

POWER ON TOUR: ENERGY FACILITIES AS TOURIST ATTRACTIONS

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More than simply a driving-force of economic development, energy is also fuelling the human imagination. Already in the first World Exhibitions of the end of the 19th century, aimed at showcasing the latest achievements of the Industrial Revolution, energy was given a central place, whether through steam engines or electricity. At that time, manufacturers and inventors were able conveniently to tap into the public's ambivalent reaction, torn between hope and fear, to demystify the risks associated with these new technologies and feed an 'imaginary of progress' (KUNTZ, 2011). After the Second World War, so-called "industrial tourism" arose in order to highlight a rapidly growing economy, protect a declining industrial heritage and provide alternative solutions to the industrial crisis (FALCONER, 2006).

The energy transition is changing our representations of energy infrastructure. With the advent of renewable solutions (wind, solar, marine, biomass, etc.), a whole new energy apparatus starts to appear in our surroundings, sparking new questions, discoveries and controversies. At the



same time, tourism is driven by the constant pursuit of new experiences. It is in the context that the discovery of old and new forms of energy production can meet a growing demand.

This article considers how tourism can be used by energy groups as a public relations tool to promote the company's image, satisfy the public's curiosity and foster a reflection on energy challenges. Thereafter, it shows how renewable energies can become an attraction in regions that wish to highlight their efforts with respect to technological innovation and sustainable development, in order to appeal to tourists, companies and investors, and facilitate the symbolic appropriation of new energy technologies by the local population. The elements developed here are based on fieldwork carried out in 2016 in three European countries: England, France and Switzerland. Our research focused essentially on nuclear power plants and hydroelectric dams, through participant observation and qualitative interviews with tourist guides, visitors and facility managers. We complemented this with analysis of secondary sources such as tourist brochures and related on-line resources.

Tourism as a Communication Tool for Energy Companies

Many nuclear power plants, hydropower dams, wind farms, and even opencast coal mines¹⁹, offer visitor centres and/or guided tours in order to attract school groups, business partners, customers or simply tourists curious about the functioning of an energy facility. Others have even developed a specialist museum, such as the *Electricité de France* (EDF) electricity museum (*Electropolis*) in Mulhouse and its museum of hydro-energy (*Hydrélec*) in the French Alps.

These initiatives fulfil several objectives. A first one concerns the policy of “transparency”, a way to provide a degree of accountability and reassure the

¹⁹ In the Czech Republic, mining companies organise “coal safaris” that take tourists to discover the singular landscape of surface mines, see the impressive machinery, understand the geology as well as the extraction process.



population regarding the potential impacts and risks involved in the company's activities. Another goal is to promote the company's image by highlighting the economic and social benefits created locally or even nationally. In this vein, Bohumil FRANTÁL and Renata URBÁNKOVÁ (2014) have observed, in the Czech Republic, the impacts of what they call "energy tourism" on visitors' perceptions. Their survey of 300 people in three different locations (a wind farm, a visitor centre and an opencast coal mine), concluded that 36% came out of the visit with a "more positive" opinion about the energy source in question, and only 1% came out with a "more negative" opinion. This case study suggests that tourism can be an efficient promotion tool, particularly welcome in the current context where energy markets tend to be more and more competitive because of market liberalisation, diversification of energy technologies and new business models. Visits can therefore be considered as a new type of "experiential marketing": direct confrontation of visitors with the infrastructure and the energy production process allows them to experience the power and the size of the technology both physically and emotionally.

School groups are another important target audience. In the *Hydrélec* museum (France), for instance, they represent 30% of visitors. For big companies like EDF, the reception of young visitors is part of a broader human resources strategy that aims at promoting engineering professions and anticipating the recruitment of apprentices, interns and young workers. The visits are also an opportunity to raise pupils' awareness about energy issues and sustainable development principles.

Industrial tourism may be used to strengthen relationships with clients, suppliers, investors and political leaders, by complementing business meetings with interactive and recreational activities within the energy plant. Professionals from the industrial sector form a significant share of the visitors. As the manager of the *Hydrélec* museum puts it, "*many engineers project a lot of affectivity on these machines, they like to see them displayed in an aesthetic and creative manner*" (author's translation). The company visits also contribute to



internal communication by offering the opportunity for the workers and their families to participate in cultural and leisure activities in their workplace. Indirectly, the transformation – even temporarily – of an industrial environment into a visitor attraction can have a legitimising effect: the fact that people outside the organisation show interest in their work may increase their self-esteem as workers and their confidence in the company's mission.

Similarly, to cultural sponsorship and corporate social responsibility, “energy tourism” contributes to the building of good neighbourly relations with the local community by displaying openness and commitment to local people.

Energy Heritage as a Feature for Regional Development

In many regions, energy infrastructure may be important for remembrance and heritage, especially for older generations who witnessed the historic and social changes brought up by new energy technologies. In mountain regions, the implementation of hydroelectric dams was synonymous with development and geographic and economic opening up. In declining industrial areas, steam and coal were central elements of the workers' memory and local communities' identity, built around industrial labour. Today, many old energy plants still have a role to play as museums or heritage features²⁰.

Other regions propose specific tours that mix standard tourist attractions with business visits within innovative energy companies in order to promote the region as an economic destination for investors. For instance, the Upper Rhine Valley (along the frontier of France, Germany and Switzerland) offers “Sustainable Visits” that emphasise renewable energies. In Western Portugal, the secretary of tourism put together “*Technology Trails*” that mix tours of high-tech companies with leisure and tourism activities. In Northern England,

²⁰ The European Route of Industrial Heritage (ERIH) – a network of industrial tourism and heritage sites, created in 2000 between several European countries, to spark interest in industrial history and to promote post-industrial regions – contains a themed route especially dedicated to energy heritage. In England alone, 21 sites out of 251 industrial sites concern old power plants (wind mills, water turbines, coal mines, gas – oil – electricity museums, etc.). Source: <http://www.erih.net/european-theme-routes/energy.html>



the “Tynedale Energy Trail” aims at interconnecting decentralised energy units (biomass and small hydropower plants) in a meaningful way in order to increase visibility and raise the local population’s awareness of alternative sources of energy.

JIRICKA et al. (2010) have studied the implementation of “eco-energy regions” labels attributed to European territories that commit to energetic self-sufficiency and renewables. The tourist options include tours of small power plants, recreational and educational energy-related activities (learning pathways, information centres, energy playgrounds, expositions, etc.). These labels are designed to attract not only professionals (*expert-oriented energy tourism*) but also families looking for new tourist experiences (*experience-oriented energy tourism*). For the authors, “energetic tourism” is an opportunity for knowledge-transfer and economic diversification.

In Denmark, anthropologists and renewable energy developers have launched an “*Energy Walk*²¹” to familiarise the local community and visitors with new elements of the landscape (wind and tidal turbines). The tour takes visitors to different sites, accompanied by an audio guide that describes the energy production process in a poetic manner. This unusual initiative has helped the local community, whose traditional economy is based on fishing, to understand and accept these new energies (WINTHEREIK, MAGUIRE, TORNTTOFT, forthcoming).

Conclusion

Energy structures form part of our collective imaginary, our landscape and our history. Although they seem ubiquitous in our daily environment, they remain abstract realities for many people, arousing sometimes admiration, sometimes fear, sometimes indifference. In this context, industrial tourism, has the opportunity to tap into a constantly renewed interest in material culture in

²¹ <http://sand14.com/energy-walk/>



industrial societies. On the one hand, we have seen that tourism can be used as part of public relations and experiential marketing strategies by energy companies. On the other hand, so-called “energy tourism” seems to be much more than just a form of “green washing”, it can help raise awareness about energy issues and develop among visitors a new “energy reflexivity” (BRISEPIERRE, 2011).

As an activity based on representations and sensorial experience, tourism stimulates new understandings of energy landscapes, legitimise new energy systems and help communities to appropriate for themselves (symbolically, and perhaps even economically) an infrastructure until then considered as “alien”. One of the challenges in this area is the coordination of industrial and tourism bodies, as well as the integration of energy sites within traditional tourism circuits. Most of the time, the energy industry is still considered as incompatible with tourist attractions associated with certain conceptions regarding regional “authenticity” and “untouched nature”. Not all territories have clean and innovative energies to put on display for tourism or heritage purposes. As for nuclear power plants, it is understandable in the current context that some tourism authorities remain reluctant to offer them as tourist attraction. In the final analysis, the study of tourism uses of energy infrastructure reveals the many economic interests and power games at stake to enforce legitimate representations of energy.

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