

Title: Opportunity Recognition in Tourism: A Study of the Kerry GeoPark

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The concept of geotourism

In 2003, a group of people came together to explore the possibilities of geo-tourism development in the South Kerry area. The Kerry Geopark Management Group was established under the auspices of a local development company, SCC IRD (Sneem, Castlecove and Caherdaniel Integrated Rural Development). Geotourism, a term derived from geology and tourism, enables visitors to gain some knowledge and understanding of geology. Geotourism seeks to use and promote an area's geological heritage, along with other facets of heritage (archaeology, culture, fauna & flora), as a tool for the sustainable development of an area.

The ultimate aim of the management group is to have the park designated as a UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organisation) Geo Park, part of a world network of Geo Parks. There are two other Geoparks in Ireland, the 'Copper Coast' in Waterford and 'Marble Arch Caves', Fermanagh. A Geopark is defined as follows:

A territory with well defined limits that has a large enough surface area for it to serve local economic development. It comprises a certain number of geological heritage sites (on any scale) or a mosaic of geological entities of special scientific importance, rarity or beauty, representative of an area and its geological history, events or processes. It may not solely be of geological significance but also of ecological, archaeological, historical or cultural value (UNESCO, 2004).

The Kerry Geopark comprises an area bordered by Kenmare Bay, and extending inland to the mountains to the north of Tahilla, Sneem, Castlecove and Caherdaniel (see Figure 1). The Kerry Geopark encompasses an area with the highest of conservation ratings. It has features that can be traced back to the ice age. The area is already just as attractive to dedicated geologist as to the casual tourist who simply appreciates the landscape around him. Ten mountain peaks of over 500m reach down to sand and coral beaches via a series of rivers and lakes. There are a multitude of rare and protected plants, animals and birds in the area. The influence of humans on the landscape over the past 6,000 years is evident, shown by the prehistoric copper mines, forts, holy wells, pilgrimage routes, ancient place names, myths and legends. The oldest of rock formations are found in Kerry. One of the most important is the Valentia Island Tetrapod Trackway, discovered in 1993. Consisting of almost 200 foot and tail prints, it is noted as the oldest, and largest of its kind, in the world.

When a GeoPark is set up, there are, in general, three objectives. In the first place, there is conservation of the ecosystems, flora and fauna and landscape protection. Geo-tourism is underpinned by the principle of sustainable development, ‘development which meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Secondly, education, that is, enhancing the public awareness of the value of nature, is an important objective. Heritage is fragile, and once lost, may never be recovered. Therefore the local community plays a key role in conservation. Building a visitor centre which reaches a wide public is one way of optimizing the educational function. A visitor centre, that is equipped for large numbers of visitors, should bring the conservation message across to a large public. Finally, the setting up of a GeoPark should provide local or regional socio-economic benefits.

Industry overview: key factors attracting visitors

In its strategy statement, Fáilte Ireland states:

Tourism is one of the largest and most important components of indigenous industry within the Irish economy. Not alone is tourism a major contributor in generating foreign earnings and sustaining employment, it also plays an important role in developing rural economies and contributing to spatial balance (Fáilte Ireland, 2005, p.5).

Statistics highlight the importance of the tourism industry to the South-West of Ireland (Cork and Kerry). The region is the third most popular destination for domestic holiday makers after Dublin and the Shannon region. There was a 15% increase in the number of Irish people choosing to take their holidays in the Cork-Kerry region in 2006, with the region outperforming the national average of 12%. There was a 19% increase in overseas visitors to the area. This growth has been facilitated by improvements in rail, road and air transport services to the South-West.¹ Farranfore Airport and Cork Airport are important gateways of arrival to the region for European visitors. Statistics from Fáilte Ireland show that the South-West region earned €1,027.9 million in tourist revenue in 2005 which represented an increase of 13% from 2004. It has the largest supply of guesthouses/B&Bs by region, with an estimated 5,086 rooms in 2005.

Brown (2000) describes cultural tourism as a term which means any form of tourism that has ‘as a prime purpose the enjoyment of a cultural experience, whether heritage tourism, performing or visual arts tourism, festival attendance or any other form of arts cultural activity’. The growth in

¹ ‘More Irish people are holidaying in Kerry’, Kathy O’ Sullivan, The Kerryman, Wednesday, April 11, 2007.

cultural tourism may be attributed to greater affluence, more leisure time, greater mobility, increased access to the arts and higher levels of education (Weiler & Hall, 1992). Kneafsey (2000) points to the increasing pace of life and commercialisation of societies to explain the growing interest in traditional Irish music, as people search for ‘true meaning’ and ‘authenticity’. Surveys show that Ireland’s cultural heritage is a magnet for tourists. A survey of holidaymakers in 2005 showed that the primary motivations for choosing Ireland as a holiday destination were as follows:

Table 1: Motivations for Choosing Ireland as a Holiday Destination

Quality of sightseeing	24%
To discover a new destination	20%
To visit friends and relatives	17%
To have a restful/relaxing holiday	12%
To visit country of ancestors	12%
To experience culture/history	11%

Source: Fáilte Ireland, 2005

Consumer research has indicated various segments that hold potential for Irish tourism, and the ‘sight-seers and culture-seekers’ are the largest segment². The key motivations and behaviour characteristics of this segment are: admiring the scenery; sightseeing and visiting historical sites; learning about the country and its culture; experiencing music and the arts.

Kerry has a strong tradition in tourism. Areas such as Killarney, the Ring of Kerry and Dingle are internationally renowned for their outstanding scenery and attract the majority of visitors. The tradition of tourism in these areas has given rise to extensive facility development, i.e. accommodation, restaurants, shops, tours, activities, etc, Kerry is well positioned to meet the needs of the ‘sight-seers and culture-seekers’ segment and is well developed in terms of tourism facilities (see Figure 2). A National Park is located around Killarney and a World Heritage Site, Skellig Michael, is located in the Iveragh Peninsula, one of only two World Heritage Sites in the Republic of Ireland. Kerry is the fifth largest county in Ireland. Kerry has mainly rural communities with the largest centres of population being Tralee and Killarney (see Figure 3). Migration to Kerry became pronounced in the 1980s as people with ‘creative’ skills discovered

² Tourism Product Development Plan 2007-2013

places like the Iveragh and Dingle Peninsulas. They moved to rural and coastal areas for a number of reasons: the natural environment, the promise of a rural idyll and retreat from city living, cheaper housing costs, the opportunity to earn tourism income, exemption of artists from payment of income tax³, the promise of access to high-speed communications infrastructure, i.e., broadband in the Cahirciveen area plays a key role in generating commercial opportunities for people living in remote areas.

Dingle is reputed to be a haven of traditional music and attracts visitors keen to hear live music in traditional Irish pubs. The Cork-Kerry tourism authority has consistently deployed music and sound in its website and promotional campaigns. A survey commissioned by the Economic Review Group (2003) found music was the cultural aspect that visitors were most interested in when visiting Kerry. Pubs were a significant source of night-time entertainment. As in other counties, there are a large number of festivals in Kerry, including the Rose of Tralee/Festival of Kerry, Listowel Writers' Week, Puck Fair, Cahirciveen Celtic Festival of Music and the Arts, Féile na Greine, Féile na Bealtaine, the World Bodhrán Championship, etc. In common with countries throughout the Western world,

Art festivals in Ireland have historically flourished wherever committed enthusiasts have acted to meet an artistic need felt within their place' (Quinn, 2006, p. 291).

The benefits of festivals (O'Sullivan and Jackson, 2002; Brown et al, 2000; Quinn, 2006) are well documented in the literature. They help further community pride, intensify appreciation for a particular art form, attract visitors to an area and multiplier effects resulting from the consumption of food, fuel, accommodation and other services are often very high. Nowadays, festivals and events are estimated to be worth approximately €200m and the sector is regarded as central to tourism development.⁴ In 2005, 144 festivals were supported with grant-aid of €3.4m.⁵ The Arts Council provides subsidies to festivals that have as their objective the promotion of arts at local level, and approximately €5.6 million was provided in 2005 to 56 major festivals.⁶

³ Many artists cannot sustain themselves on income from their work alone. Section 2 of the Finance Bill (1969) empowered the Revenue Commissioners to make a determination that certain artistic works were original and were creative works of artistic and cultural merit. Based on such a determination, income earned by artists, writers, composers and sculptors from the sale of their work is exempt from income tax under certain conditions. Today, top earners no longer benefit from this Artists Exemption Scheme.

⁴ Fáilte Ireland: Supporting Festivals and Cultural Events to Enhance the Tourism Product, 2006.

⁵ Fáilte Ireland Annual Report, 2005.

⁶ Available on line: www.artscouncil.ie.

Drive Tourism

While tourism is a critical to Kerry's economy, the picture in some small villages is quite different. Sneem, Cahirdaniel and Castlecove are three villages that lie on the 'Ring of Kerry', a well known tourism route with outstanding views and prospects. This route attracts a significant number of coach tours every day during peak season. There are so many tour buses that they have to travel one way (anti-clockwise) along the narrow roads of the Iveragh Peninsula's Ring of Kerry. Driving conditions are not ideal and the coaches require a high level of maintenance after a season on the Ring of Kerry.

Package tourism has not greatly helped the local community economically or socially. Killarney and Tralee are designated hubs under the National Development Plan. These towns provide the tourist infrastructure, along with most of the accommodation (commonly known as 'bed-nights'), fuel and other services. According to the local community, the economic benefits from being on the Ring of Kerry are minimal. Coach tours bring negative consequences. The bank holiday weekends result in overcrowding, traffic congestion, and a diminished experience for visitors and locals alike. People who travel to rural areas are predominantly looking for peace and tranquillity in places where they can connect with the local people and the local area. Instead, they are faced with an onslaught of coaches through small villages during peak season⁷. Tourists, on an organized bus trip, only visit the area briefly and tours range from just six days to fourteen days in duration. As a form of mass-market tourism, it has its detractors:

Many tourists are at risk of being carried away on a planned rollercoaster of activities and cannot, or do not, get an opportunity to experience a proper quality of contact with the natives...the package holiday option...where the tourists travel by bus from hotel to hotel and then to what is considered by the tour operator an attractive amenity for the tourist' (Wright and Linehan, 2004, p.44).

There is a schism between national government and their commitment to designated hubs under the National Development Plan (See Figure 4), and the local community, who wish to retain employment, arrest population decline and maintain a good lifestyle for the community and future generations. Coach tours are a vexed issue for some residents. Gains accrue to the coach tour operators and the larger towns, and profits leak out of the community.

⁷ Interview with Mr Nigel Fitzmaurice-Hawker, Director of Kerry Geopark, Tuesday, 29 May, 2007.

The 2006 Census shows that the population in Sneem, Cahirdaniel and Castlecove is declining. Other difficulties to be overcome include the low base of industry and small farms of poor agricultural land. The community's circumstances are not unique. Studies (Hall and Michael, 2007) show that decline in rural residency leads to a reduction in local levels of consumption, and in the face of falling demand, there is a contraction in the provision of infrastructure and services, which further accelerates the loss of social and economic amenity for the remaining rural population. This pattern of social change is ameliorated to some extent by the government programs to support the viability of rural communities (for instance Leader Plus and the Clár Programme provide support for community development projects). Many farms households in the Iveragh Peninsula have diversified away from farming. Bonane Heritage Park and the Gleninchaquin Park, show how the income base of farm households is switching to non-farm income sources. This is leading to the emergence of a community of land managers that is more diverse and more decoupled from agriculture policy support than it has ever been before.

There is a growing recognition that new forms of tourism are required that enhances the sustainability of these communities and that are consistent with their needs and values. Package tourism has been treated as a panacea for rural development. However, this type of tourism has failed to deliver a return to the areas that deliver high aesthetic value. A Visitor Attitudes Survey (2005) by Fáilte Ireland found that only one third of overseas holiday makers hire a car. Other holiday makers are therefore dependent on public transport, private coach tours, walking or cycling if they tour around the country. Public transport, however, has never been a successful means of transport to conservation areas. The conservation areas are usually far removed from train or bus stations. Attempts to set up train or bus connections to conservation areas have generally proven not to be commercially viable. This is to a large extent due to the fact that the visitor wants to make optimal use of his spare time and is generally not prepared to change the freedom and privacy of his car for the hassle of public transport. The car remains the most important means of transport between home and nature.

Second-home or holiday home development has also been regarded as a key factor in reinvigorating rural economies; however, the intrusive nature of the development on the landscape and the low rate of occupancy are causes for concern. As a corollary, locals face difficulty in obtaining planning permission for new homes, which is a vexed issue. Tourism is only one among many possible options that might contribute to a solution for development in rural areas (e.g., creative industries, information technology and manufacturing industries).

Geotourism offers one possibility to revitalise rural growth, but it is a very specific form of activity that will suit the needs of some communities but not others. Geo-tourism is a bottom-up model of development; it envisages that the local communities will be able to exercise greater autonomy and make their own choices about economic growth that are consistent with their values and needs. The rapid growth of the global tourism industry, and the growing preference of travellers to participate in niche markets, has been perceived by the community as an opportunity to develop new products that fits well with their existing resources and needs.

Geotourism and market demand

Geotourism can be seen as ecotourism spread out to embrace everything that distinguishes one destination from another (Tourtellot, 2002). It refers to “Vastness and Pastness”.⁸ Geotourism is a part of an ‘amorphous economy’ (Krugman, 1991) in which it is hard to find any focus. For instance, the entire “rural lifestyle” may be of interest (Kastenholz, 2005) to tourists and commercialized through a range of products and services. This becomes visible with the demand for local food, handicraft products and other items used in the daily life of rural communities and commodified as souvenirs and symbols of the rural world. When using the term “rural resources”, a wide variety of elements are at stake, including agricultural products (ancient and recently produced, alimentary and non-alimentary), landscape resources, natural parks and protected areas, fauna and flora, rivers and lakes, mountains and valleys, rocks and minerals, water resources, cultural heritage (popular architecture, monuments and churches, archeological heritage, traditions, markets, festivities and pilgrimages, theatre, music, dance and poetry), and other elements reflecting the rural way of life (Rodrigues, Rodrigues and Kastenholz, 2007).

What distinguishes geo-tourism from other forms of tourism is not so much the nature of activity so much as the specific psychological and social needs of the visitor, which are focussed on nature, interaction with locals, spending time with family, experiencing local culture and locally produced foods. According to the Director of the GeoPark:

Our mantra is ‘from the visual to the viceral’. We want to encourage visitors to remain longer in the area, to stop, look, listen, feel, really experience nature, wildlife, connect with the local people...to experience awe, wonder, a re-awakening of that connection with the earth...where you lose yourself, sitting on the rocks, watching a sunset, you have lost that sense of being separate and different from nature.

⁸ A line from a poem by Seamus Heaney.

Tourists interested in culture are likely to be mature, better educated and higher income earners than average (Bywater, 1993). Geotourism lend itself better to independent travellers, as well as to organised tours for small-sized groups. Geotourism can be seen as a ‘trip generator’ at two levels:

- (1) Primary generator, where it draws people to a destination because the predominant purpose of their visit is to acquire knowledge of geology and enjoy the landscape.
- (2) Secondary generator, where geology and cultural attractions provide an ancillary activity at a location that induces the visitor to extend their length of stay.

In a feasibility study commissioned by the Kerry GeoPark, a key finding is that the dedicated, hard-core geo-tourists are in the minority and the market for the Kerry Geopark consists mainly of ‘casual geotourists’ and ‘mainstream geotourists’ (see Figure 5). These tourists are generally high-yield tourists, who take the most trips, and spend the most money. They believe that their travel experience is better when they have learned as much as possible about their destination’s customs, geography and culture. They are interested in sampling local recipes and organic foods. They are rarely attracted to large luxury hotels and prefer smaller, comfortable establishments that use local quality crafts or are located in vernacular buildings. They expect to experience the warmth and friendliness of the local community. Many activities undertaken by the Geo-tourist are based around the landscape and seascape.

Planning

Since development within these villages cannot be achieved without the support of the community, meetings were held with individuals and local business, such as B&Bs, landowners, restaurants, etc. These meetings were a means of raising awareness, stimulating and energizing the GeoPark concept and were used to recruit volunteers. Within these meetings, there was debate about how the area should develop. For example, some people felt there potential to convert the large day-trip market arising from coach tours into overnight stays, whereas others felt that the independent traveller should be targeted. Responding to issues of concern was another goal. For instance, locals were concerned that the Geopark designation would restrict planning and that the development of a visitor centre with tea-rooms/café would compete with existing suppliers. Their fears in this regard had to be allayed. A focus group session was held in

October 2003⁹. Turnout to the focus group was high, with 56 participants. There was a high degree of agreement about interpretation themes and the type of projects that should be developed. An interesting finding was that all interpretative material should contain local humour and give a feeling of the uniqueness of the local culture.

Grant aid of €18,500 was obtained from the South Kerry Development Partnership (SKDP). The funding was used to undertake an audit of the heritage resource in the area. A feasibility study was completed in 2004, which had a range of objectives: gaining profound knowledge of local resources and local realities; learning about other Geoparks; drawing on the experience of Irish interpretative centres; assessing interpretative themes for the Kerry GeoPark Visitor Centre; analysing visitor numbers and developing financial projections; developing profiles of the potential final users of the tourism product; assessing new product development and marketing opportunities. Additionally, an action plan for the Geopark was considered relevant in order to consolidate this new tourism product as well as to establish an information and promotion strategy. Another aspect considered vitally important was the provision of training in order to give local citizens the skills for handling walking tours and dealing with geo-tourists. The documents serve as the basis not only for setting up the Geopark, but also for giving direction to promotional activities. The promotional work started with the setting up of a website reachable through the following address: www.geopark.com. A DVD on the geology of the area was prepared. In this way, material for publicity and for enquiries was developed, helping the Geopark to be known as a quality tourism product.

The community was interested in developing a strong identity for the Geopark, and drew inspiration from the FUSHIA brand in West Cork (the Fushia brand was established by the West Cork LEADER programme). West Cork benefits from a distinctive ‘good food’ image and strong regional branding which does much to sell Ireland as a destination for rural tourism (Sage, 2003). The aim of the Management Group is to establish a GeoPark brand, encompassing locally produced foods, arts and crafts, such as smokeries, chocolate, cheese, soap, etc, which should benefit affiliated members (see Figure 6). As regards business models, the GeoPark is also modelling itself on the ‘Midlands Meander’ venture in South Africa, and the ‘Agri-tour’ in Northern Italy. The ‘Geopark’ brand is clearly recognised as an important element in the overall

⁹ The objective of the focus group was to focus on three issues: Interpretation themes and the development of a visitor centre for Geotourism; Management Structures; Actions that should be taken to achieve Geotourism/Geopark

promotion of the area, and an initiative that that offers significant avenues for synergistic cooperation between individual members.

The working group has achieved significant outputs to date:-

2003 – SCC-IRD identifies Geotourism as a future economic driver for the local communities. Initial Evaluation Report commissioned. Delegates attend European Geoparks Network Conference in Crete.

2004 – Feasibility Study “The Kerry GeoPark Report” commissioned. Kerry GeoPark Working Group established. Interpretation Centre opened.

2005 – Research Project with students from Holland; Interpretation Centre developed.

2006 – Agency funding secured for Training; Conference on Innovative Interpretation; Signage; Walks; Attendance at the UNESCO Global Geoparks Conference Belfast. Valentia Island joins Kerry GeoPark; Kerry GeoPark Limited formed; South Kerry GeoFest launched.

2007 – Kerry GeoPark Management Action Plan adopted; Promotional DVD; Conference; South Kerry GeoFest launched.

New Product Development

The role of the working group is to encourage the development of new products¹⁰. Products that are expected to contribute to rural development and revitalise the area are as follows:

- Activity tourism
 - walking trails and a network of trained guides
 - cycling routes
 - drive tourism routes to be promoted during wet weather, interpretative driving tour tapes
 - eco-car rally
 - underwater diving routes

¹⁰ Interview with Mr Nigel Fitzmaurice-Hawker, Director of Kerry Geopark, Tuesday, 29 May, 2007.

- sea-kayaking and other environmentally-friendly, water-based products
- Geo-tourism, research and education
 - field trips for academics, research teams, secondary and third level students
 - research programs
 - Geopark visitor centre
- Cultural tourism
 - arts and crafts trail
 - support for classes (e.g., arts and crafts, Irish language, traditional Irish dance, music, storytelling, writing, etc) and access to a year round, weatherproof, quality product
 - festival tourism and revival of traditional fairs
 - Geofest of Arts, Music, Heritage & Wildlife
- Food tourism
 - GeoPark brand, upgrading and development of the food sector
- Health and fitness
 - thalassotherapy, yoga

Innovation of the recreational product is evident in the development of certain combinations of services and facilities. Packages for the geo-tourist which are under investigation include a walker's package covering (i) transport by minibus from accommodation to the visitor centre, to the Geopark and to the starting point of a walking route; (ii) provisions such as map, information brochure, lunch-pack, etc.; (iii) transport back to accommodation, a boat trip or an arts and craft class in the afternoon (iv) dinner and a music session in the evening. All providers would operate under the 'Geopark' brand and the Geopark website would advertise and take bookings for 'Geopark packages'.

The working group recognizes that walking routes are a resource for the local community and for visitors. The Kerry Way, a long-distance walking route (215 kilometres) in the south of Kerry, is one of thirty three Waymarked Ways in Ireland, which area managed on a day-to-day basis by local volunteers under the authority of the central National Waymarked Ways Advisory Committee (NWWAC). In 2001, Ireland suffered a crisis in the setback of the threat of foot-and-mouth disease. This made locals aware of the importance of the hill-walkers to the local economy. Additionally, the recent patterns in the numbers of tourists visiting Kerry and the rise in numbers of tourist participating in walking (Table 2) suggested that it was timely for further

routes to be developed. While the Kerry Way is one of the most popular trails in Ireland, the lack of designated, short circular walking routes was identified in the feasibility study. The group obtained funding (approximately 50,000€) to develop signage and information panels.

Access to private land is acknowledged to be a big issue in Ireland. Landowners do not allow unrestricted access to their land because of the risk of being sued in the event of an entrant becoming injured. In some cases, users of a route may create difficulties for farming or other work. Landowners also feel that they are entitled to compensation for access, arguing that walking holidays are one of Ireland’s key products and income would have to accrue to someone, be that the walking guide or local B&B. The working group worked with local landowners to promote the benefits of recreational walking and access agreements were sought before routes were put in place. Walking routes can have ecological impacts in natural areas. Typically, these impacts include soil erosion, trail widening, muddiness, vegetation damage and littering (Lynn and Brown, 2002). The working group had to work closely with local authorities and government agencies in order to identify suitable routes, for instance, should they pass through Special Conservation Areas (SACs)? The County Heritage Officer plays a key role in this regard. Furthermore, routes should use existing roads and tracks, reducing the cost of re-routing and preventing environmental damage caused by trampling.¹¹ For environmental and safety reasons, group size should be limited to ten people and should not exceed fifteen. The group had to ensure that the insurance was indemnified by Kerry County Council.

Table 2: The walking product

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Total Overseas Participants in Hiking/ Hillwalking (in thousands)	213	207	168	259	280
Total Overseas Tourists (in thousands)	5,840	5,919	6,178	6,384	6,763
Percentage of Overseas Tourists who Participate in Hiking/Hill-walking	3.6%	3.5%	2.7%	4.1%	4.1%

Source: Fáilte Ireland, 2005.

A ‘Geofest’, a new style of festival aimed at the outdoor enthusiast with an interest in culture and the arts, was launched. The 3-day program of walks, arts, cultural and social events, is designed

¹¹ Interview with Ms Una Cosgrave, Heritage Officer, Kerry County Council, 29 May, 2007.

to celebrate the landscape and the artists of the area. For the first time, local towns and villages in the area worked together to produce a comprehensive programme of events that took place in Sneem, Caherdaniel, Castlecove, Waterville, Ballinskelligs, Knightstown, Valentia Island and Cahersiveen. The Management Group was successful in raising funds from the South Kerry Partnership and from Fáilte Ireland.

Challenges

A great deal of entrepreneurial ingenuity will be required to turn the vision of the working group into a reality. While the work performed to date is undoubtedly a credit to the community, there are a number of challenges that lie ahead. In order to be nominated as a European Geopark, a management plan must be developed for the whole Geopark region in conjunction with all stakeholders (National Universities, FAS, the Geological Survey of Ireland, Kerry County Enterprise Board, Kerry County Council, the South Kerry Development Partnership, the European GeoPark Network, National Parks and Wildlife Service, etc). It is expected that the various “strategic partners” will provide resources and advisory support to the group, and this support will be incorporated into the Management Plan (e.g., service-level agreements). For instance, a ‘glacial map’ of the area is being produced by the Geological Survey of Ireland and a classification of geological resources is being compiled by the University departments of Zoology and Geology. The average time for a Geopark to be fully accredited is between 4 – 6 years. The Director of the Kerry Geopark, in summing up his concerns, explained:

The task is enormous; the different organisations all have their own corporate agendas. Fáilte Ireland has no conception of what we are doing, it hasn’t registered at national level - we’re not under their radar. We need to bring in an expert, someone from UNESCO, the European Geopark Network, who will say - This is a Geopark. These are the accreditation criteria. This is the way it is obtained.

The Geofest initiative is a clear example of multi-stakeholder, public-private networks that are associated with sustainable tourism¹² (Halme, 2001). These networks are used to promote learning and involve many actors, such as tourism and government bodies, academia, business associations, community organisations that have a social remit (i.e., tackling disadvantage). Halme (2001) notes that actors in public-private networks have very different rationales and

¹² Sustainable tourism refers to the maintenance and protection of cultural heritage, the natural environment, community structures or regional economic viability.

mindsets; while this promotes access to a diverse knowledge base, the actors need to be able to create a certain amount of common ground in order to act.

There are a number of barriers to tourism development in the Geopark. These include:-

- Lack of knowledge and understanding of geo-tourism amongst visitors
- A lack of skills and abilities with respect to marketing, tourism product development and management of state funds
- History of competition between agents of supply rather than of co-operation
- Access to funds - the working group are acting as the initiators of the Geopark concept and are responsible for tourism planning, but have no resources other than those that the local community can provide. The cost of developing geo-tourism will involve applying for funding under various EU programmes, Fáilte Ireland, RTA (regional tourism authorities), local development companies such as the South Kerry Development Programme, or high net worth individuals. In many cases, the management group will have to come up with 'matching funds' to secure grants.
- Bad weather and lack of indoor activity facilities

Overcoming the scepticism of key stakeholders was no mean feat. In the words of the Director

In terms of organisational growth and starting out, credibility was an issue...there was a certain deal of cynicism...people fighting amongst themselves, arguing over the bones. Absolutely, credibility is an issue, can be we trusted? Do people have confidence in geotourism?

The GeoPark won a Community Award in 2007 and was also short-listed for the 'Best Emerging Rural Destination' award. Awards are critical in helping the Management Group attract support. However, the project is still in early stages and local residents will need to see a rise in business to be convinced of the project's viability. According to the Director:

We are aspiring to have a global presence and require services that can contribute to that vision in a meaningful way... We have a procurement policy of using local producers wherever possible. We have a huge volunteer input and that is actually a great strength...

Rural tourism destinations have to compete not only with each other, but also with cities, and other countries; this makes the identification of the particular, distinctive features of the 'product'

and the unique experience provided the only possible avenue of success (Novelli *et al*, 2006). Global competitors for 'wildlife' and 'nature' travel include pristine and 'untamed' environments such as Alaska, Antarctica, the Galapagos Islands, the Alps, Zambia, Botswana. For 'culture', competing locations include Egypt, Peru, Honduras, Italy, France, etc. According to Wilson *et al* (2001), successful rural tourism development requires:

- a) attractions: the natural and manmade features both within and adjacent to a community;
- b) promotion: the marketing of a community and of its tourism attractions to potential tourists;
- c) tourism infrastructures: access facilities (roads, airports, trains and buses), water and power services, parking, signs and recreation facilities;
- d) services: lodging, restaurants and the various retail business needed to take care of the tourists' needs; and
- e) hospitality: how tourists are treated by both residents and employees in tourism businesses and attractions.

However, one of the greatest weaknesses of rural tourism businesses has been identified as the individual owners' inability to market their property and associated services (Cai, 2002). In this context, the Geopark network and strategy of joining forces with local partners should permit integrated and improved marketing strategies, reduce the isolation of small rural businesses and enable them to use resources more effectively. For instance, all businesses in the GeoPark could come together to pursue joint advertising possibilities - buy a number of pages at a discounted price in the Aer Lingus Cara in-flight magazine. Lynch *et al* (2000, cited by Morrison *et al*, 2004) summarize the benefits that may result from a network, based on a literature review. These authors classify these benefits into three categories, namely: i) learning and exchange, ii) business activity, iii) community. The Kerry GeoPark promises to deliver benefits (see Table 3) to the local community.

Table 3: Benefits arising from the Kerry Geopark

Business Planning Skills	Development of skills in terms of preparing a feasibility study and a management plan.
Education & Intellectual Access to Heritage	Educating residents about sustainable development and value of the environment. Encouraging locals to police the area, report any illegal activity at heritage sites, and become guardians of the local heritage. Education also helps the local community feel proud of their locality.
Communication with Strategic Partners	Combined strategy of internal and external communication (with local residents, tourism agents, county council, universities, heritage council, Geological Survey of Ireland, associations and local power structures).
Development of new cultural values	Developing a spirit of cooperation
Knowledge Transfer	B&B providers now possess greater knowledge of the walking product; they can provide advice on grades of walks, route safety and access; cater for the needs of hill-walkers in terms of provision of drying areas and packed lunches and suggest alternative activities in bad weather conditions.
Unique identity	The ‘Geo-Brand’ has the capacity of portraying a unique identity which is critical for a competitive destination
More income staying locally	If tourists are offered a series of services (accommodation, restaurant, festivals and walking tours) they tend to stay longer and spend their money in the village and/ or area. Simultaneously the project will foster interest in local products, such as food and handicrafts, the arts and interest in preserving local traditions.
Increases or reinvents a sense of community and pride, use of existing skills	All activities and initiatives help contribute to a stronger sense of community. It was possible to involve local school-children and their teachers in the creation of interpretative materials.
Local sourcing policy and engagement of small enterprises.	It was possible to involve small enterprises (e.g., the strong arts and crafts sector in the creation of interpretative materials) and make them all aware of their relevance in the process.
Extension of visitor season	The activities associated with “GeoPark” attract visitors all year long.
Increased entrepreneurial activity	One of the goals of the project is the development of entrepreneurial ideas and skills in the villages involved. For this purpose, a focus group session was organised and feasibility study developed. Also, discussions with other agents of supply and with the working group help generate new product ideas and alliances.
Intertrading within network	Suppliers within the Network recommend each others’ services.
Enhanced product quality and visitor experience	The designation of “Geo Park” yields the development of a differentiated, quality product, so as to improve the visitor experience. A personalized tourism experience (as opposed to the coach-tour experience) is developed where hosts interact directly with guests, eventually becoming friends and exchanging ideas about the experience and how it could be improved.
More repeat business	Improved quality of the product makes people recommend, and eventually repeat, the experience.

Conclusions

The development of geotourism is gaining in popularity in recent years. However, in order to achieve sustainable development the working group must grapple with many challenges. The competitiveness of the destination is in this context influenced by:

- i) improving the image of the destination,
- ii) preserving the cultural and natural resources,
- iii) achieving a greater penetration of markets,
- iv) developing marketing strategies,
- v) overcoming obstacles and facilitating investment,
- vi) developing new products, improving overall quality of the products and services¹³, and delivering a memorable experience for tourists.

The cooperation of the public and private sector, as well as community involvement in a bottom-up approach, is crucial. The benefits are recognized by the community, which has led them to support this initiative and to actively participate in its development.

¹³ In relation to festival management, quality could refer to producing a festival brochure in a timely fashion, developing contingency plans for bad weather, the risk of 'no-shows' or cancellations.

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Figure 1: Kerry GeoPark: Setting the Boundaries



Figure 2: Tourist Offices and Attractions in Kerry. Source: County Development Board.

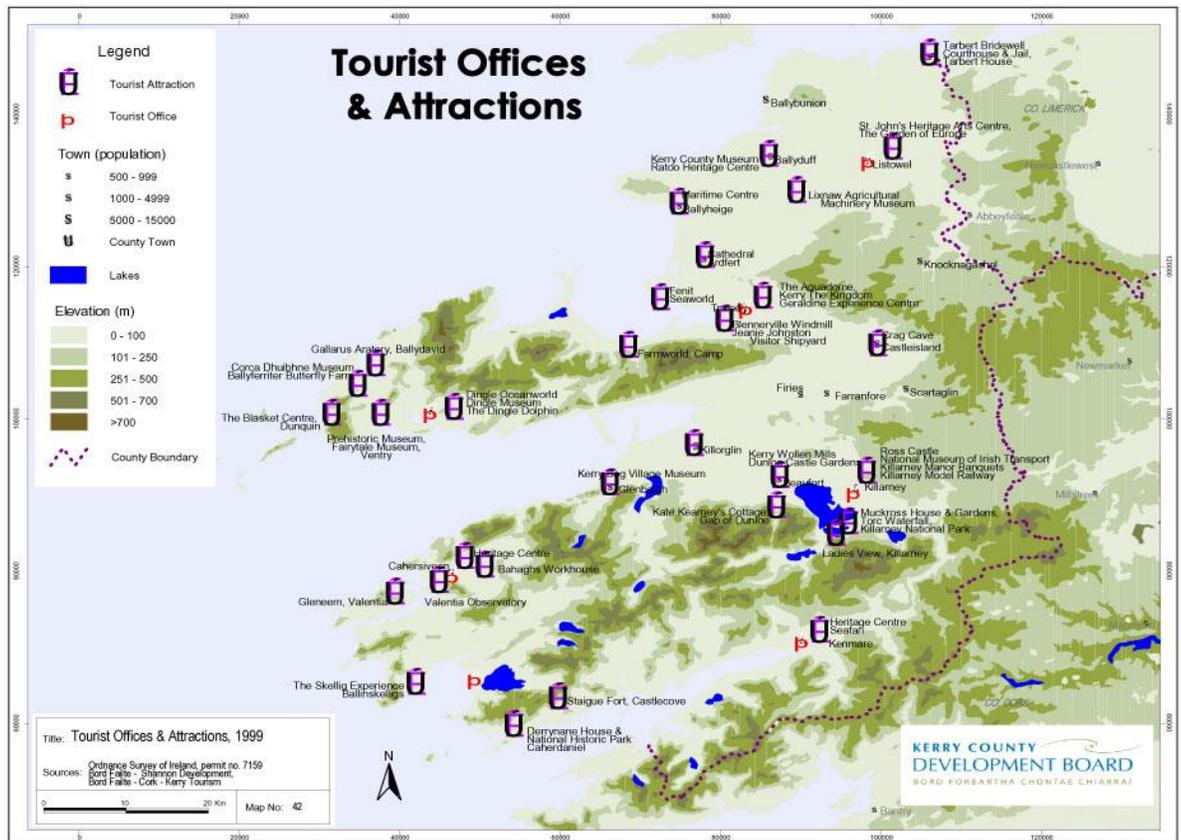


Figure 4: Designated Hubs. Source: National Spatial Strategy (www.irishspatialstrategy.ie)

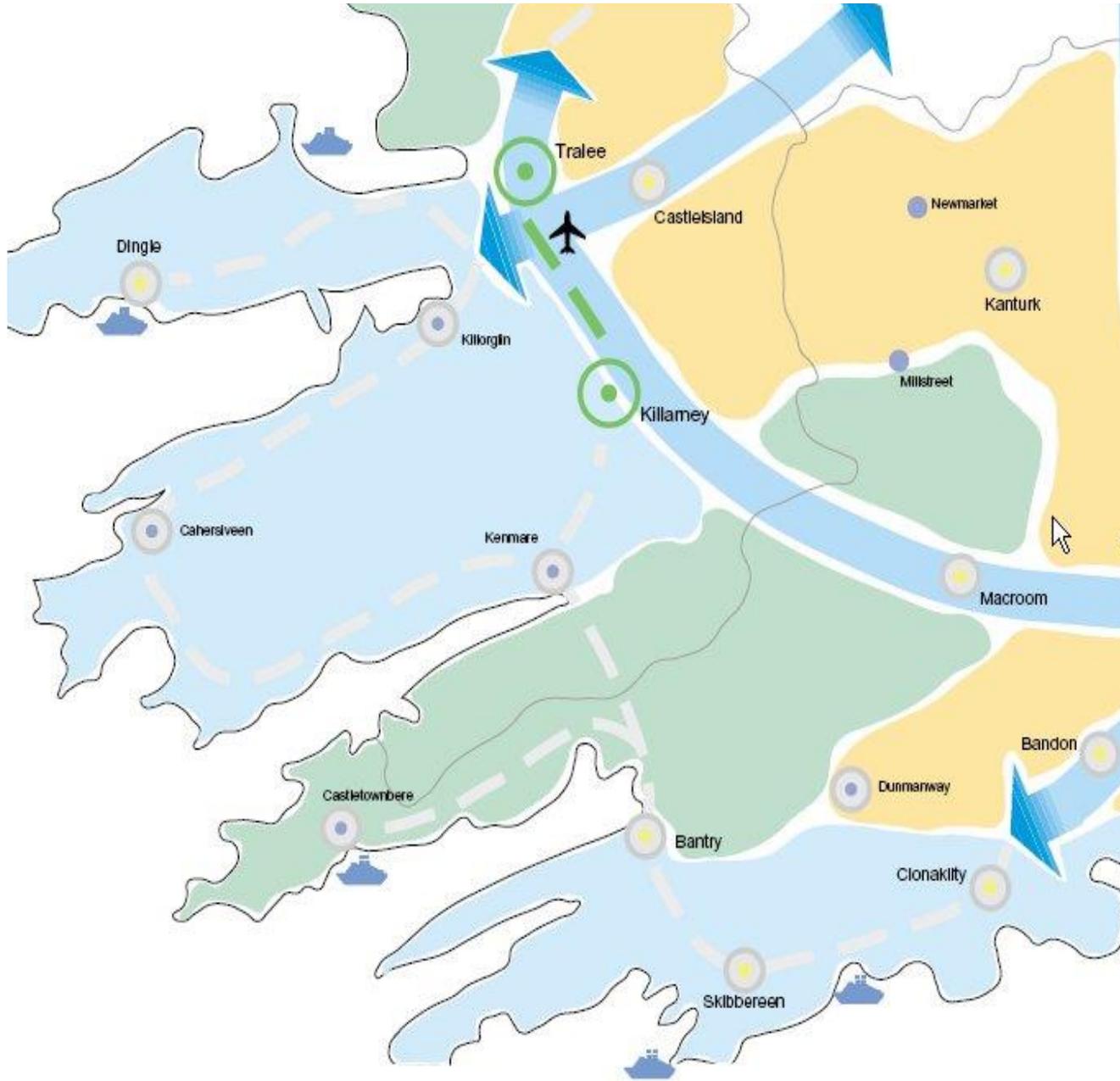


Figure 5: Profile of Key Segments

<p>Profile of mainstream geo-tourist</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Spend some of their holiday time on a particular interest, such as geotourism, without focusing exclusively on it.• A high level of environmental sensitivity• Walking, cycling, visiting nature reserves, attending festivals and events are favoured activities• Generally in the 39-59 age bracket• Usually travel in couples or small family groups with children aged under 14 years• Have high level of education• Have broad travel experience• Are quality conscious• Regularly take holidays outside normal peak periods• Majority are casual arrivals• Tend to travel independently rather than through tour operators or holiday packages• Length of stay is around 7 days or less
<p>Profile of casual geo-tourist</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do not plan their holiday around any one activity• Will experience geo-tourism as part of a broader-based holiday• Usually family groups with young children on annual holiday based in region or day trippers• Will be attracted by the diversity of attractions in a region• Ease of access important• Will have low level of geological knowledge• Adults will visit sites to satisfy their perceived educational needs for the children in the family group• Appreciate interpretative provisions, ‘hands-on’ facilities are welcomed• Only view outdoor interpretative panels for only one minute, three quarters actually ignore or pay scant attention to them• Only wish to pay a moderate entrance fee to visitor attractions• Limit their purchase to inexpensive souvenirs such as postcards, pencils etc., rather than geo-science focussed field guides, maps and books

Figure 6: The GeoPark Brand

