

SUMMARY REPORT



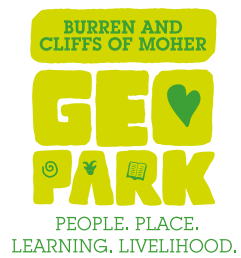
BURREN AND
CLIFFS OF MOHER

GEO
PARK

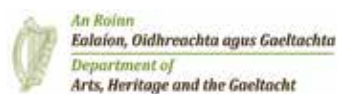
PEOPLE. PLACE.
LEARNING. LIVELIHOOD.



GeoparkLIFE:
Tourism for Conservation



Thank you to the GeoparkLIFE funding partners



GEOPARKLIFE: TOURISM FOR CONSERVATION

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Introduction

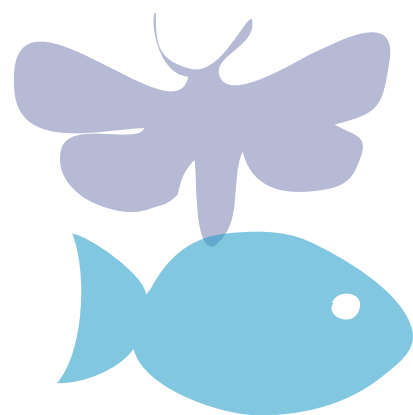
For decades, Ireland has used its landscape and heritage attractions as the cornerstone of its tourism offering. Much of our landscape and heritage attractions have high conservation value and are regulated by EU directives and/or national legislation.

Though the conservation value of these sites is of intrinsic importance to their value as tourism attractions, there is often a lack of or conflict between the tourism and conservation policies that govern their development and management.

The Burren and Cliffs of Moher region of Co. Clare was designated a UNESCO Global Geopark in 2011. The particular personality of the region has evolved through a distinctive combination of geology, ecology, archaeology, agriculture, history, culture, commerce, creativity and community. Just over 5,000 people live in the Geopark. Large areas of the region have been designated by the EU as Special Areas of Conservation and its most significant habitats and species are protected by EU Directives. Approximately 3% of the area is a National Park, the rest of the land is in private ownership. The region has thousands of national archaeological monuments. Several government agencies are tasked with the care and management of the habitats and monuments, of tourism development and farming practices. Clare County Council develops and implements the County Development Plan, which sets out an overall strategy for the proper planning and sustainable development of the county over a 6 year period.

The Burren and Cliffs of Moher region has been a tourism destination since the mid 1800's. Its popularity has grown rapidly in the last few decades. Over 200 kilometres of walking trails have opened up our landscape, habitats, ancient archaeological monuments and cultural features. The Failte Ireland initiative 'The Wild Atlantic Way' has become very popular, very quickly. Alongside these developments there has been a significant growth in coach day trips from urban centres outside of the Geopark to our iconic natural heritage site, the Cliffs of Moher, creating questions around capacity management and direct economic benefit.

The need to protect the environment and to also ensure a prosperous local economy is a balancing act that requires the commitment and participation of many actors and the interplay of many agendas; both local and national. With tourism numbers growing rapidly, it is becoming increasingly necessary to integrate tourism and conservation management to enable the long-term use of our landscape and heritage assets. Successful integration requires the active involvement of local communities, landowners and tourism businesses as well as conservation management agencies.





GeoparkLIFE

GeoparkLIFE (Tourism for Conservation) is a five year funded project under the Policy and Governance strand of the EU LIFE Environment programme. It began in October 2012 and ends in December 2017. The programme was co-funded by Clare County Council, Failte Ireland, the Geological Survey of Ireland, the Office of Public Works, the National Monuments Services, the Heritage Council, University College Dublin, and the National University of Ireland Galway. GeoparkLIFE was managed by Clare County Council and steered by a committee of stakeholders that included the co-funders and representatives of tourism and conservation groups living and working in the Geopark.

The main objective of the programme was to seek ways to reconcile tourism development with the conservation of natural and cultural heritage. This also supports the priority of the European Union to promote the development of sustainable, responsible and high-quality tourism.

This objective was approached in three ways;

- By working with **tourism enterprises** to enhance conservation actions and develop a sustainable approach to tourism.
- By working with tourism and conservation agencies to **manage tourism at sites** of high natural and cultural conservation value.
- By working with agencies, businesses and community groups to **test tourism and conservation policy** on the ground and to **build their skills** in working productively together in conservation management.





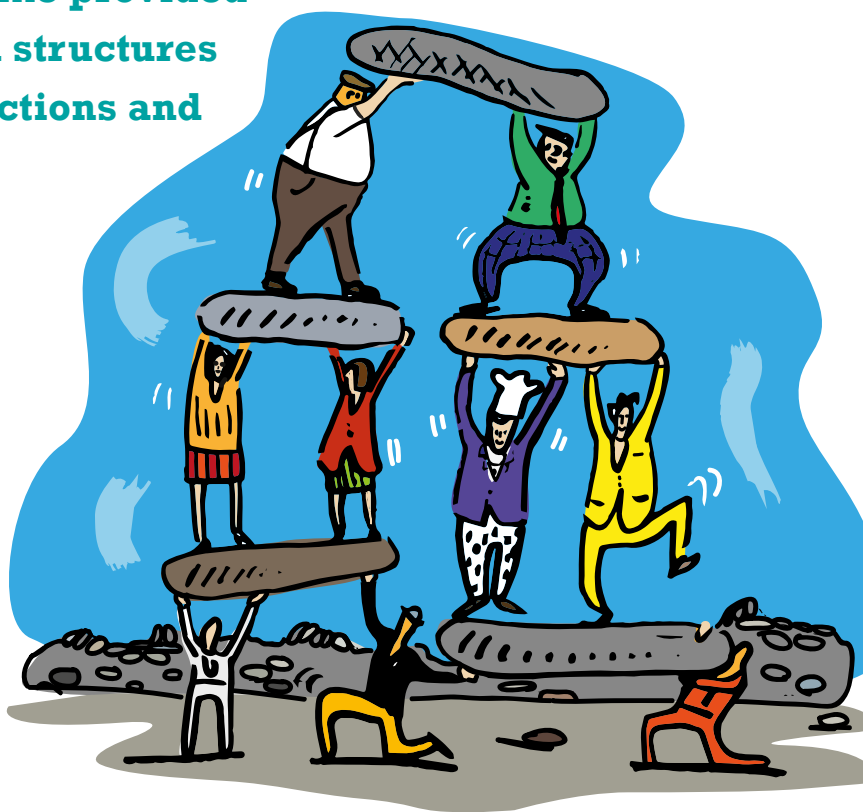
Working together

The active involvement of multiple stakeholders is central to the GeoparkLIFE programme and is espoused by EU and Local Government policies. GeoparkLIFE partnered the state tourism and conservation agencies, Clare County Council and universities with landowners, tourism businesses, schools and community groups.

A code of practice in sustainable tourism was developed with agencies and tourism businesses. Businesses worked together to create food, activity and cultural trails. Site and trails managers worked with tourism to create integrated heritage site management tools. Conservation projects brought agencies, businesses, landowners, schools and community groups together.



This collaboration led to the development of a shared vision, shared platforms, relationships and trust between the participants. The programme provided leadership and facilitation structures and focused on practical actions and measured outcomes.





Tourism enterprises

The people who work in tourism can act as mediators between the visitor, the landscape and the heritage of the area, and as such, can assume a caretaker function. Environmentally and economically sustainable tourism enterprises can play an active role in conserving the environment which ultimately sustains the tourism industry. It's a mutually beneficial exchange. A critical mass of tourism enterprises that actively engage in and endorse sustainable practices will play an important role in maintaining areas of high nature value, and the communities that live in them.

GeoparkLIFE agencies partnered with an existing business network with an interest in sustainable tourism, the Burren Ecotourism Network. Working with a local network of businesses encouraged a collective approach and provided a structure and platform for local businesses. This partnership developed a destination approach, a destination brand and a marketing strategy centred on the Geopark and its sustainable tourism approach..

100 businesses were trained in sustainable practices through GeoparkLIFE. The programme secured the **structure** of the network, to develop **standards** for its collective sustainable practices and to enhance its **economic sustainability** through marketing.

The desired outcome for the network is a strong, independent and economically viable structure. Consultation and research informed the enhancement of its vision, management, membership, roles, functions, contributions and funding. A **Code of Practice for Sustainable Tourism** focuses on the the environmental, social and economic opportunities for businesses in the Geopark. The Code is adaptable to varied types and scales of businesses. It gives a common understanding of sustainable tourism practices to these businesses and can be transferred to other destinations. The Code of Practice actively encourages all tourism businesses in the region to get involved, to start the journey towards sustainability with small steps. The Code then designs a way for businesses to progress to higher levels.

The partnership created a strong destination marketing strategy based on a destination brand rooted in sustainable practice. The Code standards emphasised the delivery of excellent accommodation, food, activities and heritage experiences.





Managing heritage sites

The Geopark contains some of the most highly visible natural and cultural attractions in Ireland, such as the Cliffs of Moher and Poul nabrone Dolmen. It has a wide range of heritage sites and trails that attract thousands of coach and car bound visitors as well as geologists, archaeologists and botanists, historians, spiritualists, hikers and surfers. The ownership of these sites is either private or public, and their management is either nonexistent or quite varied in approach and effectiveness. The aim of GeoparkLIFE was to develop a model of integrated and adaptive site management that can be transferred across a range of sites and circumstances. A 'learning by doing' approach was undertaken based on selected demonstration sites. These demonstration sites are located within the EU Special Areas of Conservation, or are National Monuments and reflected a broad range of location, ownership and visitor use.

The GeoparkLIFE project worked with statutory agencies and private landowners to create **practical ways of collaborating**. This involved sharing of knowledge on existing management policy regulations and the planning procedures involved in the development of sites as visitor attractions.

Research through the GeoparkLIFE project identified a need to obtain **baseline data** that recorded the current condition of natural and cultural heritage sites and the visitor use of these sites. Such data helped develop site specific adaptive management plans that focus on site conservation and an enhanced visitor experience. This initiated a more holistic approach to site management, looking at all of the impacts on a site including visitor behaviour, than was previously applied. The programme also produced a **Heritage Sites and Trails Monitoring App**; a system of monitoring sites and trails that will be used by the agency partners such as the National Parks and Wildlife Service, the Office Of Public Works, and the Rural Recreation Service.

The result is an effective integrated management system that can be transferred to other sites and destinations, an online data collection and sharing system and a monitoring app for sites and trails, all incorporating 'best practice' approaches and practical actions.





Policy and Skills

POLICY has a big influence on how tourism and conservation is managed. GeoparkLIFE investigated tourism and other policies, especially regulatory environmental and conservation policies.

This aspect of the programme was carried out by UCD and was approached in three ways;

- **Mapping** policy; this provides an overview of the range of legislation and policies that are relevant to conservation management and sustainable tourism within the European Union and Council of Europe, national, regional and local levels.
- **Perspectives** of partners on the current policy framework; all the key policy actors were interviewed using a standardized structure and the actions within the programme were valuable learning experiences on policy impacts on the ground. The interviews and actions provided a

range of valuable insights and perspectives on the implementation of explicit, and also less well-defined or implicit policies in the Geopark.

- **Assessment** of the main policy gaps looked to build on the perspectives of project partners and other stakeholders, to focus on policy needs and then to move to a more coherent policy framework.

Comparisons with the management approaches in areas that share similarities with the Geopark were used as best practice approach to implementing an effective policy framework.

SKILLS: EU and local government policies encourage a partnership approach to conserving local heritage. Such partnerships should include a range of local and agency stakeholders. However, it requires skills and resources to help these stakeholders work productively together.

GeoparkLIFE undertook to develop the **skills** base of stakeholders, in working together and in the understanding and management of conservation activities. This was done through a series of practical case studies where participants learned by doing. These case studies looked at policies, procedures and training needs for a range of conservation programmes from increasing biodiversity in the Tidy Towns programme, to community volunteers taking on the conservation of a heritage site, to tourism businesses taking on hedgerow management and assisting landowners to manage visitor impacts on their land, to transition year students engaging in river catchment mapping research in their town, to developing more sustainable transport options in the region, and integrating Leave No Trace more effectively into business practice.

Most of the case studies were built on projects that the participants brought to the GeoparkLIFE programme as activities that they wished to enhance under the programme. Others evolved out of the challenges or needs emerging from other actions in the programme. All of the case studies show how to strengthen positive and progressive activism in conservation management and research. Guidelines and training supports have been developed directly from the 'on the ground' experiences of the participants.





Apps and maps

At the outset of the GeoparkLIFE project there was a lot of anecdotal 'evidence' but an absence of solid baseline data on how tourism was interacting with and impacting on our environment and economy. Reports, surveys, consultations, codes and counters have provided a rounded measurement of the interaction of tourism and conservation in the Geopark.

GeoparkLIFE has produced a number of systems for collecting and sorting the data that is invaluable for the agencies, businesses and voluntary groups involved in the conservation and promotion of tourism destinations of high nature value. Such data is a powerful tool in decision making and planning, in making a case for conservation and/or development, in attracting community and agency support, in sourcing funding and in achieving awards.

The online Code of Practice for Sustainable Tourism measures the levels of resource management (waste, water, energy) amongst tourism enterprises. It also measures the levels of networking, conservation activity, marketing activity and the economic wellbeing of the businesses.

The Heritage Sites and Trails Monitoring App allows site managers to carry out a range of monitoring tasks and surveys on trails and at heritage sites, it then collates all the data and produces reports that can be acted on.



People counters provide data on visitor numbers and movements at sites. A recently trialled **WiFi system** that delivers site specific interpretation, visitor surveys and directions to the next site shows great potential as a management tool.

The conservation skills **case studies** produce a range of data as well, from the locations and waste weights of community clean ups, to the location of invasive species, to the mapping of river catchment areas, to research and conservation actions with monuments, habitats and cultural traditions.

A central accessible location for all of this data was needed and the solution came from a GeoparkLIFE partner. The Heritage Council selected the Geopark as a pilot destination for their **Heritage Map Viewer Programme**. The programme utilises a Geographic Information System (GIS) which allows for the ongoing input and viewing of multiple reports, research documents and datasets from various sources. The Heritage Map Viewer, by enabling the sourcing and viewing of large amounts of data at destination level, will have significant value to planners and managers. It will also be an excellent source of information for researchers and communities, and a resource for anyone interested in heritage and tourism.

Links to the Code of Practice for Sustainable Tourism, the Heritage Map Viewer and details on the Monitoring App can be found at:

<http://www.burrengeopark.ie/geopark-life/guides-and-toolkits/>



Communicating



The delivery of the GeoparkLIFE programme relied heavily in facilitating face-to-face meetings and regular communication between our diverse groups of stakeholders. The programme developed a method of working and communicating that made real the ideal of **'working together'**.

Steering Committee: The programme was directed by representatives of all of the co-funding agencies and key stakeholder groups from tourism, farming and conservation. This group met twice a year and provided the general direction for the overall programme.

Small working groups: Each of the three main actions was progressed by a small working group of a selection of people who represented the main stakeholder groups affected directly by the action. These groups were co-ordinated and facilitated by the GeoparkLIFE team. It was in these groups trust was built, policy conflicts identified and debated and new ways of co-operating were established. These meetings were backed up by on-site visits, training events and open events where needed and appropriate.

Website: The Burren and Cliffs of Moher Geopark website is the main window for information on the GeoparkLIFE project. The GeoparkLIFE project has a dedicated section on the website www.burrengeopark.ie/geopark-life/ with case studies and publications, research reports and much more available for download or online reading.

Awards: Applying for national and international awards has proven effective at attracting media attention to the GeoparkLIFE programme. Awards have also proven to be highly motivating, enabling the partners to acknowledge and celebrate the work, time, and resources they have committed.

Social media: Social media has been a great way of celebrating the programmes successes, acknowledging its supporters and enabling them to share the story of their success within the programme. Social media has also proved invaluable in reporting on progress to the wider community.





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Newsletters: A regular newsletter communicating the project objectives and progress was circulated widely by email. Public representatives and local community groups were on the mailing list.

Press Releases: Events such as open days, awards events, visits by delegations from other destinations, conferences, etc were promoted in the local press.

Maps & leaflets: These were free promotional literature for visitors which promoted the Geopark and things to do with the Burren Ecotourism Network, and included information on the LIFE programme.

Signage: The programme undertook to amalgamate the various signage at the demonstration sites into one signage type which promoted the LIFE programme and showcased the collective approach to site management.

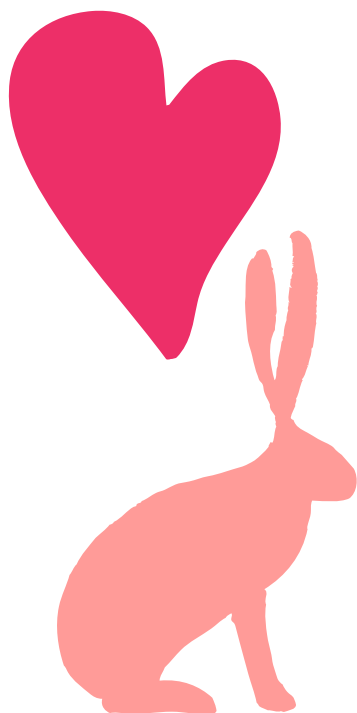
Conferences: Three free public conferences were held in the area which showcased the work of the GeoparkLIFE programme. The presentations and discussions at these conferences were recorded and posted on the project website.



- Newsletters are on our website
www.burrengeopark.ie/the-organisation/newsletter/
- Visitor maps and leaflets are also online:
www.burrengeopark.ie/discover-and-experience/visitor-guides/







Transferring to other destinations

The experiences and outcomes of GeoparkLIFE can provide guidance for tourism destinations where the conservation of high value natural and cultural heritage is a priority. They are models or tool kits that can be adapted and made fit for purpose in other destinations. The adaptation will require resources; GeoparkLIFE was fortunate to have access to funding provided by LIFE and the partner agencies. Destinations may choose to adapt only one of these outcomes at a time, and seek funding to achieve this by utilising a similar financial partnership model.

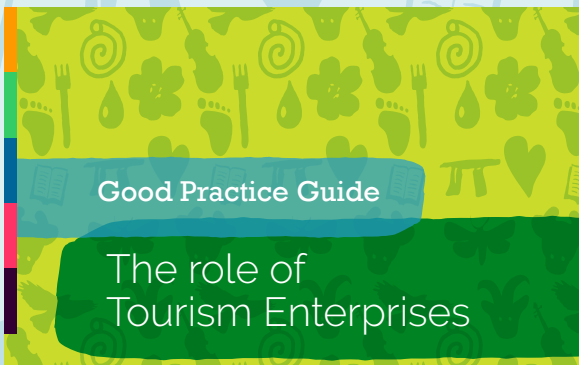
What can be adapted at other destinations

- The Code of Practice for Sustainable Tourism model\ The Heritage Sites and Trails Monitoring App model
- The Heritage Map Viewer model
- Adaptive Integrated Site Management Template
- The GeoparkLIFE Guidelines and Case Studies provide models of management, engagement and communication in sustainable actions with a range of stakeholders. These can be found online at <http://www.burrengeopark.ie/geopark-life/guides-and-toolkits/>

Resources needed

The most effective way to utilise these models is to incorporate them into an existing management structure; be it a local authority, a destination management organisation (such as a UNESCO Global Geopark/World Heritage Site/Man and Biosphere, a National Park etc) or a Local Development Company.

The adaptation and implementation of these models will require management, administration and communication resources. A core and non-negotiable requirement will be the ability to initiate and sustain multiple stakeholder engagement.





What has changed?

The collaborative approach adopted by GeoparkLIFE has strengthened the ability to work together among the regions stakeholders. It has allowed the stakeholders to see each other as partners, to learn from each other, and to share knowledge, expertise and resources. The programme has provided the tools and frameworks that will allow the partnership to continue to work on the balancing of tourism and conservation in the Geopark.

- Tourism Enterprises have developed a strong **destination and networking approach** and have gained in confidence in their businesses and in their ability to promote and care for the destination as a network working with agency partners. The **Code of Practice** has provided a framework, a focus and a practical approach for integrating sustainable tourism and conservation management into their daily operations. The Code and its supporting training programme provides environmental, social and economic gains for the businesses who engage with it.
- **Integrated management tools** like the **Monitoring App**, **The Heritage Map Viewer** and the **Adaptive Management Templates** support the framework of working together and provide heritage site managers and owners with the tools to gather the information needed to make informed decisions on site management and its wider impacts and to monitor the results of these decisions.
- Through practical applications, there is a greater understanding amongst state agencies, businesses and communities of the **role of policy and governance**. There is an increased desire to actively engage in the development of policy where its lack has created unsustainable practices. There is a much greater awareness of the absolute need to integrate conservation and tourism for the long term sustainability of the destination; this is being reflected in the future development plans for tourism in the region.

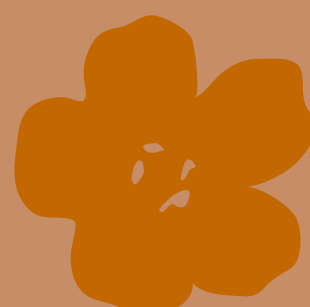






In summary, the gains of GeoparkLIFE are;

- 1** Increased and continuing collaboration, engagement and understanding between state agency and community stakeholders
- 2** A destination approach to sustainable tourism amongst tourism enterprises
- 3** Award winning sustainable tourism products
- 4** A large body of tourism enterprises implementing environmental practices
- 5** A code of practice toolkit that generates environmental, social and economic gains for established and emerging tourism enterprises
- 6** Heritage sites and trails monitoring and data management tools
- 7** Transferrable integrated management plan templates for heritage sites
- 8** Policy and governance proposals for the future management of the Geopark as a sustainable destination.
- 9** The integration of the sustainable tourism approach into the County Development Plan and the upcoming Visitor Experience Development Plan for the Burren & Cliffs of Moher.
- 10** International recognition through a series of prestigious awards.



What is next?

The developments created under the GeoparkLIFE programme will continue. The next few years will see the consolidation of the programme and its integration into the County Development Plan and in the Visitor Development Plan developed by Failte Ireland. The consultation with the partners undertaken by UCD for the policy review has produced three main recommendations regarding the future of GeoparkLIFE.

- 1** The current partnership model involving the active participation of all the relevant agencies involved in heritage conservation and sustainable tourism should be continued and developed.
- 2** A comprehensive, strategic management plan is developed for the Burren and Cliffs of Moher UNESCO Global Geopark, based on the *Guidelines for UNESCO Global Geoparks*.
- 3** The commitment to implementing the management plan for the Burren and Cliffs of Moher UNESCO Global Geopark should be included as an objective into the next iteration of the Clare County Development Plan.

Clare County Council is committed to the implementation of these three recommendations.

The Geopark is also committed to the following:

- Increasing the number of tourism businesses engaging with the Code of Practice for Sustainable Tourism
- Continuing the partnership with the Burren Ecotourism Network
- Continuing with the collection of tourism data and the monitoring of an increased number of natural and cultural sites.
- Maintaining the GeoparkLIFE working group system on site management and supporting the Code of Practice
- Updated the content of the Heritage Map Viewer
- Leading on the sustainable tourism programmes identified in the Failte Ireland Burren & Cliffs of Moher Visitor Experience Plan

GeoparkLIFE was an important phase of a long and complex journey towards the achievement of a destination where tourism and conservation support each other, depend on each other and recognise that neither can flourish without the other.

GeoparkLIFE has strengthened the integration of tourism and heritage. The programme has nurtured the desire, methods, mindsets and environment of genuine partnerships between conservation, economic and social interests and between agencies and local people. The future looks promising.



Acknowledgements:

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phillipmorrison.com

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CLIFFS OF MOHER



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