

Integrated Rural Tourism

End of Project Report no 4934

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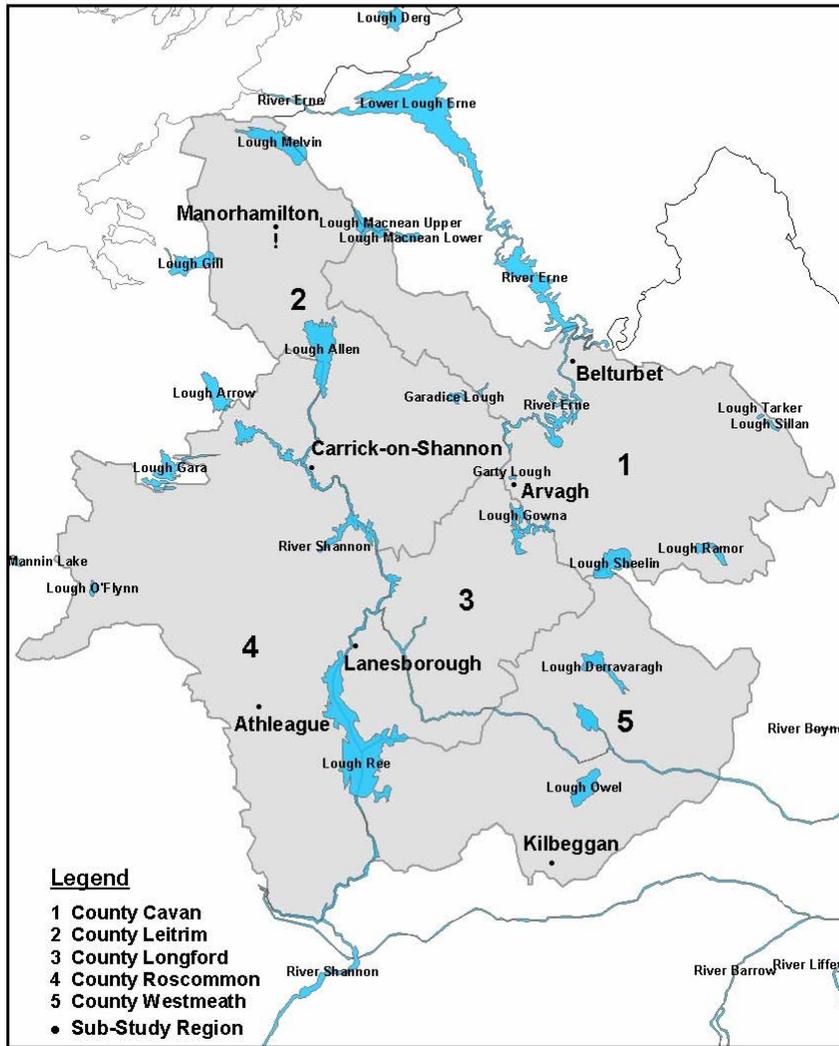
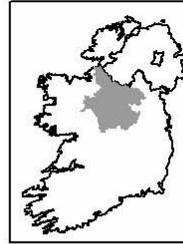
SPRITE was a rural tourism research project, part funded by the EU framework programme, which involved ten partner institutions in six European countries, under the co-ordination of the Institute of Rural Sciences at the University of Wales. Much of the empirical work of the project was conducted in twelve study regions – two per participating country. It was completed during 2004.

The overall aim of the SPRITE project was to analyse and develop the potential for better integrated tourism (IT) in the lagging rural regions of Europe. “Integrated rural tourism” is tourism, which is directly and positively linked to the economic, social, cultural and natural resources in the rural region in which it takes place. It seeks to make optimal use of these resources. It is basically a perspective or an approach to tourism development, which is sensitive to the nature of local resources and traditions and to the opportunities for sharing in the benefits of tourism development.

To achieve its overall aim, SPRITE had five interrelated and mutually supporting research objectives centred on five themes

- consumption, which focused on tourists’ perceptions, requirements, behaviour and interactions with their destination localities
- production, which focused on businesses and resource controllers in tourism localities
- community, which focused on host communities in tourism localities
- institutional, which focused on the local, regional and national institutional structures within which IT operates
- policy, which focused on current policy and available policy options with regard to sustainable IT.

In Ireland work on the project was shared between Rural Economy Research Centre of Teagasc, who held responsibility for the study of one selected region referred to as the North Midland Counties, and the Department of Geography at NUIG, who analysed the Western Region. This report is predominantly concerned with the work done by staff of Rural Economy Research Centre in the North Midland region. (see Figure 1)



Map 1. North Midland Counties: including hydrographical features

Findings

The two Irish regions provide contrasting landscapes and histories of tourism. The North Midland Counties has an extensive network of waterways and its main appeal is to specialist anglers and cruise-boat enthusiasts, while its heritage/cultural resources need to be exploited further to broaden the tourist base. The West region's tourism is based on a scenic coastal and mountainous environment and rich cultural heritage, which are recognised nationally and internationally and which yield a diverse range of tourism products. The West study region is coterminous with a tourism authority region, which provides a unifying structure that facilitates horizontal and vertical networking. The NORTH MIDLAND COUNTIES comprises part of three different tourism authority regions and networking is less cohesive as a result. Both regions share a predominant pattern of local ownership of small-scale tourism businesses and keen appreciation of the need to conserve the quality of the natural environment as a resource for tourism, through stricter control of emerging threats to that quality. Both offer considerable potential to extend the tourist season and distribute tourists more widely through further exploitation of natural and cultural resources.

There was support in both regions for the pro-active promotion of integrated rural tourism, most particularly by incorporating regional and rural tourism more fully into national tourism policy and by closer collaboration among the various stakeholders in the tourism sector.

Key recommendations for the NORTH MIDLAND COUNTIES relate to:

- expanding the tourism base
- developing a common understanding and agenda for the development of integrated tourism in the region, among the various stakeholders involved
- promoting better understanding among providers and facilitators of the role that various agencies and institutions can play in the development of integrated tourism

- facilitating access to relevant agencies through reduction of bureaucratic procedures.

Survey of Tourists : The tourists surveyed in the two Irish study regions were travelling independently as couples or small groups and were seeking types of tourism experiences that aligned closely with the definition of integrated tourism used in the SPRITE project. The physical environment and recreational activities based on that environment were identified by the tourists and the gatekeepers¹ as being the main attractions of both regions, followed by the welcoming attitude of local people, traditional heritage and culture. The NORTH MIDLAND COUNTIES's image is grounded in its extensive waterways, its peace and tranquillity. Repeat visitors were numerous in both regions, reflecting the embeddedness of tourism in the areas. Interaction with local people was reported as being highly valued. More generally, the reported levels of satisfaction with the visit were higher in the West than in the NORTH MIDLAND COUNTIES, where some tourists questioned the quality and range of goods available locally. Some tourists felt that local people in both regions gained in self-confidence from the affirmation associated with their visits. Deficits that tourists and gatekeepers identified as requiring remedial action included an absence or low quality of certain tourist facilities/infrastructure in the NORTH MIDLAND COUNTIES and in the more remote areas of the West (e.g. accommodation, all weather facilities, roads). In both regions, some gatekeepers recommended that greater attention should be given to conserving the natural resources and the traditional way of life and friendliness of the people, as a basis for integrated tourism.

Survey of Tourist Businesses : In both regions a range of types of tourism businesses were surveyed, among which accommodation and leisure-based businesses dominated. Most businesses were based on the local physical environmental resources: e.g. in the NORTH MIDLAND COUNTIES, angling, river boat cruising, walking and cycling. The businesses were predominantly small in scale and family-owned: the owners and staff were usually local (although immigrant entrepreneurship was important in the NORTH

¹ Gatekeepers are defined as providers of information for tourists and include travel agents

MIDLAND COUNTIES), local imagery was used in promotion and inputs were sourced locally. However, both regions were characterised by seasonal tourism and many businesses, particularly in the NORTH MIDLAND COUNTIES, were dependent on other sources of income. The valorisation of local resources associated with tourism related, in the main, to the waterways and angling resources in the NORTH MIDLAND COUNTIES. Whilst less touristically developed, the NORTH MIDLAND COUNTIES has been more successful in integrating local crafts and organic foods, often produced by immigrant entrepreneurs, into the tourism experience. LEADER and other local area partnerships have provided targeted assistance.

Surveys of Resource Controllers and Communities: In the NORTH MIDLAND COUNTIES, many resource controllers were in charge of resources essential for tourism, and perceived as such, but had other uses e.g. forestry. These “indirect” controllers acted independently, and had only informal contacts with tourism networks. Business owners complained of excessive bureaucracy associated with accessing resource controller support. There is a need for greater awareness and understanding of the concept of integrated tourism among resource controllers in the region. Positive attitudes towards tourists, an appreciation of the importance of tourism in the local economy and an interest in the development of integrated tourism were evident in both study regions. In particular, communities were highly supportive of forms of tourism that correspond closely with the concept of ‘integration’, as defined in the SPRITE project: e.g. natural resource and heritage based experiences and small-scale developments that involve local people. They were opposed to large-scale physical developments and those that pose threats to the quality of the environment and to the image of peace and tranquillity that characterise both regions. Community involvement in tourism development and promotion had increased in both regions during the 1990s, with LEADER and other local area partnership support. Support from the INTERREG and PEACE programmes was influential also in the NORTH MIDLAND COUNTIES . There was greater involvement of local communities in tourism initiatives in the NORTH MIDLAND COUNTIES than in the West, where private enterprise was more active. Nevertheless, this involvement in the NORTH MIDLAND COUNTIES, perceived to be difficult to sustain, tended to be

task-oriented and once-off, and more effective harnessing of community effort is necessary.

Networks between communities and tourism businesses were generally strong in both regions but there were individual weaknesses. Only tourism providers and 'established' members of the community were involved in the NORTH MIDLAND COUNTIES region. There was an acceptance that scope existed for increased tourism in the NORTH MIDLAND COUNTIES and for off-peak tourism development in both regions to improve economic sustainability. Conflict was limited and related primarily to use of waterways and land: e.g., between anglers and boat users in the NORTH MIDLAND COUNTIES and between landowners and anglers and walkers in both regions. Several respondents in both regions expressed negative feelings about the anti-social behaviour of some week-end partying groups who engage in alcohol abuse.

Survey of Institutions : Whilst much of the funding is from the state, funds have devolved, through LEADER in both regions and the INTERREG and PEACE programmes in the NORTH MIDLAND COUNTIES. In the past ten years, the number of institutions actively involved in tourism has increased and state tourism institutions, including those involved in training, have modified their role to a more bottom-up approach, dealing directly with communities and stakeholders. LEADER partnerships were viewed by other institutional representatives as playing an important role in funding local tourism development and promotion. Small-scale, locally-driven tourism initiatives that were supportive of environmental quality and cultural sustainability were viewed positively by the institutions in the context of both regions.

Growth in Value of Tourism : The actors in both regions were positive in their evaluation of change in tourism value, since 1992, along the nodes of integration identified in SPRITE, with those in the West region being generally more positive. The resource controllers and host community members in the NORTH MIDLAND COUNTIES seemed to be less conscious of threats to integrated tourism from environmental deterioration and increasing scale than their counterparts in the West. The

vast majority of actors supported a marked increase in the number of tourists who visit the regions for their natural and cultural resources (i.e. specialist tourists). Most also supported a marked increase in the number of non-specialist visitors, although a greater degree of opposition to this development was evident among key institutions in the NORTH MIDLAND COUNTIES where more wished to see the number maintained or decreased.

Policy Perspective : Survey information and discussions with policy personnel in both regions indicated a need: (i) to link tourism development more closely to rural development generally and to build consensus among different interests (e.g. landowners and hill walking enthusiasts); and (ii) to have closer collaboration between local/regional level plans and national target setting. A particular issue here is to give closer attention to areas which have hitherto been marginalised from the main tourism circuits and to focus on the complementarities among different resource uses in differentially located rural areas. The implementation of the recommendations of the national Tourism Policy Review Group 2003 offers scope to incorporate regional and rural tourism development within a national framework. Within the context of the Review Group's plan, rural tourism development needs its own programmes and structures. More basically, it must trade on its own distinctive characteristics, engage all the stakeholders — especially local communities and resource controllers — contribute to economic, environmental and social sustainability and provide for the retention of benefits locally. For this to occur, rural tourism interests need to co-ordinate their own constituency by influencing national policy with a firm voice. In fact, they have moved to establish a national federation of such interests.

Local community involvement was more influential in developing tourist experiences in the less-developed NORTH MIDLAND COUNTIES than in the West where private enterprise was of greater importance. Nevertheless, community actions tended to be task-specific and of limited duration in the NORTH MIDLAND COUNTIES. Greater support by partnerships is required in this context.

Integrative linkages have been promoted by cross-border funding of large-scale tourism infrastructure and other developments in the NORTH MIDLAND COUNTIES: the re-opening of the Erne-Shannon Waterway in 1994 and the promotion of eco-tourism through the Western Development Tourism Programme's 'Green Box' initiative of 2002, which is supported by the Department for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and the Western Development Commission.

The gatekeepers who deal with overseas tourists reported that the niche features of Irish rural tourism, including the high quality service provided in small-scale accommodation properties, and the welcoming attitude of local people, are highly influential in attracting repeat visitors. They recommended that such features should be promoted and protected if the competitive advantage of the regions is to be retained at a time when Ireland is becoming an increasingly expensive tourism destination. ...

Other processes that have promoted integrative linkages in the NORTH MIDLAND COUNTIES arise from the networking between providers, resource controllers, tourists, gatekeepers, host communities and institutions promoted by the re-opening of the Erne-Shannon Waterway, and the introduction of the 'Green Box', 'eco' tourism initiative.

The research highlighted the role of LEADER and other local area partnerships (e.g., County Enterprise Boards) in facilitating local networking and sourcing funding for product development and promotion. Such partnerships have a role of play in encouraging collaboration between smaller businesses in areas where this is absent currently. Networking is necessary to create a critical mass of tourism products that will attract and retain visitors and to promote and market products. The establishment of partnerships between local tourism groups and Chambers of Commerce to encourage greater networking between urban areas and their rural hinterlands, as a means of directing tourists to the latter, deserves to be considered. The Regional Tourism Authorities are increasingly working in partnership with the local authorities and LEADER companies to fund regional and local tourism promotion. In the Border areas

with Northern Ireland, cross-border partnerships are pertinent in the context of tourism promotion in the NORTH MIDLAND COUNTIES.

Recommendations of Required Actions in the NORTH MIDLAND COUNTIES

- better representation of various stakeholder interests, including controllers of natural resources, in regional tourism organisations, by establishing a monitoring group through the County Development Board structure
- more political lobbying by tourism providers and their representatives to heightened awareness of integrated tourism
- better provision of information relating to regional and local tourism numbers by Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland
- raising awareness among local landholders about the benefits to be derived from integrated tourism via the Community Fora and County Tourism Committee structures
- provision of a critical mass of products in local areas, i.e. accommodation, attractions, activities, to attract non-specialist tourists and reduction of over-dependence on anglers, through support of local providers by LEADER and state agencies
- greater compliance by the local authorities with the National Spatial Strategy in the control of developments relating to tourism- touring routes, amenity areas, housing planning and development, and basic tourism infrastructure

Reports Prepared as part of This Project (These reports which cover both Irish study Regions and copies of similar reports prepared for regions studied in the other countries analysed may be consulted in the Rural Economy Research Centre library at Athenry).

Barbara A Hunter, Patrick Commins, Perpetua McDonagh , Mary Cawley, Desmond Gillmor , Michael Keane and Roisin Kelly; *Analytical Review of Resources and Activities* : October 2001.

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Barbara A Hunter, Perpetua McDonagh , Cecilia Hegarty, Patrick Commins Mary Cawley, Desmond Gillmor , Michael Keane and Roisin Kelly; *Businesses and resource Controllers Survey Results and Analysis*. December 2002

Yasmin Rahemtullah, Barbara A Hunter, Patrick Commins, Perpetua McDonagh , Mary Cawley, Desmond Gillmor , Michael Keane and Roisin Kelly, *Host Communities Survey Results and Analysis* March 2003.

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Barbara A Hunter, Patrick Commins, Perpetua McDonagh , Mary Cawley, Desmond Gillmor and Roisin Kelly. *Analytical Syntheses of Survey Results*, March 2004

Barbara A Hunter, Patrick Commins, Perpetua McDonagh , Mary Cawley, Desmond Gillmor and Roisin Kelly : *Resources/Activities Audit*, June 2004

Barbara A Hunter, Patrick Commins, Perpetua McDonagh , Mary Cawley, Desmond Gillmor and Roisin Kelly. *Tourism value Networks*, June 2004

Barbara A Hunter, Yasmin Rahemtullah, Patrick Commins, Perpetua McDonagh , Mary Cawley, Brenda Gallagher, Desmond Gillmor and Roisin Kelly; *Decision Support Systems in Operation*, April 2004

Barbara A Hunter, Patrick Commins, Perpetua McDonagh , Mary Cawley, Desmond Gillmor and Roisin Kelly, *Evaluative Syntheses of Research Findings and Their Operationalisation*, June 2004

Barbara Hunter, Patrick Commins, Perpetua McDonagh, Yasmin Rahemtulla, Cecilia Hegarty, Mary Cawley, Brenda Gallagher, Desmond Gillmor, Michael J. Keane and Róisín Kelly. National Report, June 2004.