

## RE-EVALUATING A STRATEGIC MODEL FOR TOURISM DESTINATIONS - PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION OF THEORIES AND CONCEPTS

### RE-EVALUACIJA STRATEŠKOG MODELA TURISTIČKE DESTINACIJE – PRAKTIČKA IMPLEMENTACIJA TEORIJE I KONCEPTA

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#### *Abstract*

In this paper we seek to identify what we see as a dysfunctional barrier in the development of environmentally and economically sustainable tourism at a local level. Changing shifts in tourism markets have led to the greater importance of sustainable tourism initiatives, which by their very nature will tend to have a locally oriented concept, as opposed to a national or international concept. Our research used four comparative case-studies to consider the potential advantage of locally focused bottom-up tourism models based on coalitions of key local actors over top-down models based on national or international structures.

#### *Sažetak*

U svom radu nastojimo identificirati ono što smatramo disfunkcionalnim barijerama u razvoju ekološki i ekonomski održivog turizma na lokalnoj razini. Pomaci na turističkom tržištu doveli su do inicijative, da se veća važnost pridaje onim kretanjima koja po svojoj prirodi imaju tendenciju ka lokalnoj orijentaciji, za razliku od nacionalno ili međunarodno usmjerenog koncepta. U našem istraživanju komparativno upotrijebili četiri studije slučaja u kojima je izražena prednost lokalno usmjerenih turističkih modela prema metodi „odozdo prema gore“, odnosno participativnog planiranja, u čijem je temelju koalicija ključnih lokalnih aktera posloženih obrnuto od modela „odozgo prema dolje“ utemeljenom na nacionalnim ili međunarodnim strukturama.

## **1. Introductory comments**

### **1.1 Objective**

In this paper we are seeking to identify what we see as a number of dysfunctional barriers in the development of environmentally and economically sustainable tourism at a local level. Changing shifts in tourism markets have led to the greater importance of sustainable tourism initiatives, which tend to have a locally oriented concept, as opposed to a national or international concept. The challenge of resourcing and managing these destinations has been intensified by a contemporary economic climate with both capital shortages as well as greater demands for value

from tourism clients. This may therefore be an opportune moment in time to seek to re-evaluate the strategic model for those tourism destinations that are based on the development of locally-focused and environmentally sustainable cultural and heritage tourism.

In re-evaluating that model we have identified two important features:

Finding focus - the need to focus on the necessity for tourism destinations to operate on the basis of the bottom-up model, where the target concept is related to:

- growing tourism actions and activity from a local level

- thereafter engaging upwards into regional/national/international levels

Addressing failures - the need to address:

- lack of professionalism and expertise at local levels
- lack of understanding of private sector for the need to contribute towards destination management, both in non-financial and financial way
- lack of satisfactory human capacity to address the issues and resolve them in a strategic and sustainable manner on the local and even regional level sometimes

We are suggesting that the building of strong coalitions of local actors as well as dynamic connectivity with key individuals/institutions on a regional/national level will not only meet the focus on the bottom-up methodology but will satisfactorily address the problematic failures. We suggest that many of the problematic failures are due to the fact that, in general, top-down models tend to suffer from weakened impact, unfocused resourcing and a diffusion of structural energy at the point of local delivery due to the bureaucratic elements present in such models.

This has led us towards the ideal of both Critical Success Factors and Critical Failure Factors in the development of an appropriate model. The factors for success in the model may be seen as:

1. Creating economic regeneration
2. Contributing to regional tourism development
3. Complementing other tourism products
4. Transferability of the model to other destinations and tourism sectors
5. Developing and maintaining sustainable tourism.

Those factors that induce negative results may be seen as:

1. Failure to provide local/regional economic regeneration
2. Failure to contribute to the local/regional tourism model
3. Non-complimentarity with other tourism products
4. Lack of transferability of options, models, techniques and selling points
5. Failure to provide a sustainable tourism concept and product range

## 1.2 Methodology used

In the paper we used a so-called two-level approach. First we used conceptual desk research on local level sustainable & heritage tourism in the context of the above-mentioned success and failure factors. In addition we also performed a detailed literature search on destination management and developmental issues in the relation to the heritage tourism products and its worldwide trends. Theoretical and operational frameworks gained from literature and practical experience of both authors' work in the last 25 years was then studied and checked with the use of three selected case studies in Slovenia and Scotland. Each Case study present its own model and experience on development of heritage tourism and its multi-stakeholder management in the context of particular destination where product was located. Detailed analysis and field research interviews were performed in each of the selected case studies in to collect and elaborate information and data on heritage product and management. This brings us finally to the phase where suggestions of follow-up research models are proposed and discussed in order to continuing research and investigation. Final conclusion and the next steps for action are part of this phase.

## 2. Developing the heritage/cultural tourism market?

### 2.1 Connectivity into the macro-economic and financial environment

We may be able to predict that as a result of the dynamic yet highly negative changes brought about by the international financial crisis from 2008-2010 there may be greater capacity for sustainable heritage and cultural tourism which general operates in the micro and small scale tourism business sector. On one side, the massive credit restrictions of lending institutions have created a highly negative environment for micro/small businesses as a whole. But at the same time, micro/small businesses have a high degree of flexibility and adaptational skills - if they are properly managed and strategically directed. Sustainable heritage and cultural tourism therefore has the ability to position itself in the most appropriate market segments. But as we suggested in the introduction, and in a sense this is the real conundrum, it needs overlaying support from local and regional economic agencies as well as the

development of multi-stakeholder coalitions of public, private and mutually owned partnerships to underpin the ability to be flexible, to grasp new market opportunities and to retain and develop those opportunities.

## 2.2 Multi-stakeholder concepts

In this paper we are advancing the view that one of the beneficial methodologies for growing and developing sustainable tourism (e.g. heritage and cultural tourism at a local level in rural locations) is by adopting a multi-stakeholder approach. This involves a structured sustainable and integrated approach by a core of multiple stakeholders in terms of start-up, implementation and development. The crucial pointers about the multi-stakeholder approach are:

1. Entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial skills, harnessed in a bottom-up model of development, have the potential to make a huge impact on rural and agri-tourist micro-economies at a local community level. The effect in driving wealth creation and expanding employment is measurable in a very tangible and transparent way
2. Furthermore, multi-stakeholder tourism projects benefit the ownership transformation process by forcing public, private, co-operative and social ownership agents and enterprises to work together for common benefit. Because of the bottom up approach the measurable value at an enterprise or agency level is also more tangible and obvious
3. We can also see that by engaging local public agencies, the dimension of environmental planning and protection can be assured. In this way the sustainable nature of tourism and its impact on the local environment can be assessed and given due priority

## 2.3 The failed potential of mutual co-operation in local tourism

One of the major failures of the economic transition process, which assaulted Central and Eastern European economies through 1990-2000, was the continuation of the destruction of co-operative and mutually-owned institutions at a local level in rural environments. Slovenia, renowned as the "land of the co-operators" during the 19<sup>th</sup> century is a prime example of the collapse of that vision of agrarian self-reliance which

agricultural credit and production co-operatives espoused /1/. To a degree, this was:

"due to the fact that in many parts of the private sector, co-operatives are seen as inherently socialist. Yet this is a serious misapprehension given that the origins of Slovenian co-operative and mutual institutions derives from the nineteenth century nationalist-Catholic-agrarian consensus which then could find no distinctive place either in the highly centralist first Yugoslav state nor indeed in the second decentralised Yugoslav state"

For locally-focused tourism activity, mutually-owned or co-operatively owned organisations of entrepreneurs provide a significant methodology for not only mobilising credit inflows, but also providing seriously constructive marketing and promotional power. Unfortunately it is often difficult to encourage individual entrepreneurs to comprehend and understand the value of co-operation within a culture that extols the free market values of competition.

A prime example is the need for small-scale tourism entrepreneurs to develop a promotional mechanism to market their product or service at a national and international level. Individually the costs of such an activity are frequently far too great for micro-enterprises, but they are possible for groups of enterprises. This evidences how an integrated model enables participants to benefit from the totality and complexity of resources and skills held by all stakeholders. Obviously mutuals or co-operatives are not the only structural form of organisation, equally valid are not-for-profit agencies which combine a variety of stakeholders or associations. Mutuals have tended to be a prevalent form (e.g. the Italian confidi model), in part due to the fact that they operate on a one member-one vote principal.

However, we would suggest that mutual-ownership/co-operative models are very appropriate for locally-based tourism operating in the area of cultural heritage. Given that the players are generally micro/small enterprises, collaboration in a tourism co-operative may be meaningful in terms not only of marketing and promotion but also in regard to access to credit facilities. Positioning as mutual loan guarantee societies (or similar entities) could create institutions which on behalf of their small tourism enterprise members,

are able to access and articulate bank credit, venture capital and other forms of financial accessibility which small enterprises on their own are not able to reach.

### 3. Concluding views

As has already been intimated, this paper is very much "work-in-progress". To date we have identified four specific case studies, which have an input into our view of how locally driven destination management organisations engaged in cultural and heritage tourism may operate, develop and flourish. Based on these cases we would suggest the following issues as being worthy of continuing research and investigation:

1. Destination Management Organisations be viewed as critical success factors in promoting, developing and sustaining locally based cultural & heritage tourism. This is due to the fact that a significant level of cultural & heritage tourism derives from peripheral regions which have poor transport and infrastructure facilities
2. Connected to this is the fact that rural tourism by its very nature has significant difficulties in achieving a visible profile without offering a well-defined and potentially unique product.
3. This leads to linking locally focused destination management with city gateway locations
4. We suggest that local cultural & heritage tourism requires a very specific methodology in terms of marketing and promotion. Due to the relatively small scale of the tourism operator base (micro and small scale enterprises) it is undeniable that the only method of promotion and attainment of a visible profile is through multi-agency and co-operative organisations which bring together all the players - whether private, public or not-for-profit. Cases 1 and 3 show how such a methodology can successfully operate; Case 2 shows how the failure to co-operate can create an inability to be visible; Case 4 indicates how a small tourism community can be self-reliant as a first stage, and then dynamiting success to attract support from external agencies

In general, academic papers are not always regarded as a method for promoting changes in practice and the achievement of practical implementation. Such papers may not always

suggest concepts and ideas that may be converted into real practical applications. Tourism is an academic discipline that has a very real potential to integrate theory and practice, to provide a situation where theories can be applied and tested in a real world dimension. From our initial work to date, and from this group of case studies, we suggest that there is a significant scope for connecting academic research and practical implementation in the following areas:

- Assessing the potential for model Destination Management Organisations which combine multi-agency organisations from public, private and not-for-profit sector
- Creating capability models which will assist local cultural and heritage organisations to not only assess carrying capacity, but also to identify gateway opportunities
- Understanding more effective relationships between trans-national agencies (e.g. EU), national government agencies, regional and local authorities in order to mitigate the loss of resources which frequently occur as project funds pass through the top-down system
- Creating strong, identifiable and recognisable local brands through local marketing coalitions
- Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of geographic peripherality

### CASE STUDY 1

#### THE DOLENJSKA & BELA KRAJINA HERITAGE TRAIL EXPERIENCE

The rural case-study presented is one of a region in Slovenia along the border with Croatia, where a twelve year process can be tracked, from the preliminary idea to the operational reality of sustainable international tourism in a strategically-located destination-region.

1. Integrated rural community development project – CRPOV and International Heritage Trail Consultancy

The community development role of CRPOV involved many local village meetings, linked to the economic need for diversification of the rural economy. This background of the CRPOV programme as well as the parallel development in terms of Wine Trails, prompted the Regional Chamber of Commerce of Dolenjska & Bela krajina to accept an invitation by a consortium (which had in 1996 secured European Union funding to launch two pilot projects in Slovenia and Bulgaria) to create Heritage Trails. The consortium included

Ecotourism Ltd. (a British consultancy firm), PRISMA (a Greek consultancy firm) and ECOVAST (The European Council for the Village and Small Town). All of these were supported by regional and national institutions in the field of natural and cultural heritage.

## 2. Material & Methods

The UK/Slovene Heritage Trail team conducted a 'Tourist Resource Inventorisation & selection', based upon natural, built and living cultural heritage resources in the selected region. Some 150 sites were identified and proposed by the different partners involved in the participation process for the Heritage Trail. From this large number, 28 sites were selected, to be networked in a trail system for the area /2/. The idea was to develop a tourist product which was capable of offering opportunities for stays of up to seven days in the region.

## 2. Results

A major result of this work was the creation of a Regional Partnership of 32 organisations, from the public, private and NGO sectors, which signed an agreement to co-operate in the Heritage Trail's implementation phases of marketing and product development. This partnership - working under the umbrella of the Regional Chamber of Commerce - was in operation for 12 years until December 2008, then "transferred" into LAG LEADER partnership which remains a vibrant and robust operating entity /3/. The partnership supports, co-ordinates and brings together the provider-partners. Work in general consists of marketing activities, product development, and training activities, where different combinations of partners, institutions, and individuals are involved.

For marketing purposes, a local commercial partner - Kompas Novo mesto - was invited into the partnership in 2002, in order to articulate a stronger and more effective assault on foreign markets. Kompas was engaged to act as the marketing agency, on behalf of the Heritage Trail partnership. Although the official launch of the product was in 1997, at the World Travel Market in London, followed in 1998 by a presentation at ITB/Tourist Fair in Berlin, there was no significant response. Foreign markets at that time had limited awareness about any Slovene tourist products, other than what can be described as the constantly featured traditional Slovene Tourist icons such as Lake Bled, Kranjska Gora ski resort, Postojna Cave, and Portoroz seaside resort.

The effective commercial launch of the Heritage Trail at an international level, with a foreign tourist industry adviser and a much greater professionally co-ordinated national approach, was delayed until 2002, in London. There, at the World Travel Market, the launch had the active support of the Slovene Tourism Board, together with other relevant institutions.

## 3. Thematic routes – next stage development...

From these well-accepted initial considerations the promoters sought for further development of the product. Their thinking was led by the fact that:

- More than 75% of tourists from foreign markets are seeking active holidays
- More than 50% of the reservations are made by internet
- More tourists want to change the destinations every couple of days, etc.

So, it was found necessary to create a product which:

- May be used by the individual traveller in the same manner as by a tour operator
- Will connect actual tourist offer components in the region
- Will be supported by all new commonly used technologies
- Will support active holidays
- Should be different to other products in the field of active holidays

In 2009 and with financial support of the European Regional fund the promoters of the programme successfully finished the project, which fulfilled all those conditions.

With the project they built a "back-bone" for four main activities hiking, biking, horse riding and rowing in the whole region. The routes were connecting the natural and cultural heritage of the region with other tourist offers, such as accommodation, activities, information, services etc. Wholly digitalised and located by GPS, routes are currently presented in a renewed portal <http://www.slovenia-heritage.net/> and in newly built mobile portal <http://activeslovenia.mobi>. The product is also presented in Facebook and on YouTube. Biking and horse riding routes are also visualised. The potential tourist may take a detailed look and then plan their holidays from home (internet). Once on the terrain, they can use Mobile, PDA, GPS devices (and print outs) to navigate themselves in the region. For those who have insufficient time to create the holidays by

themselves, the active tourist packages are prepared and shown on the web as well.

It is clear that:

1. Entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial skills, harnessed in a bottom-up model of development, will have a huge impact on rural and agri-tourist micro-economies at a local community level. The effect in driving wealth creation and expanding employment is measurable in a very tangible and transparent way.
2. Furthermore, multi-stakeholder tourism projects benefit the ownership transformation process by forcing public, private and social ownership agents and enterprises to work together for common benefit. Because of the bottom up approach the measurable value of an enterprise or agency level is also more tangible and obvious. It can also be seen that by engaging local public agencies, the dimension of environmental planning and protection can be assured. In this way the sustainable nature of tourism and its impact on the local environment can be assessed and given due priority.

At the same time, in such integrated projects, individual entrepreneurs begin to comprehend and understand the value of co-operation as well as of competition. A key feature is often the need for small-scale tourism entrepreneurs to develop a promotional mechanism to market their product or service at a wider national and international level. Individually the costs of such an activity are too great for micro-enterprises, but they are possible for groups of enterprises. This shows how an integrated model enables participants to benefit from the totality and complexity of resources and skills held by all stakeholders.

## **CASE STUDY 2 THE HERITAGE TRAILS OF SLOVENIAN ISTRIA**

### **1. Introduction**

Slovenian Istria is a compact rural area of very distinctive character. It is green and fertile, with Mediterranean climate and vegetation. It has a remarkable structure of deep valleys and flat-topped hills, with plateaux offering stunning views west to the sea, north into mountainous Slovenia, and south into Croatian Istria. The overall effect is of a fine and distinctive landscape. The area is rich

in wildlife, and in features of cultural heritage, including fine churches (some with remarkable frescoes and other features), vernacular buildings, water-powered mills and other monuments. It has traditional local products of high quality, notably a variety of good wines; a distinctive regional cuisine; and a local dialect and tradition of custom, dress, music and decorative arts which are recalled and valued by the older local people.

### **2. Heritage Trails Consultancy**

The main implementation institution for the project beside three already mentioned municipalities of Koper, Izola and Piran was Regional Development Centre of Koper, which was supported by regional institutions on the field of natural and cultural heritage. Partners & stakeholders in the project were institutions from public, private and NGO sector in this part of Slovenia.

#### **2.1 Methodology**

First of all, shared opinion among experts, who were responsible for the development of the concept was that the Heritage Trail in Slovenian Istria must take account of the distinctive character of the territory. It must take account also of the area's location, immediately behind and above the zone of coastal tourism, and adjoining the Croatian part of Istria, to which it is linked by history, character and a pattern of inland roads and tracks. It had the potential to build on the existing pattern of tourist enterprises and flows of visitors.

These factors imply that a Heritage Trail in this area would be different from that in Dolenjska-Bela krajina in two crucial ways:

(a) It may be aimed at two distinct types of visitor, namely :

- day visitors, coming from the adjoining coastal resorts and from Trieste and the surrounding areas of Slovenia and Croatia
- people staying overnight within the area

(b) It may relate to two different scales of activity, namely :

- larger groups of visitors, for example parties of 20 - 30 or 50 people arriving in a coach (although this are fewer than some years ago): such groups need to be focused only on those roads, and those facilities, which have the capacity to take them
- smaller groups, such as families or parties arriving by car or minibus, who can use the narrower roads and the smaller facilities.

Team of experts suggested that there should be particular emphasis upon three issues, namely:

- The character and physical capacity of the focal points (villages, churches, restaurants, monuments etc) and of the roads and tracks through the area, with a clear distinction between those which may take the larger and the smaller scales of activity stated above.
- The existing pattern of tourism activity, with a focus on the types of visitor (see above) and their profile (nationality, point of origin etc), since this would provide crucial clues to the early stages of developing and marketing the Trail.
- The existing or potential links between different features on the prospective Trail: this would provide the starting-point for creating and marketing distinctive 'products' within the total concept of the Trail. For example, the establishments connected with horse-riding may be linked to a network of horse-riding routes within and beyond the area

Finally a model was drawn /4/ in order to illustrate all these elements and justify why the concept of the Trail was structured in the method proposed. This model presented historical movements from inland rural parts of the territory which supplied main towns on the coast. In the context of sustainable tourism development product, as Heritage trails should be structured, the model anticipated a range of integrated tourism products. This included an interaction in terms of the tourism offer comprised as an ideal product mix between the coastal elements and the rural elements, which may be seen as sustainable in the longer term perspective.

## 2.2 Stages of commercial product adaptation and implementation

In comparison with the Heritage Trails in Dolenjska and Bela krajina, the Heritage Trails in Slovenia Istria was sadly never officially launched, neither on the domestic nor on the international market. The reason for this failure lay in the fact that tourist stakeholders in this coastal region, which was traditionally and remains now the most visited tourism region in Slovenia, were fixated in the past achievements of tourism activity. As a result, in the current contemporary environment, which holds greater challenges and demands, they were unable and to a degree unwilling to make that critical step forward to co-operate, to engage and to agree an efficient and long-term public-private partnership & co-operation, which will perform as Destination Management Organisation (DMO). Such a DMO would act on behalf of all

tourist stakeholders in the region and by the synergies thus created dynamise the entire tourism offer for this region /5/. Regrettably, such an organisation does not exist in this region of Slovenia. Unfortunately it was a lost opportunity to launch a Heritage Trail /6/ and to focus on the rural offer some years ago when the opportunity was ripe for such actions. It is not our intention to speculate and insist that this will change the figures presented above, but we believe that a Heritage Trail type structure would open immense opportunities for rural entrepreneurs and offer them new challenges for new jobs in their home-yards in rural Istria. Certainly the evidence presented in Case Study 1, shows how such a potential can reach a realistic and achievable end.

## 2.3 Tourism destination

It would be a task of DMO to provide opportunities to all tourism stakeholders in the Slovenian Istria to collaborate in a range of areas that can boost business performance and productivity. By coming together local businesses can create something that is greater than the sum of parts, collaborating to strengthen external promotion, but also internal improvements.

DMO can and should therefore provide packages of shared products, be it coastal, be it rural and above all shared services to tourism businesses operation in well-defined geographic area such as Slovene Istria is. For example, a DMO acting as a shared service co-operative could provide such facilities as marketing, bookings, travel services, web presence etc. to a group of local hotels, restaurants, tour operators and guides. These have particular value in connecting up tourism opportunities in both rural and urban areas of Slovene Istria.

## CASE STUDY 3

### ARGYLL & THE ISLANDS TOURISM CO-OPERATIVE

#### 1. Background & development of AITC

This case study is a live example – AITC (Argyle & the Isle Tourism Cooperative, 2015) was only created in 2012 and remains in the process of establishing and developing its strategic vision. It is an example of a regional tourism destination management organisation (DMO) collectivising state agencies, semi-state bodies, local government, private tourism operators and local DMOs. It is structured as a co-operative in which all members have a single vote irrespective of size, assets or

influence.

Whilst Scotland as a whole benefits from one third of all tourists (based on per night spend and thus contributions to Scottish GDP) coming from outside the UK, in the case of Argyll & Bute (the AITC operating region) it is only one-fifth of all tourists. The region has 9% of Scottish land area but only 2% of the national population. At the same time tourism employs around 15% of the regional workforce (10% across Scotland as a whole) (Scottish Tourism Statistics 2015). Importantly the AITC region has a rich cultural heritage. There are 60 medieval castles, 1256 neolithic monuments, the cradle of Scottish Christianity at Iona and the seat of the ancient Scottish kings at Dunadd. The initial step in creating a distinctive local agency for Argyll and the Islands began in 2009 following the closing of the former state tourist boards; a summit event was held in 2011 that devised a plan with 3 key action points:

1. To develop an umbrella brand identity for the region
2. To have a strategic presence at the tourism exhibitions and events
3. To better communicate within the industry

It was apparent that a delivery vehicle was needed, and that this should be wholly industry based and engage the 150 tourism enterprises in the region. The result was the creation in 2012 of a tourism co-operative for public, private, voluntary and not-for-profit tourism activities in the region - the Argyll & Isles Tourism Co-operative. A key decision was that the new body would focus on destination strategies and thus add value to the existing local DMOs. It was therefore envisioned as an umbrella cooperative, whose members would be the local DMOs as well as sectoral groups. The co-operative, AITC, was established in 2012 with 15 members. The areas covered are Mull, Iona, Tiree and Coll; Islay, Jura and Colonsay; Oban and Lorn; Kintyre and Gigha; Inveraray, Kilmartin and Knapdale; Bute; Cowal/Loch Lomond and the Clyde Sea Lochs. Industry sectors include museums, gardens and food production. Funding was secured from local and central government for the period from 2014 to 2017.

## 2. What makes it different?

There are interesting issues of differentiation in the AITC model

- Formation as a co-operative membership model is based on the "one member one vote" principle. Members work together with a common aim and despite differences in size

and resources, all members are equal

- The region is geographically peripheral with a distinctive language (Gaelic), strong historical traditions of music and folklore and collective socio-economic structures
- A strong engagement of local communities - often on a volunteer basis

Thus tourism has to respond to local communities, whilst at the same time recognising that many projects need European level intervention in the provision of resources.

As with many cultural-heritage focused tourism projects in peripheral regions, AITC has a particular attraction for those from small groups (individual travellers, groups of 6-10,, the "grey/retired" market) rather than from mass tourism. Transport capacity is limited by aircraft size (under 30 seats), the lack of rail routes or the size of car ferries (which will frequently give priority to commercial traffic).

In addition, with a large percentage of the market Scotland/UK-based AITC is seeking to grow the overseas visitor market (which demonstrates higher earning capacity) through focused campaigns. These are now being targeted on the Nordic/Scandinavian markets. An important element is on boosting the offering in relation to wildlife, the open heritage culture, various outdoor activities as well as the quality of environmentally sustainable and organically-produced food and drink.

Essentially the AITC tourism offer is mainly channelled through micro & small enterprises, located in remote rural locations with seasonal tourism flows (April to October). As a result, much time has been devoted to community-focused training and brand development during the November-March period. In addition resources are also being focused on developing winter specific programmes focusing on wildlife and adventure tourism in somewhat harsh climatic conditions as a means of using available capacity during the "low" season.

## 3. The future

The cultural heritage is the most important motivator for tourism growth in this region, a heritage which is many ways is protected and developed by the very peripherality and remoteness of the region. This then requires a careful balance between economic development from exploiting the heritage and protecting the viability of the heritage from usage in excess of carrying capacity.



At the same time, this also reflects the equally delicate balance between top-down management - from whence much of the financial funding flows - and the bottom-up developments much of which is driven and inspired by micro enterprises and unpaid volunteers. The top-down has the necessary human resources and connectivity into global tourism markets; the bottom-up has commitment, local knowledge and a desire to share a rich and vibrant heritage. Undoubtedly economic growth will bring significant benefits, but must be handled in such a way as to protect a fragile cultural heritage that has endured for almost 3,000 years on the North-Western edge of Europe. Ethnic cleansing in the 18th and 19th centuries had a destructive impact on both the landscape and the socio-economic system; it is therefore important to ensure that tourism capacity is managed in such a way as to protect the cultural heritage that remains. We see this case study as work-in-progress, a case study that provides useful comparisons with the other case studies and which also may provide some useful lessons for other regions facing similar challenges to their cultural heritage.

#### CASE STUDY 4

#### BUILDING SUCCESS ON THE EDGE OF EUROPE

##### Background

This case study is based on a small Irish island. The entire western coast of Ireland is not only peripheral compared to the more populated east of the country, but peripheral to Europe as a whole. There are 28 inhabited offshore islands, which in the 2011 census had a combined population of 2,896. The economic development of these islands is under the responsibility of Comhar na nOileán Teo (Federation of Irish islands), the LEADER/ EU partnership company which operates under the Irish government's Department of Arts, Heritage & The Gaeltacht. The company is also the Irish representative on the European Association of Small Islands (ESIN).

The island of Inishbofin (Inis Bó Finne)

Inishbofin is located 10km from the west coast of Galway, with an area of 23km<sup>2</sup>. The main activities are tourism, farming and some fishing. The island having been inhabited from around 8000 BC. Inishbofin has EU Blue Flag status, with sandy beaches which due to the clear nature of the sea water are good for swimming, snorkelling and diving. Two of the beaches on Inishbofin have been awarded a 'Green Coast Award' to denote their

exceptional water quality and natural, unspoilt environment. Inishbofin is also special area of conservation as it is a breeding area for many species of birds. The population has fallen from 1404 in 1841 to the current level of permanent residents estimated at 212. There is a passenger ferry connection (35 minutes) from the mainland port of Cleggan operating two return sailings daily with an additional sailing in the summer. In addition there is a cargo ferry service twice a week. There is no passenger car ferry access, which limits the capacity of traffic to the island.

##### Tourism background

Structured tourism began on the island in 1969, with 2 hotels; in 2016, there are 3 hotels, 5 Bed & Breakfasts, a hostel, a campsite and 60 holiday homes. The holiday season on Inishbofin operates from Easter-October. Tourism is focused on a high level of repeat business, predominantly from the domestic market. For the hotel market, although the domestic market is the largest at around 80% (and again highly dependent on repeat visitors) the next largest market is from the UK, followed by France. For day visitors, the Irish domestic market is predominant, followed by France, Germany, Italy, Spain and USA. Word-of-mouth and personal referrals have a significant part in the tourism inflows. The island has not had to resort to expensive marketing campaigns, although capacity is limited to the actual capacity on the ferry service (90), and the total capacity of the island's accommodation facilities (around 400). This tends to ensure that carrying capacity will not reach levels at which damage could be made to what is a fairly fragile ecological environment.

##### Organisational structure

After a working through two voluntary associations, in 1993, a legally constituted company limited by guarantee was established - the Inishbofin Development Company (IDC). This has the mission to improve:

1. the quality of life through the establishment, development and provision of support and services
2. the socio-economic, eco-infrastructure, cultural, heritage and administrative requirements of the island

It is clear that on Inishbofin, the community seek to take a different approach to tourism, aiming to achieve sustainable tourism that does not negatively impact upon the island's natural environment, whilst at the same time benefitting and supporting the local community.

The island has, in the words of Simon Murray, Chairman of the IDC, been driven by its peripherality to maintain its existence. The abandonment of a nearby island (Inishark) in 1960's was a great shock for the inhabitants of Inishbofin, and created an urgent need to ensure that the island remained populated and viable. Importantly, the island did not await the provision of government or EU grants before seeking to improve and structure its tourism and related offers. Rather it relied on a process of self-resourcing, and then when it had achieved viable products, then began to seek grants and financial support. This is an interesting learning point, as it indicates that tourism-driven communities can be self-sufficient, independent of grant/loan support and only applying for such support once they have developed a tangible project. The focus on tourism activity from Easter-October has traditionally been part of the socio-economic model for the island population; it has then enabled a focus on other economic activities from November through to March (e.g. farming, fishing, tourism marketing and development). However it has become clear that there is surplus capacity in the "shoulder" periods (mid-April to end-May and end-August to end-October). Whilst the Irish school holidays occupy an 8 week period from the beginning of July to the end of August, there are period outwith that peak season which could be further exploited. The shoulder seasons have now become a primary area for the development of outdoor cultural heritage activities which are by their nature not weather-dependent.

#### Eco-tourism developments

As part of EcoTourism development, the island achieved Gold Certification from EcoTourism Ireland for its *Cultúr na nOileáin* (Culture of the island) tours. These tours offer ecotourism experiences in the most the most environmentally friendly way (i.e. walking). Importantly both the tour company and the Inishbofin Community Centre are members of the Leave No Trace (LNT) network, with the guided walks keeping to the LNT code of conduct and adhering to the minimal impact hillwalking, birdwatching and marine megafauna viewing codes where relevant. The tour maximum group size is fixed at 25 people per guide. Particular care is taken to highlight features of the Special Areas of Conservation, and how to avoid negatively impacting upon these. Currently there are two EcoTourism experiences - an exploration of Inishbofin and a guided tour to the

unpopulated island of Inishark. Inishbofin is the first Irish island to have been given LNT status; the Inishbofin LNT Network currently includes 7 businesses on the island, and many inhabitants have taken the certified Awareness Sessions that LNT operate. This has led towards EcoTourism being a major force in the "greening" of the island - with 4 ecotourism certifications covering 23 tourism activities. This has included such diverse activities as historical tours and studies, equestrian activities, farm tourism and birdwatching. In addition the community is also engaged in a food festival and other festivals which relate to the cultural heritage of the western part of Ireland. Importantly, the IDC has been able to operate to a fairly tight schedule in developing these actions; utilising grant aid from the state Environmental Protection Agency, it was able to gain certification for the main ecotourism activities.

#### Conclusion

Despite the issues of location (e.g. peripherality, lack of developed infrastructure, dependence on a single transport link), this appears to be a community that has built cohesion in its efforts to attract sustainable and environmentally friendly tourism activity. This task has been carried out through self-reliance and self-support, using the cohesion of the island community and the skills of the islanders themselves. The Community Centre is clearly the island's activity hub, including tourism information, cultural/heritage activities as well as community support (e.g. nursery/childcare).

The critical success factor is the engagement of the permanent community who see building a sustainable tourism product and extending the tourism season as helping to ensure the long-term survival of the island. Connected to that has been embracing environmental and eco-system controls, to ensure that the flow of visitors does not damage a fragile environment. Carrying capacity is effectively restricted to the size of the passenger vessel, which effectively even in high season can only transport around 200 passengers per day in each direction - some of whom will stay and others will be only day visitors.

Importantly, the community cohesion has been bottom-up driven, to reflect the boundaries existing in a peripheral island environment. Undoubtedly, Inishbofin is a very small tourism destination. However, it presents a microcosm of the situation affecting Europe's offshore island tourism facilities. In a sense, size is an attraction, as it presents a

compact and easily visited environment. For the day traveller it is possible to walk around the whole island, take a meal, visit some local tourism establishments and return. For the longer stay visitor it provides a small, remote location with the general facilities expected in larger destinations, but with the atmosphere provided by the remote location.

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