

Sustainable Tourism Conference - A Community Perspective
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We have seen wonderful presentations today on the big picture in relation to sustainable tourism and on the policies and experiences internationally, which should be the blueprint towards achieving the required balance, between realising the economic benefits of tourism and the conservation and enhancement of the very resources on which the tourism industry in any particular area is built. We have learned about issues of best practice in the industry and how such practices can be transferred and adopted or adapted in other areas. In my opinion however we should not underestimate our own ability to contribute on the issue of best practice and we should at all times be mindful that we can set new standards in developing the type of tourism products which are most appropriate to our own environment and which in turn might be themselves transferable.

The literature describes me as a 'community development expert'. I can only assume that it is the fact that I've been around so long that entitles me to that particular label. In any event I've been involved both in a voluntary and professional capacity in community activity for more than forty years during which time I've observed and I hope contributed to community tourism initiatives mainly but not exclusively in Co. Clare. It is in this context that I've been asked to address you today.

When we think about it tourism as we now know it is a relatively new industry in Ireland. Even at a wider level the whole concept of package holidays that we now take for granted only has its origins in the 1960's. With the economic upturn in Ireland in the late 1950's and 1960's and with Shannon Airport well established the possibility of attracting foreign tourists in large numbers to this part of Ireland became a reality. Shannon Development Company was established as a regional development organisation in 1959 with tourism development as part of its brief. The potential of tourism as a driver of economic growth in Clare was identified from a very early stage and the first network or partnership happened as early as 1961 with the establishment of the Clare Tourist Council, a body which is still going strong to the present day.

Of course there was a tourism industry in Clare for more than a century before that, but the visitors to the county were for the most part Irish, the main attractions being the seaside resorts of Lahinch and Kilkee, the lakeside resort of Killaloe and the Spa town of Lisdoonvarna. Lahinch had the added advantage of being a golf resort. The early make up of the Clare Tourist Council, driven by people like Michael Vaughan, father of the current President of the Irish Hotels Federation, was with people who already had experience in the tourism industry but in the following years individuals and community development groups became members in a collective effort to promote Co. Clare to the wider world.

And what was the origin of the community development organisations referred to? Several can trace their beginning to this period, such as Lisdoonvarna Failte, Ballyvaughan Development Association, Quin Community Council, Tulla Development Association and others. I will confine my history lesson however to my own parish of Corofin to provide an example of what could be and was achieved by voluntary local networks in rural communities in those early years.

Rural development organisations such as Muintir na Tire and the Irish Country Women's Association had done much to enhance the social and economic lot of their members in rural Ireland in the previous decades and in Corofin it was an initiative from the ladies which saw the establishment of the Corofin & District Development Association in 1969. This quickly became a broad based organisation and set as its goals, economic development, improved infrastructure and village enhancement. The group did not set out to become a tourism organisation. However it was clear that Corofin was unlikely to become a base for any manufacturing industry, although there were plans at one time to establish a glove factory, which fell through. Instead much of the early effort was devoted to establishing the area as an angling destination. Corofin village has eleven lakes within a five mile radius and the River Fergus runs through the parish. The area also had an established track record in attracting anglers. During the first half of the 20th century when the big houses in the area, such as Clifden House and Cragmoher House were struggling to survive they promoted angling holidays, especially in England, in an attempt to make ends meet. Clifden House and Lake Inchquin was the setting for Barker's famous publication 'An Angler's Paradise' which helped to attract UK anglers to the area, pre and post, World War 2,. Many photographs survive which reflect on that period.

However the challenge in 1969 was entirely different. How do you go about establishing a tourism industry which will benefit the community as a whole? Firstly there was an issue of accommodation. This led to a need to encourage families to consider setting up guesthouses or bed and breakfast accommodation. It meant providing the training to enable in most cases the woman of the house to run such establishments successfully. I well remember boat-building classes being held in the old schoolhouse in Corofin where I think around 12 wooden angling boats were built over two winters. Many of these boats are still in use today. I referred to the fact that the area around Corofin boasts eleven lakes. At that time however any kind of road access was a major issue. The development organisation took on the role of negotiating with local landowners to buy up strips of land which allowed for new roads to be made and in many cases car-parks provided which opened up these lakes not only for anglers but for other water based activities. And the anglers came. It gradually brought benefits to the area, accommodation providers, local pubs and restaurants, shops, boat hire, ghillies, etc. However angling tourism in Corofin was badly hit by events elsewhere in the mid-70's. The escalating troubles in Northern Ireland impacted greatly on the main UK market. A very good example of this was that a group of around 20 Liverpool policemen who had made an annual fishing trip to Corofin over a six year period no longer came.

By the early '70's however tourism had become a buzzword and it was fast becoming a major contributor to both national and local economies. It had become a priority for the government of the time and Shannon Development Company had been making strides to expand tourism development throughout the mid-West region including Co. Clare. There was an increasing demand for self-catering holidays. Visitors were becoming aware of all that Co. Clare and the west of Ireland had to offer and were happy to be based in one location in order to experience this. Corofin's central location and its proximity to the Burren made it a good choice. Shannon Development launched a promotional campaign to help establish holiday villages in many small towns in the region. This was the advent of the Rent-an-Irish-Cottage scheme.

The first two locations selected to participate in this programme were Corofin and Ballyvaughan. The regional authority realised that the only way that this could happen quickly was by working with the local development organisations in each location. It was up to the local groups to acquire the land on which the cottages would be built and the locals were also expected to contribute towards the cost of each cottage. The number of self-catering units built related directly to the amount of investment that could be raised in the local community. The commitment of the Corofin public to making this project a success is evidenced by the fact that while one cottage scheme was planned for the area the amount contributed locally allowed for two schemes, one of eight cottages on a panoramic site overlooking Inchiquin Lake and a second of six cottages in Corofin village. Similar schemes followed in towns and villages throughout the mid-west and were the forerunner of the many modern self-catering complexes that followed later. The cottage scheme served the area well for the next thirty years but as more modern developments and other options became available they lost some of their appeal. Most are now in private ownership, with many used as holiday homes. As an aside the Corofin development group realised early on that it could enhance the visitor experience by providing an element of cultural entertainment and this led to the setting up of the original Teach Ceoil in the village and the provision of a weekly seisiun of traditional music song and dance during the summer season, something which has been widely adopted and expanded upon in other areas since.

And it was towards culture and heritage that the voluntary group in Corofin next turned its attention. St. Catherine's, the Church of Ireland building in the village which was originally constructed in the early 18th century had been disused for many years and was offered to the local community by the Representative Church Body around 1980 for use for some appropriate activity. There had been a move around that time to provide other experiences for tourists by way of 'visitor attraction's' and it was decided that the church building would be very suitable as a small museum. This led to the establishment of the Clare Heritage Centre in the village providing another piece of tourism infrastructure in the area. It was obvious that this would at best be a seasonal attraction and have minimal prospect of providing employment. It did however ensure the conservation and development of this historic building and while modern visitor attractions have been developed using very sophisticated and high tech methods the museum in Corofin which houses a fine collection of artefacts still continues to attract a sizeable number of visitors each summer. The person most responsible for the establishment of the Heritage Centre and the driving force behind the Corofin & District Development Association at that time was Ignatius Cleary or Naoise as he was known to everyone, the retired school principal in the village. He was also a well-known local historian and an expert on family names and place-names.

In this context he continually received visits and written requests from people wishing to trace their Irish roots. He had collected a sizeable archive of reference material over the years but was aware that the main source of family information was to be found in parish records. He managed to convince the clergy at the time that these records should be indexed and in return he would provide a copy index to each parish. And so over the following years the church records of every parish in Clare and St. Mary's parish in Limerick City pre 1900 were copied and indexed and for the most part computerised.

I changed from being a director of the local development company in 1982 when I was taken on to supervise and manage the recording process and set up a genealogical service for people with Clare roots. FAS the state training agency supported the initiative through the provision of a youth training programme which also saw the recording of gravestone inscriptions from around the county and adding other genealogical resources. The demand for the service grew and space at the museum, where the project was located was limited so it became obvious that a separate centre to house the genealogical research would be needed. We acquired the site of the old garda barrack close by and with assistance from Clare County Council and Shannon Development Company built the new Genealogy Centre which opened in 1988. In a quid pro quo with the Council an adjoining building was constructed housing a new library for the village. The initiative in Corofin attracted the attention of community groups in other parts of Ireland and in a relatively short period of time similar centres sprung up in several counties. This led to the setting up of The Irish Family History Society as a national network on which I served as vice-chair until I parted company with the Heritage & Genealogy Centre in 1992. During my time as manager of the centre I had the opportunity to serve as Chairman of the Clare Tourist Council in 1988 and 1989 and this gave me an appreciation of the collective effort of other businesses, individuals and community groups working throughout Clare to promote the county. During my two-year tenure I initiated a national tourism conference with a view to highlighting new developments, dealing with common issues and raising the profile of tourism in Co. Clare. I'm happy to report that this conference has continued to be held annually by Clare Tourist Council for the past 24 years. The Corofin centre is still very active in dealing with genealogical enquiries and part of the new building now houses an information office for the Burren National Park.

In 1992 I became aware of a new rural development initiative, namely LEADER, being introduced, on a pilot basis in a number of regions around Ireland. In all sixteen areas were selected including Co. Clare. The EU sponsored initiative proposed the concept of bottom-up development, allowing communities and rural dwellers a greater say in determining their futures. It would be delivered on the ground by broadly-based community organisations which would also include representatives from a number of state agencies and elected representatives. It had the added attraction of having funding available to support worthwhile projects which would emerge. I wanted to be part of this and use the experience I had gained over the previous twenty years in community development to assist other communities realise some of their potential. I was also influenced by the fact that the organisation in Clare had at its head Harry Bohan one of Ireland's foremost sociologists and campaigners on rural and community development.

I was fortunate to be one of two development officers taken on to work on the first LEADER programme in the county. The roll out of LEADER in Clare was mainly based on networking and partnerships. Advisory groups were established in all areas of the county which helped identify the potential for development in these areas and plans and strategies were shaped accordingly. Networks of special interest groups, such as craft-workers associations were also set up. The first programme was very flexible with great autonomy given to Rural Resource Development the community company delivering the programme in Clare. Many tourism initiatives were supported. The majority of projects funded in the period 1992 to 1995 were private or individual projects with only around 15% being community initiatives.

This was due to the fact that community structures which I had been familiar with in Corofin were not in place in many parts of the county. Much of the work I and my colleague Patricia Donnellan became involved in at that period was in organising community meetings, often three and four nights each week. These were known as community consultations where local people came together to look at possible development opportunities in their areas under a number of different headings, with rural tourism always being to the fore. The meetings also focused on the structures required for establishing an effective local development or special interest organisation. During the second LEADER programme community projects were on a par with private initiatives and over the last two programmes the majority of LEADER supported projects have been received from the community sector. An obvious drawback to greater community involvement is the fact that such development is dependant on the voluntary effort of the members. An interesting element of the recent LEADER programme saw animation funding made available whereby community initiatives could secure a grant to employ a professional to significantly move a project forward. A similar initiative in any future programme would be most welcome to many community groups.

With the success of the first LEADER initiative the second programme saw LEADER expanded to all of Ireland with the exception of the main urban areas. In Europe the Irish approach was held up as the model for other countries to follow. The fourth programme is now coming to an end and there is some uncertainty as to how future programmes will be delivered. As someone who is no longer involved having retired from LEADER this summer after 21 years I would caution against making any drastic changes. The model of delivery since 1992 has been very successful and effective and has served the county and the country well. I believe that rural tourism in Clare has benefited greatly from LEADER over the past two decades. All areas of the county have been supported in developing new tourism products or expanding existing ones. Local tourism groups and networks have been supported to implement actions which they consider beneficial to their respective areas. The LEADER approach has always been on building on the resources and strengths which each area can offer – I would contend, a sustainable approach.

When it comes down to it what Clare has to offer is a fantastic county with spectacular and contrasting landscapes, a unique environment, an incomparable resource in terms of heritage and culture and a friendly and welcoming people. Everything else is built around that. Clare has the benefit of an international airport at Shannon and boasts some of the top visitor attractions in Ireland including the Cliffs of Moher, Bunratty Castle & Folk Park and Ailwee and Doolin Caves. A partnership approach has always paid dividends in relation to tourism in the county. Where individual community organisations or groups with a specific focus have shown a willingness to act for the benefit of their members support has been forthcoming from the local authorities, from Failte Ireland and from other agencies. We have seen the development of eco-tourism networks in North and West Clare and seen other organisations such as East Clare Tourism, Promote Ennis and Clare Tourism Forum established. We have witnessed the efforts of individual community groups in promoting their areas through festivals and events, through twinning projects and environmental activities including Tidy Towns. We have seen a coming together of food producers and tourism projects to create a new experience for visitors. We have seen the establishment of the Burren National Park.

We have seen new projects based on the culture and heritage of the county. We have seen the old lighthouse on Loop Head opened to the public and seen the Loop Head peninsula declared as the best place to holiday in Ireland. We have seen a big rise in activity holidays with surfing in particular experiencing a huge upsurge in recent years. We have witnessed major development of walking trails within the county. This has been greatly accommodated by the appointment of a Rural Recreation Officer for Clare in 2008. I happen to be chairman of The Burren Way which has seen considerable development in recent years. This summer thanks to financial help from Failte Ireland, the tremendous support of Clare County Council and the co-operation of local landowners we have what we consider one of the best and most spectacular sections of public walking trail in Ireland, from Doolin to Hag's Head via the Cliffs of Moher. Allied to the development of walking trails has been the establishment of walking clubs and the promotion of walking festivals in different locations. A Clare Trails Steering Committee has been in place for a number of years, which was again a first in Ireland. This brings together all of the main stakeholders to plan, develop and promote trails development in the county. Its not all about walking however and currently a canoe trail is being developed on Lough Derg. It's also worth referring to the proposed Wild Atlantic Way driving route from Donegal to Cork part of which will follow the North and West Clare costal route. I believe that this is an initiative to be welcomed. It is important however to ensure that it delivers tangible benefits to the communities along and close to the proposed route and that all potential traffic management issues are addressed in advance.

And finally we have the Burren & Cliffs of Moher Geopark which is responsible for bringing us here today and making us all aware of our responsibilities in relation to sustainable tourism. The Geopark brings a new status to the North Clare area but it also brings with it management responsibilities which we all share. I note that one of the objectives is agreeing a signage plan with local visitor attractions. I don't think anyone could be happy with the current signage situation in the area. I've been aware of the work of Carol Gleeson and her colleagues for a number of years through Burren Connect and have been happy to be part of an advisory committee to the project. There is little need for me to go into detail on what has been achieved as it's all detailed in the Geopark's very informative brochure. Achieving the status of a Geopark is however a major milestone and securing EU Life funding for a five year period is an equally significant achievement. In terms of partnership it is worth noting that while they work with lots of community interests on the ground the project also receives practical and financial support from nine different organisations. I think the Geopark is a major development in North Clare and I wish them well with their endeavours.

And so here we are after fifty years. There have been many ups and downs over that period but in a spirit of working together for the most part we have been about developing a sustainable tourism product. While there is always room for improvement I believe we are moving in the right direction.