



# **Tourism in the Burren: Summary of Literature and Policy Documents**

**For Burren Connect**

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# 1 Introduction

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**“It is a country where there is not water  
enough to drown a man, wood enough to  
hang one, nor earth enough to bury him”**

These are the not-so-flattering observations of the Burren by a Cromwellian Officer, quoted in Ludlow's Memoirs, 1651.

Appreciation of the resources and environment of the Burren has certainly changed in the minds of visitors, locals, administrators, policy-makers and scientists alike in the intervening three and a half centuries. Today, there is a growing consensus about the value of the Burren's resources but growing recognition of the need to manage these resources in a way that balances multiple needs . environmental, agricultural, social and economic.

In the past decade, published literature and local discourse have also been developing a consensus that the Burren is a cultural landscape produced by the interaction of man and nature. Consequently, individual themes cannot be managed in isolation as the needs of the host environment, host people and the visitor are intertwined.

Despite this, there has been no integrated management initiative put in place to build on the emerging consensus. There is a widespread concern within the literature and in local discourse about this lack of progress.

Within the literature, there have been few attempts to establish baseline data, criteria or impact measuring mechanisms that can serve in the future to monitor the effects of any new Burren management initiatives.

This paper is a summary rather of recent literature and policy documents. It is not a review but rather aims to bring together and summarise existing published documentation on Tourism in the Burren to assist the Burren Connect Project and others in their development of policies and initiatives.

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## 2 Current Tourism Context

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Ireland received 7.7 million overseas tourists in 2007, bringing total foreign exchange earnings of " 4.9 billion. A further 593,000 visitors came from Northern Ireland and 8.3 million domestic trips were made.<sup>1</sup>

The Shannon Region received 1.2 million overseas tourists, 30,000 visitors from Northern Ireland and 826,000 domestic trips, bringing total revenues of " 518 million.<sup>2</sup> Almost 60% of visits to the region are to Clare. According to Shannon Development, the significance of this spend is that its economic impact is relatively large, with low import content, high labour input and considerable spending in rural areas.<sup>3</sup>

The current national development Plan 2007 -2013 positions tourism as a critical indigenous industry with high employment density as well as significant foreign earnings. The income generated by the industry is largely retained in Ireland.

At regional level, tourism is also identified as a significant driver of growth and has having the potential to further contribute to regional income generation at a time of downturn in other sectors. A 2008 Shannon Development discussion paper argues that

the industry possess (sic) the capacity and stock to achieve further growth in the future and to help promote regional development at a time when many indigenous sectors face structural and trading difficulties.<sup>4</sup>

The Discussion Paper also that there is considerable untapped potential to develop tourism in many areas of the country, particularly around nature and heritage.<sup>5</sup>

Given the nature of the Burren's tourism profile and resources, it can be viewed as having greater such potential than other areas.

The attraction of flagship sites in the Burren brings huge numbers of visitors. The Cliffs of Moher (the largest visitor attraction in the country) and Aillwee Cave received 911,000 and 200,000 visitors respectively in 2008. However, the capacity of the Burren to retain

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<sup>1</sup> *Fáilte Ireland, 2008 Tourism Facts 2007*

<sup>2</sup> *idem*

<sup>3</sup> *Shannon Development, 2008, p.3*

<sup>4</sup> *ibid, p.2*

<sup>5</sup> *ibid p.3*

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these visitors is low as seen in recent surveys undertaken by Burren Connect and the Cliffs of Moher Centre. So, from a purely tourism perspective, there is clearly significant untapped potential but as a wider literature perspective reveals, the Burren is a location where tourism's future is inextricably linked to wider human and ecological development issues.



### 3 1970s and 1980s

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One of the first writers in the modern era to investigate tourism, community development and visitor pressure in an integrated way was William Nolan *North West Clare Today? Tomorrow?* published in 1973.

#### **'North West Clare Today? Tomorrow?'**

Nolan gives an interesting profile and summary of the development of tourism in the Burren from the early years of the twentieth century. He describes the principal features of tourism in previous years

- The substantial summer houses of the gentry dotted along the coastline (e.g. Lady Gregory's near Burren)
- Traditional coast-oriented family holidays as experienced elsewhere in Ireland
- Leisure activities centred on the Spa resort of Lisdoonvarna that had led to the growth of Victorian hotels
- Camping and caravan activities
- The growth of automobile ownership had brought about a growing significance of day trips.

With the growth of tourism, Nolan perceived stresses and strains on the environment caused by the utilisation of these resources<sup>6</sup> and this leads him to ask

the very special problem in North Clare is: will the ultimate effects of organised tourism destroy the very thing which gave the area its attractions in the first place.<sup>7</sup>

He notes that this concern had been articulated in the 1967 County Development Plan which adopted a policy to exclude development which would be prejudicial to the natural beauty and amenity value of the area.<sup>8</sup>

He goes on,

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<sup>6</sup> Nolan, p.56

<sup>7</sup> *idem*

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, p.67

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The advantages (of tourism) will be the influx of money and social diversity to an area which is strongly uniform in social terms. The disadvantage will no doubt result from pressure on the environment and the tension between visitors and people living in the area.<sup>9</sup>

Nolan gave some interesting statistics on accommodation capacity from the NWCDO survey . Lisdoonvarna had capacity for 28,000 bed nights (15,000 unoccupied) in addition to capacity for 300 caravans, Lahinch 19,000 (1,500 unoccupied) and the estimate for Liscannor was 5,000 (2,500 unoccupied).

Nolan advocated the setting up of a Burren Authority whose initial task would be to prepare a case for the designation of the Burren as a National Park. The Authority would consist of local authority representatives, tourism represents, local voluntary organisations, farmers groups, trade unionists and educational interests with a chairman of national stature.<sup>q</sup>

Practical activities to be undertaken included the extension of accommodation, improved access, the provision of a central locations for the marketing and display of Burren crafts and an Operation Eyesore<sup>q</sup> to remove derelict sites and regenerate Kilfenora and Ennistymon.

### **Clare County Council, Revision of County Development Plan, 1982**

The 1977 County Development Plan was revised in 1982 and a special section was devoted to the Burren.

The area was defined it as that part of the county lying north of the road from Corofin to Lisdoonvarna and then to Ballyryan; north of the road from Corofin via Tubber to Gort and defined on the east by the county boundary.<sup>q</sup>

It was described as having unique plants, turloughs, karst landscape, monuments and that % requires special and careful consideration..... it is essential that the promotion of tourism should not endanger the conservation and protection of the area.<sup>q10</sup>

It was proposed to prepare a management plan for the area.

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<sup>9</sup> Nolan, p.56

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Clare County Development Team, 1986, pp. 6-7

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## Clare County Development Team – Burren Committee Report – Burren District June 9<sup>th</sup> 1986

As tourism activity increased and the international reputation of the Burren grew, so too did the appreciation of the challenges and potential amongst scientists, state agencies and local government. In 1985, the Clare County Development Team established a committee representative of the various official interests to study matters relating to the Burren.<sup>11</sup>

It comprised the north Clare area members of Clare County Council, the County Engineer and Senior Planner, representatives of the Office of Public Works, Department of Tourism, ACOT.

In recent years the Burren has made a substantial contribution to the economy of the County because of its attractions to tourists and specialists. This is difficult to quantify but an indication of the popularity of the area is the fact that in 1985 over 300,000 persons visited the Cliffs of Moher Centre and over 80,000 visited Aillwee Caves.<sup>12</sup> The committee set itself the task of writing a report covering conservation, recreational provision, education, provision of information and research & development.

Regarding various efforts to provide a delimitation of the Burren, the Committee observed that it is virtually impossible to set an exact geographical boundary which was acceptable to the three major interests concerned. These interests perceived the Burren as either the Ecological Burren a distinct planning area in the County Development Plan or as the Burren as the public and tourist perceives it.<sup>13</sup>

The Committee adopted the latter option and it is worth relating what it considered to be the tourist Burren

The greater part of the Burren is situated (sic) in County Clare and constitutes the area enclosed by an imaginary line commencing at the south-west corner of the Cliffs of Moher at Haggs Head, then continuing along the L54 route in a north-easterly direction via Tooclae crossroads to Lisdoonvarna, then continuing along the L53 route to Kilfenora, then continuing in a south-easterly direction via Lemenagh, Clifden and Rath Cross to

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<sup>11</sup> *Clare County Development Team, 1986, p.1*

<sup>12</sup> *idem*

<sup>13</sup> *ibid p.3*

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Corofin, then continuing via Ruan southwards to join the T11 route at Barefield, then continuing along the T11 route northwards via Crusheen to Banahan House and Tubber, thence continuing along the county boundary with County Galway to Aughinish, then continuing along the line of low water mark from Aughinish to close at Haggs Head. In order to include that part of the Burren which is situated (sic) in County Galway the line should continue from Tubber via Ashfield House to Gort, then continuing northwards along the T11 route to Kiltartan then continuing north-westerly to Cahermore then continuing to Kinvara, then continuing to the seaward point of Kinvara Bay.<sup>14</sup>

Regarding the preferred future management structure, the Committee concluded that areas in the United Kingdom designated as National Parks were those most closely related, in terms of status, to the Burren and that, accordingly, it should be afforded similar type treatment by way of control, development and management.<sup>15</sup>

As usage of the term National Park in this country tended to apply to land in total public ownership and only a small portion was owned by the state, the Committee agreed that the area should, more appropriately, be described as the Burren District.<sup>16</sup>

It recommended that a distinctive logo should be adopted and used at all entrances, signposts and literature. An art competition yielded a winning logo that the Committee adopted.

Its other recommendations included:

- Protection of certain sites in public ownership and the application of various pieces of existing legislation to other sites.
- A budget of £100,000 per year to cover ranger services, upland management, information services, education, development and administration.
- Actions to promote tourism (branding activities, information provision)
- Actions to secure conservation (e.g. EEC grant aid for farmers where agriculture and conservation came into conflict, protection of sensitive monuments, consideration of Special Amenities Area Order to protect environment).

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<sup>14</sup> *Clare County Development Team, 1986, p.4*

<sup>15</sup> *idem*

<sup>16</sup> *idem*

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## Shannon Development – The Burren Report, 1988

Many of these policies and recommendations were taken up and echoed in a Shannon Development report two years later.

In 1988, regional development executives in Shannon Development formed a committee to define the company's role in the development of the Burren. They produced 'The Burren Report' which, in addition to outlining the company's role, aimed to outline strategies to maximise potential income and to spearhead the implementation of such strategies.

This committee defined the Burren as including Lahinch and Ennistymon but otherwise agreed with the boundary recommended by the Clare County Development Team 1986 Report.

The Report outlined the challenge of protecting the environment whilst developing tourism potential,

It is important that the causes of irreparable damage be quickly identified and monitored so that the numerous elements of the Burren do not disappear before their significance in the ecological and historic chain can be ascertained.<sup>17</sup>

To develop the tourism industry, they recommended marketing and branding activities such as the highlighting of the area's boundaries, the use of a logo as an official symbol and the publication of accessible tourist literature. It also stressed the need for a tourism focal point in the Burren . A centre that can serve to convey to different publics its great significance.<sup>18</sup>

To be called 'The Burren Experience' its functions would include education, display, reference library, craft and local produce outlet, centre for rangers, outdoor activity centre, training for organic farming and craft production.<sup>19</sup>

It also recommended a major annual event such as a Burren Summer School.

The reports referred to other Burren products in the that were already previously been proposed as part of the 'Strategic Framework for the Development of the Shannon region

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<sup>17</sup> *Shannon Development, 1988, p.4*

<sup>18</sup> *idem*

<sup>19</sup> *ibid p.8*

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1988 . 1990+such as a marina at Ballyvaughan and improvements to the harbour at Liscannor. It also noted an earlier proposal to develop a Burren Trail designated walking route.



## 4 1990s

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From the late 1980s onwards, the role of farming and the interaction of culture and nature in producing and maintaining the Burren Landscape has come to be more appreciated in academic literature and policy documents. The effect of this well summed up by O'Rourke,

The landscape is by its essence a synthesis and nowhere is this more obvious than in cultural landscapes, which can be thought of as the meeting place between humankind and the environments. One of the reasons for the renewed interest in landscape studies in recent years is that it forces us to confront what is increasingly seen as an artificial dualism between natural and cultural systems.<sup>20</sup>

Since the late 1980s, most literature on the Burren has sought to avoid segregation of the worlds of farming, conservation and tourism.

Even scientific literature acknowledges the human input. A typical summary is offered by Ute Bohnsack in 'The Burren, Its Farming and Wildlife' Whilst outlining the outstanding conservation of 'priority habitats...such as limestone pavements, orchid-rich calcareous grassland and turloughs' she demonstrates the human role in the creation of the current landscape,

The Burren is a cultural landscape that has evolved out of the cultural interaction between man and the environment over a period of almost 6000 years. Traditional low-input and predominantly cattle-based pastoral agriculture over many centuries has helped to maintain one of the most extensive calcareous grassland areas as well as what is probably the most important oligotrophic, calcareous system of freshwater lake in Europe.<sup>21</sup>

In the debate and controversy over the siting of an interpretative centre for the Burren National Park during the 1990s, there was much focus on the merits or otherwise of the site chosen by the Office of Public Works. Despite the intensity of the debate on that issue, effort to resolve the issue did lead to the publication of some important reports in

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<sup>20</sup> O'Rourke, 2005, p.70

<sup>21</sup> Bohnsack, 1999, p.17

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which we can see the emergence of a more modern consensus on the interaction of various interests in the Burren.

**'The Burren: Alternatives to the Mullaghmore Visitor Centre – A Proposal produced by a Burren Community Group, 1992**

This report by those opposed to the OPW's chosen site sought to balance what it saw as the three key interests . locals, visitors and the physical environment,

%6 we are to develop a sustainable form of tourism in the Burren, we must recognise and harmonise the needs of the three components in the tourism triangle . the visitor, the host community and the host environment. Tourism must not be allowed to damage the environmental resource, prejudice its future enjoyment or use or bring unacceptable environmental impacts. Equally, tourism must be developed as a positive activity with potential to benefit the host community and the place, as well as the visitor.+<sup>22</sup>P1

The document urged the adoption of a Burren Ring where access is gained through gateway villages with information provision, education, interpretation and outlets for Burren produce Thereafter, it argued that visitor access to the central Burren should be more properly gained by car, minibus, bicycle and on foot whilst heavier traffic should be focussed towards the periphery.

**Brady Shipman Martin – Tourism in the Burren A Strategic Plan, 1994**

Although this study also took place against the backdrop of a political hot potato, it is the most comprehensive analysis and set of recommendations for the Burren ever produced.

It sets out its belief that the pursuit of tourism activity and the preservation of the environment are compatible ends.

It notes that in the past, tourism developments based on the natural environment sometime sought short-term exploitative gains but that now %6ourism and environmental interests can be aligned, so that tourism aids and reinforces conservation in order to ensure its own long term economic future.... It is this approach that is recommended for the Burren.+<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Burren Community Group, 1992, p.1*

<sup>23</sup> *Brady, Shipman, Martin, 1994, p.1*

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The report sees its tourism strategy as being aligned with and (acting) as a precursor to an overall strategy encompassing conservation, farming, rural development, and village improvement.<sup>24</sup>

The report defines the tourism resource that is the Burren as comprising a set of complex elements including a limestone plateau, wetland on the low inland Burren, coastal area, an unpolluted physical environment with rare flora and fauna by interaction of agriculture and nature, an environment suited outdoor activities, a wealth of field monuments, folklore and music, built environment.<sup>25</sup>

It gives three categories of tourist .

- 1) Casual tourists passing through the area, including Irish-based coach tours on day or longer visits, many of which include the Cliffs of Moher, Galway Bay and Bunratty:
- 2) More informed tourists taking an active interests in aspects of the area, including some Continental-based coach tours; and
- 3) Specialist and academic tourists taking an in-depth interest in the area or pursuing particular activity.

Casual tourists stay with the coast road or go through Corkscrew Hill. The more informed may take in Poul nabrone and possibly centre in Kilfenora, Aillwee or Corofin. The specialist engages in a wide range of studies, sports and activities.<sup>26</sup>

The Report asserts its view that the expectation of the visitor to environments renowned for the beauty or amenity value has fundamentally changed,

The tourist and his attitude to his surroundings has changed. Environmental education... has given rise to a higher level of expectation. Direct contact with the landscape is now seen as an essential component of the visitor's experience.<sup>27</sup>

This is allied to concerns about personal health and fitness and the pursuit of holiday activities that can act as an antidote to increasingly sedentary lifestyles.

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<sup>24</sup> Brady, Shipman, Martin, 1994, p.5

<sup>25</sup> *ibid* p. 10

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*, pp. 12-13

<sup>27</sup> *ibid* p. 17

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The authors make the point that tourism activity in the Burren is constrained by an outdated emphasis on the casual tourist. Coach and car tourists are expected to remain in their vehicles whilst other activities such as walking, cycling and speciality interests are still catered for as minority or eccentric aspects of tourism.<sup>28</sup>P18

However, the authors recognise that a change is coming about in the mind set of the tourism operator and that local tourist interests now identify the Burren as an underused asset in the light of growing environmental tourism business.....the future image of the Burren is, therefore, of an area which is the Irish flagship for eco-tourism, ecologically and socially responsible nature-based tourism that fosters environmental appreciation and understanding.<sup>29</sup>

The report makes a link between visitors' desire to experience community life as well as environmental resources,

The idea of holidaying within a local community, unlike the anonymity of a large tourism centre, is a natural partner to ecologically based activities.<sup>30</sup>

In addressing the need to safeguard the environment, the report believes that the message of conservation can be imparted whilst delivering the activities that visitors wish to engage in -

The objective for the development of tourism in the Burren is in giving visitors, recreation and pleasure from a beautiful environment, but also in impressing upon them the need to care and respect for that environment.<sup>31</sup>

Access and visitor management is key to this, giving rise to a requirement for 1) understanding and co-operation of farmers and landowners, 2) consideration of proposals for access, 3) a system to manage tourism activity combined with management of agriculture and conservation and 4) improvements in information provisions, roads and parking facilities.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Brady, Shipman, Martin, 1994, p.18

<sup>29</sup> *ibid* p. 19

<sup>30</sup> *idem*

<sup>31</sup> *idem*

<sup>32</sup> *ibid* p.22

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The report outlines a comprehensive strategy through its 63 recommendations which can be summarised as follows;

- Management - devise an overall plan to build on the tourism strategy (1); make the Tourism Strategy the Irish flagship for environmental tourism (2) and have it prioritise in NDP (13); seek an EU environmental quality mark (3) and World heritage Site status (4); define a single Burren Conservation Area (4) and link this to the County Development Plan, planning regulations (12) and building guidelines (13); define an appropriate area for agriculture and conservation policies and coordinate with REPS (5,6); develop community participation (9, 61 and 62) and rural development (8) approaches.
  - Traffic management, road improvement (14, 17) and parking (19, 20) measures.
  - Signage (14, 49-53) and logo deployment (21, 22).
  - Walking routes and access (23 -26) improved access to certain monuments (27) promotion of academic and specialist activities (28 - 34), coordination and improvement of visitor centre facilities (35 . 37) new events with archaeological, musical, literary, natural or historical themes (38) , accommodation (40 -45) and retail (46 -48) issues.
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## 5 21st Century

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By 2000, the Burren was increasingly seen as a cultural landscape (as described by O'Rourke) by policy makers and tourism interests. This perspective is clearly put in the opening page of the Report of the Committee set up to report to the Heritage Minister towards the end of the Burren National Park visitor centre controversy.

### **Consultative Committee on the Heritage of the Burren, 2000, Report to the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands**

The Report opens with the assertion that there is no Burren without the people of the Burren.<sup>33</sup> It further stresses human input into the current environment,

The mark of mankind is an important aspect in the formation of the Burren and its continuation is essential to maintain the landscape as we know today. The bulk of the land is in the hands of farmers and their contribution is essential.<sup>34</sup>

Whilst believing that the IUCN's (World Conservation Union) Protected Landscape status could offer a management framework, the Committee wanted to explore further the possible restrictions that this might mean for local people,

The Committee felt that the designation of the Burren under IUCN Category V (Protected Landscape) merits investigation. There is at present inadequate knowledge in the Committee on the implications...<sup>35</sup>

Recommended brand to be carried through official literature, signage, tourism operators and any general promotions that take place<sup>36</sup>

The Burren should target its marketing at the Eco-tourism visitor. Special programmes giving emphasis to the walker, cyclist and special interest areas such as flora and fauna have long been identified as a target market for the Burren. Eco-tourism has a low environmental impact on the region and contribute (sic) with longer stays and more bed nights in the area.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *Consultative Committee on the Heritage of the Burren, p. 1*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid p. 7*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid, p. 5*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid p. 8*

<sup>37</sup> *idem*

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However, echoing a theme of the Brady Shipman Martin report, the Committee felt that the visitor needs to *experience* the region through more interactive tourism and suggested the development of Fáilte rooms in villages as a community-based initiative, modelled in the International Lounge in Kanazawa, Japan.<sup>38</sup>

Its other recommendations included the following:

- In line with many other bodies, the committee advocated better traffic management including a one-way coach system and more training for tourism industry staff
- Implementation of the Burren Monuments strategy
- Support for the widespread distribution of the Burren Code drawn up under the Burren Tourism Environmental Initiative
- A structured programme of agricultural research
- A number of initiatives to safeguard, record and promote traditions in folklore, built heritage, arts and culture.

### **The Burren Tourism and Environment Initiative, Final Report 2000**

The Burren Tourism Environmental Initiative<sup>39</sup> was primarily aimed at the management of the interface between tourism and environment in the Burren

Its activities included the development of a website, drawing up of a Burren Code, training for accommodation providers, a limestone pavement rescue event and traffic management pilots.

In an impact survey, PWC found that over half of respondents had a poor understanding of the Burren. This theme was later developed by the Burren Connect surveys in 2007. The project identified a key educational role for tourism operators and accommodation providers,

Accommodation Providers were identified as the conduit for conveying reliable, quality information to visitors to the Burren....an environmental message is best conveyed to visitors by the host community.+

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<sup>38</sup> *Consultative Committee on the Heritage of the Burren, p.9*

<sup>39</sup> *Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2000, p.3*

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In its finding that the tourism industry can effectively intervene to conserve the environment, it asserts a caveat that a real incentive must exist to sustain participation by the wider tourism community in the longer term (to activities with environmental objectives). Such an incentive was, according to the report, provided by the BTEI project's support materials .

The project demonstrated that such an incentive existed and the visitors responded positively to the material provided by the pilot group.<sup>40</sup> Further, it claimed that such materials resulted in visitors wishing to stay longer in the area,

Dialogue with accommodation providers revealed, and the visitor survey confirmed, that exposure to the material provided under the Initiative resulted in a desire by visitors to extend of (sic) their stay in the Burren.<sup>41</sup>

The report concludes with a summary of recommendations on matters other than the provision of information and education,

in maintaining the basic tourism resource, intervention in a sensitive landscape like the Burren demands a level of visitor management that promotes particular uses of the landscape by visitors. Principally, this relates to the diversion of some traffic to lesser used sites, the management of visitors on and between sites and of the general behaviour of visitors in the landscape, particularly where there is a threat of damage to monuments, the flora or landscape features.<sup>42</sup>

**Eileen O'Rourke, 'Socio-natural interaction and landscape dynamics in the Burren, Ireland' in *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 70, 2005**

Most literature, especially that associated with policy makers or local agencies, agree that tourism is necessary for the economic fabric of the area but that it must be sustainable by having an education input and diverting visitors from unsustainable activities and vulnerable locations.

O'Rourke dissents from this view as she sees tourism as benefiting only small numbers especially in the east Burren and getting in the way of life of others.

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<sup>40</sup> Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2000, p.33

<sup>41</sup> *idem*

<sup>42</sup> *ibid* p.4

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Contrary to policy expectations, the majority of the inhabitants of the internal Burren do not profit directly from tourism, apart from seasonal employment in poorly paid tourist facilities, which are concentrated along the coast. Inland from the coast very few farmers are involved in agri-tourism, preferring to commute to farm jobs in surrounding industrial towns, such as Shannon. The brevity of the tourist season, which coincides with the peak agricultural season, the financial investments need to bring their dwellings up to tourist standards, along with what is often described as a clash in mentalities (tourists seen as new colonists), are all given as reasons why the farmers of the internal Burren have not enthusiastically embraced the tourist option.<sup>43</sup>

She cites studies in Connemara that found that the economic benefits of green tourism seldom benefit the rural communities upon whose cultural and natural heritage green tourism depends.

### **Brendan Dunford, Farming in the Burren, 2002**

Dunford sees an opportunity to deliver a model of sustainable agriculture for the Burren, one that meets the needs of farmers and their environment, while benefiting from, and facilitating the needs of, other sectors such as tourism.<sup>44</sup>

To fully avail of this opportunity, it must first of all be appreciated that the Burren is a dynamic, living, landscape, closely attuned to human activity, enlivened by human presence, threatened by human neglect and excess.<sup>45</sup>

He believes that awareness of the role of agriculture in the Burren's past and future needs to be improved amongst farmers, environmentalists and administrators,

There remains a critical lack of awareness among farmers of the resource that they are being paid to protect.....equally, many representatives of local, regional and state management bodies, visitors and even well intentioned conservationists remain hopelessly oblivious to the important role that farmers play in protecting, and contributing to the Burren's heritage....this is a situation that needlessly stifles co-operation and development.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> O'Rourke, 2005, p.78

<sup>44</sup> Dunford, 2002, p.97

<sup>45</sup> *idem*

<sup>46</sup> *idem*

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Although, Dunford sees a more positive potential for tourism than O'Rourke, he recognises that it has not begun to deliver what it has promised as an mechanism for complementing or diversifying farming activity,

Tourism, frequently mooted as the panacea for the financial concerns of Burren farmers, has so far failed to deliver in its enormous failure in the region, as reflected in the dramatic gap between the percentage of farmers who host tourists on their land, and those who benefit in any way.<sup>47</sup>

### **Clare County Council, North Clare Area Plan, 2005**

Major objectives of the current Local Area Plan are

to facilitate the growth of innovative and integrated tourism products which respects and compliments (sic) the unique environment, traditions and diverse resources of North Clare and

to conserve and enhance the local distinctiveness reflected in the local built environment, the unique natural landscape and the cultural heritage of the plan area....<sup>48</sup>

The Plan makes provision for the development of outdoor activity tourism and environmental tourism,

Opportunities exist to further develop the area, especially for special interest tourism like marine tourism and eco-tourism.<sup>49</sup>

The potential exists to encourage a larger proportion of the tourism traffic to stop within the North Clare area for longer periods to make use of the numerous rural and town based attractions....of particular relevance to North Clare are the following trends:

- Shorter and more frequent breaks
- Tourists increasingly require stimulation and experiences
- Increase in European flights to Shannon Airport
- Increasing number of independent holidays

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<sup>47</sup> Dunford, 2002, p.99

<sup>48</sup> Clare County Council, 2005, p.9

<sup>49</sup> *ibid*, p.15

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- Increasing interest in the Burren environment.<sup>50</sup>

Other tourism sectors identified in the Plan as having development potential in North Clare are:

- Marine based tourism e.g. scuba diving, sailing, windsurfing, whale and dolphin watching
- Activity and Adventure Tourism e.g. golf, sea, river and lake angling and horse riding
- Nature based/Eco Tourism e.g. bird watching and studying Burren flora
- Backpacking

The Council aims to support special interest tourism,

the specialist visitor markets, including marine, water and eco-tourism are all markets which North Clare could continue to develop on the strength of its many natural assets which would be of appeal to an international market. The Council will support and promote development which is considered to develop these markets.<sup>51</sup>

All planning policy in the area is to be predicated on environmental protection - proposals for developments which are in harmony with the area's rural heritage and promote sustainable tourism will be supported.<sup>52</sup>

**Liam Lysaght, Wildlife Officer with the Heritage Council, 'The Burren: the case for a different kind of National Park', in Heritage Outlook, Summer/Autumn 2005**

Lysaght's opening statement is bold and echoes views of the Consultative Committee, Dunford and O'Rourke,

Trying to separate the natural from the cultural heritage of the Burren is futile, it is one and the same thing.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Clare County Council, 2005, p.15

<sup>51</sup> *ibid* p.21

<sup>52</sup> *ibid* p.22

<sup>53</sup> Lysaght, 2005, p.8

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He echoes themes that are now becoming a consensus - the Burren's heritage is a consequence of, and has been maintained by, generations of low intensity livestock farming and the once dominant position of agriculture as the primary economic activity in the Burren has changed to it being only one component of the local economy. Tourism and recreation have become much more dominant economic forces.<sup>54</sup>

He notes the state has land in the south east Burren (1673 ha designated as a National Park) and Keelhilla in the north east Burren (145 ha designated as Nature Reserve). Otherwise the remaining land in the Burren uplands is privately owned and most is designated as Special Area of conservation (SAC).<sup>55</sup>

In reviewing attempts of the previous years to initiate new management provision for the area, he is unequivocal,

**“The Tourism in the Burren – A Strategic Plan (BSM), the Burren Monument Strategy and the Burren Consultative Committee have all attempted, and failed, to produce any strategic action or planning for the Burren.”**<sup>56</sup>

In order to move forward, he argues that what is needed is a radically new approach to strategic planning, management and decision making in the Burren, one that fills the void between the general policy context provided by the County Development Plan and the more site-specific planning provided by the Local Area Plans. This could be achieved through the designation of all of north Clare, an area of 63,000 from the Cliffs of Moher in the west to Corofin and Gort in the east and Kinvara to the north, as a National Park, run by a special National Park authority. The task of a National Park would be to reconcile national policies with local needs. This National Park would acknowledge the landscape is a living landscape in which people work and live, and where certain types of economic development and tourism will be facilitated and even encouraged.<sup>57</sup>

Such a Park would be categorized as a Protected Landscape management category of the IUCN (World Conservation Union, defined as an area of land where the interaction of people and nature over time has produced an area of distinct character with significant aesthetic, ecological and/or cultural value, and often with high biological

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<sup>54</sup> Lysaght, 2005, p.8

<sup>55</sup> *idem*

<sup>56</sup> *ibid* p.9

<sup>57</sup> *idem*

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diversity. Safeguarding the integrity of this traditional interaction is vital to the protection, maintenance and evolution of such an area.<sup>58</sup>

Lysaght believes the advantages of such a designation include 1) the marketing potential of the National Park brand for the area, 2) the allowance for a system of zoning upon which management policies and decisions can be based and crucially 3) the provision of a forum to allow residents, visitors, academics, policy-makers and planners to negotiate their interest

The area would require staff with very different skills to those traditionally associated with national Parks in Ireland. Besides expertise in nature conservation. Teachers, tourism specialists and even business advisors to assist with the proper development of the area. It would be all about bringing nature conservation into mainstream rural development.<sup>59</sup>

### **Burren Beo - [www.burrenbeo.ie](http://www.burrenbeo.ie)**

Whilst not a book or periodical, the Burren Beo website is both a forum of current perspectives and a record of the work of the Burren Life project with farmers in the area.

It notes that

The economy of the Burren has seen a steady shift in recent years from one based primarily on agriculture and associated industries, to one in which the services sector plays an increasingly large role.

Echoing O'Rourke (2005) and Dunford (2002), the site notes the low level of tourism activity in the eastern upland Burren,

After agriculture, the next most important sector is services (20%), often associated with tourism, and particularly important in areas near the towns of Lisdoonvarna and Ballyvaughan. Lisdoonvarna (DED) has 32% of its jobs in the services sector....in contrast, rural upland DEDs such as Oughtmama (0%), Noughval (4%) and Carran (7%) all have very low numbers in the services sectors, confirming the limited role that tourism plays in the economy of the more remote, agricultural areas of the Burren.

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<sup>58</sup> Lysaght, 2005, pp.9-10

<sup>59</sup> Ibid p.12

The website, like Lysaght, laments the lack of action and coordination,

**“In spite of the need to develop the Burren’s potential as an Eco-Tourism destination (as established in numerous reports on the region), little or nothing has been done thus far. While local walking guides and other service providers do operate in the region, there is no umbrella-structure to support the promotion or management of the Burren’s green tourism industry. In a nutshell, the story of eco-tourism in the Burren is one of so much potential, so little of it yet realized.”**

The Burrenbeo Trust recently launched a new initiative aimed at exploring options for a more strategic approach to the management of the Burren.

This initiative emanates from three basic premises. Firstly, that after all the reports that have been commissioned and recommendations made on different aspects of the Burren, action is long overdue. Secondly, that there is an urgent need to move from partial perspectives to an overall strategic management approach to the Burren as a whole. Finally, that strategic management will only succeed if it is based on aligning economic and social development on the one hand with conservation on the other.<sup>60</sup>

### **Stephen Ward, Strategic Management of the Burren: Exploring the Options, 2006**

This paper reviewed existing literature pertaining to options for strategic management of the Burren, reviewed Irish and international case studies on management approaches to areas with similar problems and explored future options.

Its starting premises were that 1) despite the existence of several reports, many of the identified challenges remain, 2) there is a need to move from partial perspectives to an overall strategic management approach for the Burren as a whole 3) strategic management must be based on harmony between conservation and economic/social development, 4) appropriate national legislation needs to back up any strategic management approach adopted, 5) state policy in agriculture and tourism should support those in sensitive environments to implement sustainable tourism and landscape

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<sup>60</sup> All information and quotations in this section taken from [www.burrenbeo.ie](http://www.burrenbeo.ie)

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management practices and 6) education and awareness-raising actions need to take place on the ground to complement top-down policy.<sup>61</sup>

The recommended options included:

- Adoption of Lysaght's (2005) proposed 63,000 hectare management unit.
- Exploration of Protected Landscape designation and either Special Amenity Area orders or Landscape Conservation Area Orders.
- Exploration of the Scottish legislative model with its two-tier approach involving the local community.
- Preparation of a management plan for the current Burren National Park.
- Appointment of rangers and support staff Burrenwide.
- Generation of a budget commensurate with the Burren's reputation.
- Twinning of the Burren with an area of similar heritage features which has overcome similar management problems.
- Placing of the Burren on the tentative list of candidate World Heritage Sites.
- Development of a tax credit scheme for conservation open to all landowners.<sup>62</sup>

In respect of Category 5 Protected Landscape status, Ward argues that its emphasis on the interaction of people and nature over time make it more relevant to the Burren than Category 2 which is more akin to a National Nature Reserve. He contrasts Ireland's lack of any land currently with Category 2 status with the UK (153 sites), France (44), Sweden (292), Germany (1035) etc. He cites the Scottish legislative model with its general primary legislation and local designation orders as worthy of further exploration.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ward, 2006, pp. 7-8

<sup>62</sup> Cf. *ibid*, pp. 63-64

<sup>63</sup> Cf. *ibid*, pp. 37 - 41

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## **Burren Connect, 2007 Surveys**

During the summer of 2007, 538 persons at visitor centres and a range of local accommodation were surveyed to explore these issues. Only those who stated that they were on holiday were surveyed - those on a day out or a business trip were excluded.

Visitor satisfaction rates were very high . 96% said that the Burren had met their expectations and 88% would visit again.

Visits to visitor/interpretative centres and archaeological monuments were the most popular activities amongst the group surveyed but it must be borne in mind that many of the interviews were conducted at these sites.

There is considerable unsatisfied demand for walking routes, nature-watching and water-based activities as well as local produce and cultural events. Responses to other questions indicate that those with greatest environmental awareness are more likely to engage in these activities although they do not profess to have significantly higher interest levels.

63 accommodation providers were surveyed (72% of these were B+B's and the remainder were mostly self-catering, hotels, hostels and campsites). Visits to these premises tend to be very short - 59% of their visitors stay 1 -2 nights; 27% stay 2-4 nights. Just 14% stay longer than four nights.

When examined together, the length of visitor stay and the demand for activities suggest there is considerable scope to increase overall time spent by visitors in the area. Many visitors expressed a desire to engage in more activities than they actually undertook in their holiday although these wishes were not tested against issues of price point, practicality, weather conditions etc. However, as 69% were also visiting other parts of Ireland on their holidays, less than 1 in 3 stay entirely in the Burren and only 14% stay more than four nights, it would be fair to conclude that there is a significant scope to extend the duration of stay through increased accessibility, promotion and/or availability of the identified activities.

The Cliffs of Moher Centre's Marketing Research Report of 2007 underlined the shortness of visitor stays . less than 25% of visitors to the Cliffs who were surveyed

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stayed in North Clare the night previous to visiting the Cliffs and a similar figure stayed the night after.<sup>64</sup>

Regarding visitors' appreciation of and respect for the environment, Burren Connect survey participants were asked to rate the impact (high, medium, low or none) of removing stones, picking flowers or building mini-dolmens on the environment.

36% of respondents rated all three activities as having high impact. Therefore, just over one third of visitors surveyed are aware of the impacts of these activities. This is despite the fact that 64% are aware of legislative protection. The survey analysis suggested that there is a need, therefore, to provide information about legislative protection and explain the impacts of certain practices for visitors who are not automatically aware of the fragility of an environment that is new and strange to them.

Key learning that emerges from the survey is that information on sustainable visitor behaviour must be targeted especially at younger visitors, continental Europeans and those who do not engage in active outdoor pursuits.

The survey of industry operators yielded a strong endorsement of proposals to develop the Burren as an eco-tourism location,

80% of visitor centre managers and 97% of accommodation providers believe that the Burren should be developed and promoted as an eco-tourism location, including the development of a brand to identify the Burren as an eco-tourism destination. Almost all believe this would have a potentially positive economic impact. 60% of accommodation provider respondents said that they would be interested in achieving an internationally recognised accreditation as an eco-tourism provider.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> *UL Marketing Centre, 2007, pp. 13-14*

<sup>65</sup> *Burren Connect Surveys, 2007*

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## 6 Conclusion

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The emerging literature and policy consensus on the way forward for Burren tourism can be succinctly summed up by these short quotes from Shannon Development and Brady Shipman Martin,

The Ireland's tourism product must be based around the three pillars of people, place and culture....<sup>66</sup> and Tourism cannot stand alone, it must be part of an integrated conservation, tourism and agricultural strategy.<sup>67</sup>

There certainly seems to be a consensus that in any future designation and management arrangements, all relevant interests need to be taken into account, that conservation, farming, tourism and community cannot develop independently of each other.

Whilst a policy and literature consensus has come about, there is a strong sense of the ground that action has been lacking. Although not a book or a periodical and perhaps not classified as literature, an Irish Times article of 27/09/2008, (Burren Plans are left barren) however, highlights the frustrations felt over the inaction as well some of the obstacles to progress.

Author of Farming in the Burren, Brendan Dunford is quoted, In one way, not a lot has happened in the past decade.....but the Burren is such an extraordinary resource, that we are still waiting for it to be developed in a respectful manner and for it to fulfil its potential properly.<sup>68</sup>

Chairman of the Corofin Development Association, Gerard Kennedy, points out one of the key obstacles in proposing new management models for the area,

The implication with all these calls (for World Heritage Site status) is that from a local perspective there are always restrictions to being named with any of those headings. What local will want to know is how would such a designation restrict normal work practices, and how will their lives be affected.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> *Shannon Development, 2008, p.5*

<sup>67</sup> *Brady Shipman Martin, 1994*

<sup>68</sup> *Brian O'Connell, Irish Times, September 2th, 2008, p. 9*

<sup>69</sup> *idem*

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If renewed efforts are to be made to develop the Burren in a respectful manner, there are currently few tools in existing literature or documentation to help describe and measure potential progress in this area. To assess whether eco-tourism or environmental tourism through visitor management is working, there are no agreed indicators and little baseline information, whether statistical or qualitative, save for part the 2007 Burren Connect surveys which sought to establish visitors awareness of the impacts of certain activities such as dolmen-building.

To build on the growing consensus about the need for tourism development that respects the environment, there is a considerable challenge to the producers of policy and literature to 1) facilitate agreed understanding of what such progress will be, 2) develop mechanisms to measure it and 3) resource the measuring process.



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