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## COMMUNITY TOURISM GROUPS: DEVELOPMENT FOR SUSTAINABILITY

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### ABSTRACT

*Environmental policy in Ireland draws on the principles and priorities set out in the National Sustainable Development Strategy, which was endorsed by Government and published in 1997. It recognises that future development in tourism can be sustainable only if the natural assets upon which they depend are protected. Sustainable tourism aims to meet the needs and aspirations of the host area and its people, holiday makers and operators alike in a way which respects them all and those who will follow on.*

*There are many different government departments and national, regional and local agencies involved directly and indirectly in the promotion and delivery of tourism policies and objectives. There are many community groups and individuals committed to the social and environmental welfare of their localities and communities who are now involved in tourism development as a growing component of economic development.*

*This paper looks at the importance of local community groups who are involved in the development and protection of tourism through both an international and national case study of community based sustainable tourism development. The first case study examines the positive effects of community involvement in tourism planning and development in the Yulong Snow Mountain Region of China. The second case study examines the power behind pressure from local community groups involved in the protection and sustaining of their areas, through the examination of the '10-year saga' of sustainable rural tourism development in the Burren in North Clare.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Tourism has been one of the most significant and consistent growth industries in the world. Among all the 'export industries' tourism represents 25% of the international trade services spending. The World Tourism Organisation (WTO) estimates that tourism is now the worlds' largest industry, having overtaken both crude and petroleum and motor vehicles to become the number one export earner. Tourism is, therefore, seen as a major contributor to global economic development, creating employment and generating wealth on an international scale. (World Tourism Organisation, 1996)

Overseas tourist visits to Ireland grew by 7% in 1999 to 5.9 million, the eighth successive year of growth, generating £3 billion in total foreign exchange earnings. In the last decade, in fact, tourist visits have grown by 145% (Bord Failte, 2000). The present key priority for Irish tourism policy makers is to maintain existing growth levels for the period 2000-2006 (Quinn, 2000). The development potential of tourism in the new millennium, undoubtedly, offers significant opportunities for the Irish tourism industry.

Tourism growth predictions indicate that our visitor numbers will surpass 8 million per annum by the year 2006 (McDaid, 2000). This rapid growth of tourism in Ireland has brought an increased awareness of the dependence of tourism on the environment and of the importance of sustainable tourism. Signs of congestion in certain specific locations are becoming more evident. but so as. In order to preserve, however, the unique characteristics of Irish tourism, proper management of increasing numbers is necessary. (McDaid, 2000) If poorly planned, developed or managed, tourism can have a number of damaging impacts at local, national and international level.

Two examples of poorly planned developments that had a number of impacts at local and national level are the planned visitors centre in Luggala, County Wicklow, which An Bord Pleanala rejected permission for development, and the centre at Mullaghmore in County Clare.. This example of Mullaghmore will be examined more closely later in the paper.

The influence of travel and tourism on a community is significant. Most obviously tourists bring revenue. However, how this revenue is attracted and the people who reap the benefits vary greatly. The way the money is spent and how it is reinvested also varies. Clearly the components of the tourist destination can be effective only if careful planning and management deliver a sustainable tourism product. (Cooper et al, 1993, 86) The environment has an intrinsic value, which outweighs its value as a tourism asset. Its enjoyment by future generations and its long-term survival must not be prejudiced by short-term considerations. In any location harmony must be sought between the needs of the visitor, the place and the host community. In a dynamic world some change is inevitable and change can often be beneficial. Adaptation to change, however, should not be at the expense of any of these principles. (Cooper et al, 1993, 87)

This paper will outline the Irish governments view of sustainability and those parties involved in sustainable development. It will also examine the importance of local communities when planning and developing tourism projects for sustainability. The international example of the Yulong Snow Mountain Region in the People's Republic of China shows us the positive effects of tourism development for a region when all parties are involved from national through to local level and how the community themselves can benefit economically from such a venture.

Alternatively, the national example of the sustainable rural tourism development in the Burren in North Clare clearly shows what goes wrong when the proper planning procedures are not adhered to. In April 1991, the Irish government announced the

establishment of a National Park within the south-west region of the Burren and (without consultation) unveiled plans for an associated interpretative centre which it proposed to locate in the heart of this region, close to Mullaghmore Mountain. While the establishment of the park was generally welcomed, the site chosen by the Office of Public Works (OPW) for the centre gave rise to widespread protest, based primarily on concern for the delicate ecosystem of the area.

### **Sustainable Development**

The Government strategy on sustainable development defines sustainable tourism as tourism which:

Provides a high-quality product based on, and in harmony with a high quality natural environment without adverse impacts on local communities, built heritage, landscapes, habitats or species;

Supports social and economic prosperity while protecting and enhancing the cultural and natural environments. (Department of the Environment, 1997)

Structures to improve the delivery of sustainable tourism should involve the co-operation between national, regional and local agencies and the participation of local communities.

### **National, Regional and Local Agencies**

#### **National**

National groups generally fall under the auspices of the government umbrella network, some being involved in the planning and development of tourism projects. Bord Failte, An Bord Pleanala, Duchas, The Office of Public Works, An Taisce (The National Trust for Ireland), the Heritage Council, LEADER, the Irish Wildlife Federation, Birdwatch Ireland, Friends of the Irish Environment, Irish Peatland Conservation Council etc, are only some of the national bodies involved in sustainable development. Most of these groups have sustainable tourism development and/or conservation of Irish heritage as a key stone to their mission statements.

#### **County**

There has been a development of county strategy groups under the Operational Programme for Local Urban and Rural Development (1994-1999) drawing members from the County Enterprise Boards, LEADER groups, County Tourism Committees and some volunteer groups.

#### **County Development Board (CDB)**

The new County Development Board (CDB) provide an opportunity for the integration of tourism and environment with other sectors. The CDB draws on the traditional Irish concept of 'meitheal' or working together. The CDB brings together the key players at local level, the public sector agencies, the social partners and most importantly, local communities and the voluntary sector to seek common cause in developing their cities and counties. (Dempsey, Department of the Environment and Local Government Publications, 2001)

### **County Tourism Committee (CTC)**

County Tourism Committees were established in 1993 with the aim of planning, developing and promoting the county as a tourism destination. They are formally incorporated into the regional tourism authorities, although most have become somewhat inactive due to lack of funds and or personnel. An example of this can be seen through the Kildare Tourism Committee focusing on Leixlip. Its aims are to promote Leixlip as a prime area to locate new industries and start-up businesses, and as an ideal tourist location and a special place to shop and conduct business.

### **Local**

Policies and objectives cannot be drawn up without the direct involvement of local communities. Area community groups are in the process of being established as part of the County Development Board (CDB) process. These groups should be used to bring together community participants, Udaras na Gaeltachta, representatives of tourism groups and agencies working at local level, as well as representatives of other economic sectors including agriculture, fisheries, aqua-culture, energy, forestry, conservation and others. Such groups would support the work of the CDB working groups. An example of a local community group is the Burren Action Group (BAG).

### **Burren Action Group (BAG)**

BAG evolved as a local response to oppose plans by the Irish National Parks and Wildlife Service to develop a large-scale interpretative centre at Mullaghmore in the Burren, Co. Clare, Ireland.

BAG has consistently argued that visitor facilities should be sited in villages - where there are already existing services and where economic benefits can accrue to the local populations - and not in the sensitive core area of the Burren National Park.

BAG is made up of environmentally conscious people who care for the Burren and have no vested interest. Those involved include local farmers, solicitors, nurses, craft-workers, musicians, teachers, biologists, ecologists, doctors, writers, artists, labourers, homemakers, people without jobs etc., the majority being natives of north Clare.

### **Importance of Local Community Groups: An International Example**

This first case study examines the positive effects of community involvement in tourism planning and development in the Yulong Snow Mountain Region of China. ("Community Based Tourism in the Asia-Pacific" by Michael J. Hutton, 1999).

### ***Yulong Snow Mountain Region***

#### **Location and Attraction**

The Yulong Snow Mountain Area in Yunnan Province is located in the south central portion of the People's Republic of China, immediately south of the Tibet Autonomous Region and Sichuan Province. The area is renowned for its breathtaking mountain scenery, some of the best examples of both North and South China architecture, the first bend in the great Yangzi River, one of the world's deepest gorges, the Naxi culture, numerous Red Hat sect Buddhist monasteries and more. The area includes the historic town of Lijiang, set in a beautiful mountain valley at an altitude of 2,400

metres. Designated as a “National Town of History and Culture”, Lijiang includes both an old town and a new town. The former, known locally as Dayan, is of keen interest to tourists for its narrow, cobbled, criss-crossing streets, gushing canals, well-preserved architecture including classical wooden buildings, and market life. Situated at the foot of Lion Hill, Lijiang reflects 700 years of human habitation.

### **The Development Process**

The Yulong Snow Mountain Tourism Development Area was identified in 1993 as having significant potential for tourism development. Since that time, the provincial Administrative Committee responsible for the area researched and formulated an integrated plan for developing the area. *Most importantly, this plan respects and conserves the physical and cultural environments.* This committee, with strong city representation, retains overall responsibility for the large-scale development and administration of tourist infrastructure and services. In the earlier part of the 1990s, the area was linked regionally and developed through a variety of infrastructure projects that included the construction or improvement of roads, electrical capacity, telecommunications, water supply and sewage disposal. More recently, the emphasis has been on construction of tourist attractions and facilities within the area. Much of this has been accomplished through joint ventures with a variety of companies. This has attracted hundreds of millions of RMB Yuan in capital monies. In 1997, domestic and foreign tourists to Yulong numbered more than 260,000. Currently, 60% of regional tourism expenditures are spent in the Yulong Snow Mountain Tourist Development Area with per capita consumption amounting to some 400 RMB Yuan.<sup>1</sup>

### **Community**

The development and construction associated with the Yulong Area has attracted large capital expenditures and, to date, this has had an important effect on the local economy, including increased employment and income. Before this development, agriculture and animal husbandry were the main source of income for almost all residents. Now, with the advent of tourism, many members of the local communities enjoy increased personal incomes based either on work done directly for companies involved with tourism development or, in other cases, as small business entrepreneurs offering materials and services to these companies. As well, with the increasing number of tourists, there are more and more opportunities to sell products or services directly to visitors. Overall, the result has been increasing income and stronger encouragement for greater community involvement in tourism-related activities. Further, community involvement is strengthened through local representation on the Administrative Committee, including appointment of the Steering Committee Director by the City Government.

### **Sustainability**

In order to continue the development of Yulong Area in an environmentally sound, stable, and sustainable manner, the Steering Committee and local officials ensure all construction respects the principle of balancing development with conservation and that

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<sup>1</sup> 1 EUR = 7.55555 RMBY; 1 RMBY = 0.132353 EUR (<http://www.xe.com/ucc/convert.cgi>)

it is environmentally appropriate and complies with sustainable principles. At the same time, it is critically important that the local communities understand and support the long-term value of sustainable principles.

Before this project, environmental protection was not a priority for many members of the local communities. Too often, forested areas were destroyed for land reclamation, ecologically sensitive sandy areas were indiscriminately misused, and the removal of stones from key tracts created a patchwork effect. All this imposed serious threats to the forests, water and other land resources. Now, with the benefits from tourism apparent, the local communities are obviously, and increasingly, supportive of sustainable development and environmental protection. This outcome has only been made possible by involving the community in the development of tourism and tourism infrastructure, and ensuring they benefit directly.

### **The Future**

Future development must continue to build on the principles of sustainability and community development. So far, the influx of tourists has not had a deleterious effect on the overall natural environment, and there is room for continued growth providing this occurs in a planned and judicious manner. It is critical for future success that the number of tourists does not exceed the carrying capacity of the environment. Similarly, ensuring the local community is directly involved with and benefiting from the tourism activity is fundamental to its purpose.

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### **Importance of Local Community Groups: A National Example**

The second case study examines the power behind pressure from local community groups involved in the protection and sustainability of the Burren in North Clare.

### ***'10-year saga' of Sustainable Rural Tourism Development in the Burren in North Clare***

#### **Location**

The Burren in Co. Clare is one hundred square miles of unparalleled beauty. This limestone landscape is acknowledged as an area of international importance for its flora, fauna and turlough/water ecology. The district around Mullaghmore represents a unique association of limestone pavement and turloughs, which supports a diversity of rare habitats and flora. In 1988, in recognition of its importance, the state Wildlife

Service recommended the designation of the area as a Nature Reserve. In April 1991, the Irish government announced the establishment of a National Park within the south-west region of the Burren and (without consultation) unveiled plans for an interpretative centre, which it proposed to locate in the heart of this region, close to Mullaghmore Mountain. While the National Park was generally welcomed, the site chosen by the Office of Public Works (OPW) for the centre gave rise to widespread protest. Objection was primarily based on concern for the delicate ecosystem of the area.

### **Development and the Community**

Consequently, early in 1991, the Burren Action Group (BAG) was formed to campaign for the relocation of the centre to a suitable site in or near a village on the periphery of the Burren. From such a site, the impact of visitor numbers could be spread over the whole Burren on a year-round basis, to the advantage of visitors, local people and the environment alike.

Support for this viewpoint has been expressed by every environmental organisation in Ireland, including An Taisce (The National Trust for Ireland), the Heritage Council, the Irish Wildlife Federation, Birdwatch Ireland, Friends of the Irish Environment, Irish Peatland Conservation Council, the Mountaineering Council of Ireland, the Irish Federation of Adventure Sports, and Bord Failte. Other concerned individuals included the naturalist and filmmaker, Eamon de Buitlear, the Nobel Prize winning poet, Seamus Heaney, and members of the rock band U2. Internationally, concern has been expressed by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWFN), Plantlife and, most importantly, by the World Conservation Union (IUCN) who sets standards for the operation of National Parks worldwide.

Subsequently, construction of the interpretative centre was halted by successful court actions initiated by BAG. In the process, the group won valuable changes to Irish planning legislation, bringing the OPW under the same planning application system, as that required of every private citizen. In the spring of 1995, a new Government announced that the planning application for the Centre would be withdrawn and that the partially completed development on site would be dismantled.

### **Sustainability**

Work has recently been completed (June 2001) on demolition of the centre and car park at Mullaghmore. One decade after the Mullaghmore controversy first erupted, players from opposing sides met on the site of the ill-fated Mullaghmore interpretative centre to perform the final act in the drama.



Since last February, Government contractors have been busy removing the last remnants of the conflict, demolishing (at a cost of £800,000<sup>2</sup>) the partially completed interpretative centre, car park and sewage treatment works in the shadow of Mullaghmore Mountain. Where the car park and centre once stood, there are now brown fields with grass starting to grow again. Members of the BAG met with representatives of the OPW to ensure the work was being done to their satisfaction. These men, P.J. Curtis and James Howard, were among those protestors who, in 1992, objected to the commencement of the visitors centre on this same site when the first sod was turned by Minister Brendan Daly. Ten years later after a long and hard battle, they witnessed the turning of the 'final sod' and the closing of the final chapter in their successful fight. They say they were "motivated by an almost innocent love of a mountain" in one of the most sensitive areas of the Burren. They fought for the generations to follow to be able to appreciate the area as much as they do. (Deegan, *The Irish Times*, 9/6/2001)

BAG supports the recommendations outlined in the Draft Burren National Park Study, Draft Strategic Plan for Tourism in the Burren Area and the Heritage Council's policy statement on Management of the Burren National Park. All of these recommendations highlight the need to locate visitor and interpretative facilities, away from the fragile core area of the National Park, in or near gateway villages. In accordance with best national and international planning practice; this would allow for concomitant private development (restaurants, craft centres, etc.), while minimising environmental damage, maximising job creation and the socio-economic benefit to the region (<http://www.iol.ie/~burrenag/>).

### **The Future**

At the time, back in November 1992, Government agencies didn't need planning permission for their development, and it seemed inevitable that their plans would surge ahead when in December work commenced on the site. In a bid to prevent it being completed, the action group took to the courts, which resulted in the most fundamental change in Irish planning legislation in 30 years.

One of the members of the Burren Action Group, Leilia Doolan, said, "It is a difficult thing taking on the authority of the state and to stand up and say 'this isn't right, you can do it another way'. Changing the law, bringing the State authorities into line with the rest of the citizens so they would now also have to apply for planning permission was a very important and good thing. One of the other satisfying things is that an awful lot of people are a lot more aware of the countryside through this issue." (Deegan, *The Irish Times*, 9/6/2001)

There already exists an interpretative centre in the village of Kilfenora called the Burren Centre where visitors can explore the geology and geography of the areas, including the rich diversity of Burren flora and fauna and the history of man in his landscape ([http:// www. Shannonireland. travel. ie/ clare/ attractions. asp](http://www.Shannonireland.travel.ie/clare/attractions.asp)). This centre is undergoing refurbishment at the moment.

<sup>2</sup> 1 EUR = 0.787564 IEP; 1 IEP = 1.26974 EUR (<http://www.xe.com/ucc/convert.cgi>)

## Conclusion

At both national and international level there is a need for a coherent policy for sustainable tourism in rural areas, which recognises distinct culture and community structures. It is not realistic to assume that these areas can take the overflow from more congested traditional tourism resorts. Instead tourism should be integrated into the local economy and evolve slowly so that the character and identity of the locality is retained.

Tourism as a rapidly expanding economic sector, has potential to bring significant benefits to rural areas, which was evident from the international case study of the Yulong Snow Mountain Area in the People's Republic of China, but it can also bring damaging impacts, such as those in the Burren. Through an integrated strategy for rural development, involving participation by local communities and the co-ordination of policies by the different economic sectors, those impacts can be minimised and the potential of sustainable tourism can be realised.

More importantly, at a national level the Planning and Development Act 2000 will have major implications. An Bord Pleanála now has responsibility for assessing the numerous major infrastructure projects which are due to be carried out under the National Development Plan. There will also be an onus on the Board to ensure that these procedures are carried out with the greatest speed possible while ensuring that the principles of sustainable development are upheld. Apart from the significant range of new functions, the Act will bring important changes in the operation of the existing planning system including the systematic application of the principles of sustainable development.

## Appendix 1:

The Battle of Mullaghmore

April 1991 - Government plans unveiled for an interpretative centre at Mullaghmore in the Burren National Park;

December 1992 - Planning permission not needed by the Office of Public Works (OPW) and construction work commences on the project;

February 1993 - Work stops after Burren Action Group secures a High Court injunction. The high Court rules it was unconstitutional for the OPW to be exempt from the Planning Acts. Works rendered illegal;

May 1993 - Supreme Court upholds High Court ruling;

January 1994 - Planning application lodged for centre with a 12.5% reduction in size;

February 1995 - Culture Minister Michael D. Higgins withdraws planning application after fall of Fianna Fail - Labour Government;

October 1996 - Revised plan lodged by Higgins for visitor facilities at Mullaghmore;

September 1998 - Clare Co. Council refuses planning permission after a council vote;

October 1998 - Minister Sile DeValera appeals the decision to An Bord Pleanála;

March 2000 - An Bord Pleanála refuses planning permission on a number of grounds;

July 2000 - Burren Action Group secures High Court order to have the Mullaghmore site restored to its original condition;

February 2001 - Machinery prevented from gaining access to site by visitor centre supporters. Blockade lifted after intervention of the Taoiseach Bertie Ahearn. DeValera reveals that exploratory talks have opened with Clare Co. Council to identify alternative site for access to the Burren National Park.

May 2001 - Work is completed on demolition of the centre and car park at Mullaghmore.

A more detailed history of this 'Mullaghmore saga' can be obtained from the following web-site: <http://www.iol.ie/~burrenag/hist72000.html>

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