Managing the Environmental Impacts of Tourism at County Level

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Introduction

Local Authorities across Ireland have a statutory obligation to plan and maintain the natural environment which tourists put such a high value on. Without an evidence-based approach to tourism planning, Local Authorities would be at a disadvantage to anticipate future planning needs, thus potentially diminishing the tourism product. Such an approach to tourism planning can be achieved through the application of the European Tourism Indicator System (ETIS).

Wild Atlantic Way Research Group

This research group formed with a principal focus on investigating and contributing to the sustainable development of tourism along the Wild Atlantic Way (WAW) and to better understand the key indicators for sustainable destination management.

European Tourism Indicator System (ETIS)

- The ETIS is a free indicator system developed by the European Commission (EC).
- This particular indicator system contains seventeen environmental indicators to enable destinations to monitor their sustainability performance and progress over time.

Results and Analysis

- The ETIS contains 17 environmental indicators, 9 of which are core indicators.
- The indicators cover a range of areas including transport, climate change, solid waste management, sewage treatment, water management, and energy usage and landscape and biodiversity management.
- It was difficult to obtain data for a number of the environmental indicators at a destination level particularly for solid waste management, water management and particularly energy usage. This area requires further research.

Methodological Approach

- The three destinations chosen for the pilot study were Counties Donegal, Clare and Sligo, all located along the WAW.
- Surveys were carried out in several ‘honey pot’ destinations in each of the three counties.

- Several of the environmental indicators of the ETIS also complement the EEA TOUREM (Tourism and Environment Reporting Mechanism) which seeks to measure the environmental impacts and sustainability trends of tourism in Europe.
- This study presents results from the application of the environmental indicators of the ETIS in three separate destinations along the Wild Atlantic Way (WAW).

- Information on the average distance travelled by tourists to each destination was obtained from the visitors surveyed. Average travel (km) by tourists and same day visitors from home to each of the three counties varied. Clare had the highest (2584 km), with Donegal (1815 km) and Sligo (1369 km).
- The carbon footprint is closely linked to the distance travelled by the tourist and hence the highest carbon footprint was evident for tourists in Co. Clare.
- There is growing awareness among all citizens in relation to global warming and climate change yet the enterprise surveys revealed that there is a very low uptake in climate mitigation schemes by tourism enterprises.
- County Donegal (72%) was found to have the highest percentage of tourism enterprises located in ‘vulnerable’ zones compared to Clare (29%) and Sligo (37%).

Conclusion

- While there is a drive towards the sustainable management of tourism destinations within the EU, an evidence based approach to future tourism planning in Ireland is needed so Local Authorities along the WAW can protect the tourism product going forward by basing future planning on data collected locally and benchmarked every year.

- The development of smart destinations along the WAW using data gathered from the application of the ETIS may provide the necessary lens to inform and guide landscape policy, action plans and Local Authority development plans, thus further protecting Ireland’s natural environment.

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