

OPTIMISING GASTRONOMIC HERITAGE IN A PERIPHERAL REGION

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ABSTRACT

Peripheral regions and particularly island peripheral regions have many attractions as tourism destinations, not least their pleasing geographical settings and the sense of renewal which they can inspire. Such regions often face the challenges of seasonality, depletion of population, difficulty of access and infrastructure deficit. The objective of this exploratory study was to develop a model for the enhancement of the tourism product in a peripheral region in Ireland. The work was undertaken in collaboration with the office of Udaras na Gaeltachta in the region. The approach was a) to scope the chosen location in terms of innate assets and unique selling points and b) to determine the interventions required to reformulate, market and manage those assets as an enhanced and sustainable tourism product. Preliminary observations were undertaken on the location regarding facilities, food produce, the landscape, heritage, arts and indigenous crafts, community engagement and the regions diaspora. The results led to the proposal for the enhancement of the tourism product through the promotion of local produce, products, culture and heritage in an innovative, supportive and synergistic environment involving the public, semi-state, private and academic sectors as key actors. The study also brought into focus the key demands of such participants. The format envisages a community centre style model in a co-dependency with external involvement and the stimulation of small scale local enterprise. The concept is based on maximising the latent potential of traditionality in food including any medicinal potential of local produce and on identifying and optimising the reach of cultural products. The model provides for education, research and training and for the operation of a commercial kitchen, a dining facility, food product development and incubator units, a craft workshop, a retail outlet and meeting rooms. The interventions identified to achieve this include the synthesis of expertise based on integrating traditional knowledge with education and research initiatives, local engagement, the attraction of funding and the development of an appropriate model of governance. Such a model is essential in order to

reconcile the sometimes conflicting operating and strategic requirements of the participating sectors and to achieve true synergies. While the study focussed on a specific location the ideas developed are adaptable to the unique profiles of other regions.

Keywords: tourism and food entrepreneurship; knowledge based economy; Udaras na Gaeltachta

INTRODUCTION

This proposal arose from an opportunity extended to the academic sector to participate with the semi-state and private sectors in an initiative to contribute to a sustainable Food and Tourism development in a peripheral region in Ireland.

APPROACH

Observations and discussions were used a) to scope the chosen location in terms of innate assets and unique selling points and b) to determine the interventions required to reformulate, market and manage those assets as an enhanced and sustainable tourism product. On-site preliminary observations were undertaken on the location regarding facilities, food produce, the landscape, the cultural heritage, arts and indigenous crafts, community engagement and the regions diaspora. Feasibility meetings were held with the local enterprise community. These aspects were facilitated by Udaras na Gaeltachta.

OUTCOMES

Innate assets of the Region

There is an evident sense of place and history. The region is much acclaimed, notably in song and story, for its scenic beauty, quality of life and environmental quality. The land is arable with an indented coastline bounded by the Atlantic with sheltered bays and harbours, much rugged and mountainous landscape, raised boglands and a national park (140km²). Tourism makes an important contribution to the local economy. Visitors include returning emigrants and first timers - many of whom become regulars - drawn by the reputation of the region, the natural environment including the national park, the plethora of summer schools, festivals and galleries and the opportunities for activity holidays based on walking, cycling, mountaineering and water based sports.

The region which includes island communities is sparsely populated. There is a tradition of fishing, craftwork and farming which provides raw produce such as mountain lamb, mussels, crab, limpets, mackerel, whitefish, salmon, seaweeds, oats and vegetables such as cabbage and the iconic potato. Traditional food products

include soda bread, potato bread, limpet stew (Bord Bia 2010), champ, colcannon and lamb stew.

Culture

The region is celebrated in Irish culture for its historical figures and events and for its traditions of music, storytelling, writing and dance. While the region is steeped in traditional music and boasts a distinctive fiddle playing style it is also well established in rock and popular music circles through the acclaim of its contemporary performers.

The region encompasses an extensive Gaeltacht area with an Irish College which attracts several hundreds of students during the summer months. In recent years the National University of Ireland Galway established an outreach campus of An tAcadamh na hOllscolaiochta Gaeilge in the region. The region has a strong sense of community with business acumen and experience, a strong commitment to sustainable development and significantly a wealth of local knowledge. As with many peripheral regions there is a tradition of emigration, returning emigrants and a significant diaspora many of whom are well placed to promote the development in and of the area on the international stage.

Access

The region is heavily dependent on road transportation although it is serviced by air through the local Donegal Airport at Carrickfinn and by Eglinton City of Derry Airport both of which provide flights to Dublin and Belfast. Improvements in the national road network have improved access and facilitated trade through the ports and airports in Larne, Belfast and Dublin.

Existing Facilities

A dedicated enterprise facility, owned by Udaras na Gaeltachta, is available in the region adjacent to the local island ferry and the local Irish College. This facility comprises nine areas in the 30 to 35m² range and one smaller area. Two of the larger areas are in partial use from time to time – one as a Restaurant and the other as a Production Kitchen which services the Restaurant and is occasionally used for Training. It had been intended that a third area would operate as an Artisan/Retail outlet, another as a Conference Room with the five remaining spaces being used as Incubator areas. The Restaurant is operated seasonally and is mainly dependent on the activity generated by the local Irish College. The smaller area mentioned is used as a Ticket Office to service the local ferry.

Formulation of a Model for an Integrated Food and Tourism Enterprise

The fundamentals of Food and Tourism synergies derive from considering food and beverage products as elements and expressions of culture just as music, lifestyle, heritage, literature and drama, the sciences, the built environment and sport are also elements and expressions of culture.

It was perceived that any suggested initiative to synergise Food and Tourism in the region must add value to the region while addressing the identified issue of seasonality and that it must be compatible with local tradition, interests and expertise. Based on observation and contextual considerations a model for an Integrated Food and Tourism Enterprise was developed. It was proposed that

- The Integrated Food and Tourism Enterprise will engage in research based high value added food product development, the promotion of local produce-based cuisine and the promotion of traditional crafts together with provision for postgraduate education and training. The theoretical underpinning for this concept reflects the Knowledge Triangle approach engaging actors from the Education, Innovation and Research sectors. The actors identified in this study are the higher education sector incorporating education and research; the state sector; and the business sector incorporating local entrepreneurs and external interests. This approach is necessary to provide the infrastructure and management framework to realise the latent synergies in the innate assets of the region as described above. An appreciation of the trapped value within these elements can only be understood when one contemplates the cost in resources of generating afresh elements such as an unspoiled landscape, a clean environment, local and community knowledge, experience and goodwill. It is not feasible for the individual idea generator or even groups of individuals to access the services/expertise required and coordinate these elements thereby bringing a product from the idea stage to competitive existence in a sophisticated global market.
- The Restaurant and the Kitchen will be used in conjunction with the Conference Room to showcase local produce-based cuisine and innovation. Most of the incubation units will be used for the development of traditional and high value innovative products by strategically selected food entrepreneurs. Priority will be given to innovatory activity in the produce characteristic of the region and will be cognisant of pertinent reviews. For example Bord Bia has referred to Mountain Lamb as Culinary Ireland's best kept secret while the need for regional identification and branding of fish products and product development of marine resources is recognised.
- There will be a dedicated incubation unit for use by an on-site food technologist who will provide support and training regarding ingredient selection, recipe formulation, pricing, use of equipment, packaging, labelling, storage, sensory analysis, food safety and scale-up. It will be necessary to fit out the three completed Units and to complete the two outstanding Units and the Conference/Training Room. Ancillary facilities such as provision for the outdoor storage of gases will be required. Food processing equipment will be

required for preparation, mixing, processing, chilling, freezing and packaging under industry simulated conditions.

- The retail/artisan area will be developed initially as a Craft Display Unit which will be used for exhibition and merchandising and later as a base for strategic innovation such as the contemporisation of traditional design. There is potential for the development of an IT based resource for culture and heritage matters.

Business Support

There was indication that support in the following areas would be considered by Udaras na Gaeltachta under a number of schemes:

Programmes for employment: these are once off revenue grants and could be considered to contribute to employing a centre manager and supporting administration

Capital: to contribute to any on site work required to modify/customise the centre

Feasibility Studies: for individual entrepreneurs to assess their needs and projected viability

Training: for course design

Rental: rental costs offset by subsidy

General Supports: An tUdaras, in addition to providing the specific financial supports outlined here, also provides an extensive range of other essential components for new business namely such as expert advice and introduction to other organisations.

Management and Governance

The proposed development would require funding, provision for Project Management, Facilities Management and Strategic Development and availability of Administrative and Technical Support.

The proposed Integrated Food and Tourism Enterprise would represent a coming together of the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), Udaras na Gaeltachta and at least one private sector partner. The management of the overall centre with its various units would be the responsibility of DIT. The day to day operation of the Enterprise Units both production and retail, would be the responsibility of the private sector partner. The governance, management and financial package were designed to address the reality that the partners would each have their respective missions and time horizons not all of which necessarily coincide.

Higher Education Institutions such as DIT have as an integral part of their mission engagement with industry and service to the community. Participation in such a project also creates opportunities for postgraduate research and work placement. In

summary the participation of DIT provides a model which supplies the management skill, the technical knowledge and access to state of the art research and development.

The participation of local partners is an essential component to access the corporate memory of the local community through individuals who have an intimate knowledge of the context of the project and who have the capacity and track record to negotiate the operating environment. This type of experience is crucial to ensure that the concept of research based high value added food product development is nurtured and visible in the marketplace. Likewise maximising the strengths of local expertise, managing the supply chain and negotiating the logistics of deliveries and subsequent distribution of products have a strong dependency on local knowledge.

A very high level of understanding, a mutual trust and a clear shared vision between all parties concerned is essential. The viability of participation of local partners is dependent on their ability to make a margin. The need to make a margin consistently may in the early years of the project create a tension between the macro areas of the project and short term commercial realities.

Udaras na Gaeltachta is the regional authority responsible for the economic, social and cultural development of the Gaeltacht. The policies of An tUdaras have at their core the aim of preserving and promoting the Irish language. The Authority administers the Community Employment Scheme, the Rural Social Scheme, Tús and the Jobs Initiative which are Government funded. Currently the focus is to maintain employment levels of 7,500 (2011 figures) in existing enterprises and reduce the rate of job losses (Udaras na Gaeltachta 2012). A total of 734 new jobs were created in 2011. The food sector, as well as supporting tourism, is one of the areas within their development remit. Funds therefore from an tUdaras to support the Integrated Food and Tourism Enterprise must visibly contribute to the organisations objectives and current priorities.

DISCUSSION

Tourism embraces a wide range of activities in the private and public sectors with a multitude of micro, small and medium sized enterprises and many State owned resources including visitor information centres, museums and heritage attractions, national monuments and parks. The future success of Irish tourism will be determined by how effectively the state, semi-state and private sector actors collaborate. Effective collaborations will also provide a viable platform for a knowledge based economy approach to the development of the Tourism and Food sectors as they interface.

Currently the initiative which was the focus of this study has stalled. There has been partial utilisation of the existing facility but not in the spirit of the original purpose

and context. In this regard there has been direct letting/leasing of some of the facility as a retail service outlet.

The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in its vision document Food Harvest 2020, confirms that the potential for agriculture and fisheries to create employment must extend beyond the strict definition of 'food production' to incorporate products linked to the environment and tourism (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food 2010). Forfas recently published the results of the National Research Prioritisation Exercise on the topic Science, Technology, Innovation: Innovation, Research and Development (Forfas 2012). The Report identified Sustainable Food Production and Processing as one of 14 National Research Priority Areas and has been adopted by Government.

The proposal, in this paper for the synthesis of an Integrated Food and Tourism Enterprise with generic application, to promote local produce and products, in a synergistic environment based on the cultural heritage of food and tourism is in line with Government policy. The proposal is timely with regard to intersectorality and potential for contribution to national recovery and is not intended to replicate existing products or available specialities.

CONCLUSIONS

The original need for the concept still exists – now more than ever. In the intervening years since it was proposed, unemployment has climbed and credit facilities to existing and start-up businesses have severely contracted due to the financial crisis.

It is evident that the identified need for an Integrated Food and Tourism Enterprise has not been met elsewhere in the country notwithstanding that the Government remains committed to innovation and continues to fund research, development and enterprise – albeit at a reduced level.

There is a requirement for a coherent management package which brings together and enables the elements required for the nurturing of high value added Food and Tourism related products by facilitating the realisation of the latent synergies in the inherent assets of regions.

In the future, the key to competitive survival will be in realising the competitive and comparative economic advantages which spring from the innate assets of the country. For a comparatively modest investment there is a rich dividend potential. The question is not can we afford to develop the proposed Integrated Food and Tourism Enterprise in the region studied but rather can we afford not to?

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