How Are Rural Settlements Changing and Why?

How to develop a field study
by Angharad Harris

There are many reasons for changes in settlements. Remember that this is not a new phenomenon. Rural villages and towns have always changed over time and will continue to do so. They are dynamic, with populations that swell and shrink like the ebb and flow of the tide and are dependent on the economic and social state of their surroundings. This dynamic can be seen in ruins and new houses and in rusting ploughs alongside Quad bikes. In order to investigate the changes in rural settlements, an appropriate area must be chosen. This article focuses on Snowdonia National Park.

Appropriate or not?

A rural area is usually defined as an area where the settlements are sparse, where agriculture is the main employer and where the majority of jobs are connected with agriculture. The map above, from the Snowdonia National Park Authority (SNPA) website (www.eryri-npa.gov.uk), shows that settlements are far apart. With a little more research on the website, we find that the population of Snowdonia was 25,682 in 2001 in an area of 823 square miles. 2001 census figures show a reduction of 3% in Snowdonia’s population since 1991. At this time, 14.9% of the population worked in agriculture. By 2001 this figure had fallen to 9.1%. Although it may not be immediately obvious that agriculture is the ‘main employer’, it is significantly higher than the national figure of 2.5% for the whole of Wales. 25% of the population is employed in the tourist industry, with the landscape attracting the majority of visitors. All in all, dependence on the land is higher than in any other sector. We can therefore confidently say that Snowdonia can be classed as a ‘rural area’.

What about the settlements?

Firstly let us consider HOW they change, before looking at ‘why the change’ has occurred. By dividing the question into smaller components, we will be able to answer it more easily. Where should we search for information? There is plenty of information available on-line, but...
How are rural settlements changing and why?

Initially, we will be focusing on the following data on Aberdovey and Beddgelert. The data shows that both settlements have experienced a change, and also that there is a relationship between the change in population and holiday homes. Things are not usually this straightforward in geography, and we need to do some further research in order to see whether there are other changes afoot.

What primary data could you collect?

Start with your perception of the place. Walk around to get a feel of the place. Use a bipolar scale to record. Here are some suggestions:

Would you like to live there? What is there to do locally? Midweek in winter when everyone is huddled up in front of a fire or at work, rural villages can look dull. Search near the village hall, in the shop window, on the Church / Chapel / school notice board for evening activities and other services. Make a note of these and how often they occur. Create a simple tally chart for the village, or create a matrix if you wish to compare villages.

How has the settlement changed over time?

Have any new houses been built? Has one shop replaced a butcher and baker? Mapping land use will give you the chance to compare villages that have similar populations. Use symbols for houses and shops, pubs and restaurants, hotels and B&Bs. Also, can you identify the holiday homes and show them on the map? Note any change of use: large windows suggest an old shop, the names ‘Hen Bost’ (Old Post), ‘Hen Ysgol’ (Old School), etc. If there has been a change in the number of shops, is the distance to a large centre responsible, or is it due to more modern shopping patterns? How do visitors affect a settlement and is this apparent how buildings are utilised, e.g. climbing equipment shops, restaurants.

What about a questionnaire?

The best time to do this is at the weekend or in the evening. As well as the usual questions – age, work, distance to work and mode of transport – you should ask whether individuals were born in the area. If the answer is ‘YES’, there should be sub-questions asking about any changes that have been observed. If the answer is ‘NO’, consider a different series of sub-questions: when and why did they move there and from where. Ask whether they shop locally or on-line. This will all help to illustrate how things have changed, and why. If everyone uses e-mail, and the supermarket van visits weekly, is there a future for the post office and the local shop? If there is no-one at home to answer your questions, could it be a holiday home or one that is let to visitors? How often is it used? Perhaps neighbours could help, but remember not to pry too much!

Moving on to secondary data

Easy, you may say? Everything is available on-line. Well yes, but is this information relevant and, more importantly, is it correct? If in doubt, use official websites. The obvious place to start studying Snowdonia is the Snowdonia National Park Authority website (www.eryri-npa.gov.uk); Gwynedd Council (www.gov.uk) and Conwy County Borough Council (www.gov.uk). Our example is in Gwynedd.

You need to do some detective work to find relevant information, and in order to do this you must consider which information you would like to use. Information on the change in the structure of the settlement (new houses) and data on the population – age, income and work. Data of this kind is a starting point for further research, e.g. is there a correlation between the number of holiday homes and the population, or are other factors responsible?

Are there more children in Beddgelert than in Aberdovey? Information on the change in population in Gwynedd schools is available on-line. In general, the number of young people in Snowdonia is falling. Choropleth maps, like the one shown below from the SNPA website, shows the percentage of people under 15 in Gwynedd. Do the same areas have small schools? Are they agricultural areas? Is there a correlation between a low percentage of children and a high percentage of older people? Further research is needed.

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% Age 0 - 15

- 21 to 24
- 18 to 21
- 15 to 18
- 12 to 15
- 9 to 12
- Statistically invalid
Have more houses been built in Beddgelert? A map of EVERY settlement in Snowdonia is available for the Snowdonia Development Plan 2007 and there are also maps of the same villages from the old Management Plan. You can therefore compare changes in Snowdonia’s villages and towns between 1993 and 2010 from one website, and use the map as a basis for your land use work out in the field. Are there any new houses? The map will not tell you what types – single or five storey – but has Google Street view paid a visit?

The population of Aberdovey is decreasing. Are there older people living there? The population pyramid compares the population of Snowdonia in 1991 and again in 2001. Where have the younger people gone? Who are the older population that took their place and did they come here to retire or to work from home using modern technology? The answer may be found in the 2001 census (www.statistics.gov.uk). You will find specific information on Snowdonia under ‘Key statistics’ and you should find details for every ward on www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk

What changes will occur in the future?

The Welsh Assembly has carried out studies on the population of the National Parks. It predicts that the population of Snowdonia will increase, specifically the number of older people, from 5,600 over 65 in 2006 to 7,700 in 2031. This is an increase of 35.7% in this age group, while the number of under 16s will decrease by 23.5% in the same period. Why? People live longer today, and the children of the post-war baby boom will reach pension age. With a smaller number of the population between the ages of 16 and 64, there will be fewer in the area to have children. What effect will this have on the area? This section of the Gwynedd website could help. If you want to see where the greatest change will be in the population in the future, you could study the number of births and deaths in Gwynedd between 2004 and 2008.

This information should be a starting point for your research into “How are rural settlements changing and why?” without doing the work for you. After all, question 3 on the exam paper will ask how YOU carried out the research, from where you obtained the data (remember to be specific – ‘on-line’ will not do), what problems you encountered and how you could improve and go on to do further research. It will not ask how I did the research for you! Good luck.

Useful websites

Gwynedd Website
– including data on births and deaths by ward
– including primary and secondary school populations in Gwynedd

The Welsh Assembly’s forecast of the population of Wales’ National Parks – in English only. An updated article published January 2011
http://wales.gov.uk/topics/statistics/headlines/population2010 /100329/?skip=1&lang=cy

Neighbourhood Statistics; the types of data available by ward. For relevant information, type in the name of the ward or the post code
http://neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination/LeadPage.do?pageId=1004&tc=1294049598697&a=3&b=6176 586&cc=Bala&d=14&e=16&f=618&g=4132448&i=1001x1003x10 04x1005&d=121&o=1&m=0&r=1&sa=1294049598697&enc=1

From the 2001 census website link to the key statistics; some are specific to Snowdonia, others are for individual Authorities / local councils.

Snowdonia Website
Data and park profile available at www.eryri-npa.gov.uk under Education
Maps of the old Snowdonia management plan (dating back to 1993)
Maps of the new Snowdonia management plan, to compare the changes
http://www.eryri-npa.gov.uk/cym/planning/its-your-future- have-your-say/local-development-plan-inset-maps