferent to onshore-windfarms because they “stay in that holiday camp and will never venture out of it, and for many, I am sure, will never venture out of the gambling machine arcade.” This claim was quickly challenged for its obvious exclusionary positioning by Dilan who said that far from “getting bevved up and playing fruit machines,” a healthy proportion of visitors to Haggerston Castle Holiday Park and similar establishments “actually do get out quite a lot.” Still keen to make his point, Stanley retorted:

The people who stay in the self-catering cottage, the B&B in the more openly remote areas, let’s be fair, aren’t the people staying in the static caravan near the coast – and so there’s a refinement there that maybe it’s right to reflect on (Mordue et al. 2020, 1894).

From this vantage, social class is imprinted onto the Northumberland landscape, and the more remote the landscape the more socially elevated it will be (cf. Cosgrove 1984 and 2006; Williams 1973; Mordue et al. 2020). Winston then suggested that windfarms would be more acceptable in South-East Northumberland where the landscape is more industrialized and, as he put it, “degraded:” “therefore the extent to which there would be harm caused by wind-turbine development is better and more tolerable than it would be elsewhere.”

Turning to research that does not support the vehemently anti-windfarm sentiments of some members of the focus group, Winston opined that the “benefit side of the balance is highly skewed with far too much emphasis wrongly put upon the need to alleviate climate change by wind-turbines – they don’t do that.” Furthermore, Jack, who like Winston, declared he was well studied in the research on the impacts of windfarms on tourism, as well as the research on the capability of windfarms tackling climate change generally, said “there is a lot of what I call ‘cod’ research masquerading as science... We are sleepwalking into a situation without knowing, and having the proper information to base decisions on”. Although disputing the research, Jack is nonetheless subscribing to the view that the arbiter of the windfarm/tourism issue is hard, objective scientific evidence – though not the hard evidence produced to-date. He then escalated his argument, stating there is a

notion that somehow wind-turbines actually will save carbon emissions and save the planet and all the rest of it, but also in the nature of the research itself because I think a lot of it, a) is done on the cheap, and b) aims at getting a sound bite essentially (Mordue et al. 2020, 1895).

The “Not in Anyone’s Back Yard” (Devine-Wright 2009) questioning of the scientific consensus might be strongly felt by local residents, but it also seems part of a trope or framing strategy that takes the debate beyond local concerns in such a way as to displace charges of NIMBYism to an all-encompassing global environment. In doing this, not only is the wind energy orthodoxy challenged, but the international environmental lobby is pitched against uniquely local landscape values in a compelling David versus Goliath narrative.

Nigela (National Trust), however, accepted that perhaps published research legitimately does not support such locally induced conclusions. She also confessed to feeling “continually challenged” by the issue, revealing that her organization takes a view on onshore-windfarms on a case-by-case basis. By taking part in this research she also hoped to glean, and further, evidence-based, “balanced” answers. Her colleague, Will, expressed very similar views—as did Dilan (Northumberland National Park), Walter, Peter, and Teresa (the three local AONBs) and Harry (English Heritage).

That both the staunchly anti-wind energy voices and the more cautious voices of the “professionals” in the group should seek resolution through rational means and/or objective-evidence on such a subjectively charged matter is both interesting and revealing. Indeed, it seemed the subjectivities so evident in many responses—and in the issue more generally—were consciously discounted as a potential pathway to resolution; mirroring NCC’s reasons as to why the research was commissioned in the first place. We must ask however, given the subjectivities involved, whether evidence-based, objective research alone is the best arbiter of these issues?

### **Is “better,” more objective, research the answer?**

As alluded to, our 2014 research found no evidence suggesting that, overall, tourists are either positively or negatively affected by the development of onshore-windfarms in UK rural landscapes. A finding that is clearly at variance with the way tourists’ views were represented in the local anti-onshore-windfarm discourses evident throughout our research, and as highlighted here (also see, Mordue et al. 2020; NU 2014). For these objectors, the presence of onshore-windfarms carries both economic as well as cultural costs. However, the evidence from Northumberland Tourism’s annual tourism impact reports published since 2014 does not support the claims regarding economic costs (see [Northumberlandtourism.org.uk](http://Northumberlandtourism.org.uk)). For instance, in 2015, Northumberland received 9.5 million visits (3 percent up on the previous year), rising to 9.7 million in 2016, then 10.3 million in 2017, and 10.48 million in 2018. From 2013 to 2018, the number of people working directly in tourism in the county rose steadily from 11,000 to just over 13,000 (NCC 2013; [Northumberlandtourism.org.uk](http://Northumberlandtourism.org.uk); Mordue et al. 2020). Thus, resistance to onshore-windfarms seems to be driven more by cultural predilections around landscape values and perceived risk than hard evidence (cf. Rudolph 2014).

Similarly, the rejection of the science that supports the environmental benefits of wind energy by the most stridently anti-windfarm respondents also appears to be generated from an entrenched position that mistrusts or simply discounts expert opinion (see Barry et al, 2008) – though they hung on to a belief that truly objective science would support their position. The uncertain, “balanced” focus group voices were much more willing to recognize the complexities and nuances at the heart of the issue, though they too

believed the issue could only be resolved through definitively objective research. On this count, however, our research failed because it did not provide a cut through, one way or the other, conclusion—and thus NCC did not get the objective arbitration it was seeking either.

Our research was also rendered somewhat redundant in April 2016 when the UK (Conservative) government withdrew public subsidies for onshore-windfarms and placed decision-making on their development at the community level—in order to give “local people...the final say” (Conservative Party 2015, 57). Planning applications for onshore-windfarm development immediately plummeted, effectively creating a moratorium on the development of onshore wind energy throughout the country, and in 2017 applications were 6 percent of the 2015 UK total (Harper et al. 2019). The policy was also timed to become a key Conservative manifesto commitment for the 2015 general election (ibid.; FT 2014), which drew accusations from opposition political parties of “vote chasing” by targeting Conservative voters living in rural Britain, who dominate the UK’s rural political map and tend to be older than opposition voters (Curtis 2017; Carrington 2015; Devine-Wright 2007; Electoral Commission 2015 General Election Results; Mordue et al. 2020). The Guardian newspaper also reported that “senior economists in the sector” argued the policy was both economically and environmentally irrational because onshore wind energy is the cheapest form of clean energy available.

We must be careful, however, of suggesting only Conservative voters and politicians hold anti-onshore-windfarm views (see Hess and Renner 2019; Walker et al. 2018a), “but it is fair to say the idea that onshore-windfarms are alien to the British rural landscape is now officially enshrined in the UK legislature” (Mordue et al. 2020, 1897). It is also true to say the policy change flies in the face of broad UK public support for wind energy (Harper et al. 2019), including support from the majority of tourists (see NU 2014). Arguably, then, we need a more effective energy politics that is less partial, and reflects public opinion equitably. More still, a politics which seeks strategic approaches that are borne not from narrow party political interests but from an understanding of the realities of human and environmental interdependencies in and across geographical space. Though this seems even further away as the UK pulls away from close union with its European neighbors, a more sustainable citizenship does not hinge on the UK’s membership of the EU. It does, however, depend on a sensibility that sees all places and landscapes as simultaneously mutual and exceptional. Climate change and environmental sciences, we suggest, would support such a purview, as they would the need for a more mature and sophisticated relational political geography.

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Photo: Pair of wind turbines (windmills) located off Cambois Beach, Northumberland, England | Shutterstock  
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