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Inspire Policy Making with Territorial Evidence

UPTAKE ARTICLE

ESPON Peer Learning Workshop: Greening Tourism: Reimagining the Tourism Sector in Ireland

Virtual

20 April 2021

Objective



The ESPON-TNO programme organised a virtual Peer Learning Workshop with ESPON researchers and academic and Irish stakeholders on the 20th of April, 2021.

In the current COVID-19 pandemic, where the emphasis for many sectors is on recovery, this meeting focused on how the Irish tourism sector aims to “survive to thrive” over the short term.

While keeping tourism alive is an obvious objective, COVID-19 has provided the whole sector with the opportunity to invest in the growth of sustainable tourism from 2022 onwards.

In the long term, Ireland’s emerging tourism strategy for a post-COVID landscape recognises the sector’s role as custodian of the environment and as part of this, to explore specific options offered by different forms of tourism (i.e. slow tourism, ecotourism) and to evaluate the potential of natural areas and the role of the public realm in broadening leisure and recreation offers. While not a new concept to Irish tourism, growing sustainable tourism is a renewed ambition for the sector, with an emphasis being placed on growth/value over volume, engaging the community, and lengthening seasonality.

Thus, the general goal of the event was to generate a debate among policymakers and practitioners in the sector on building a new sustainable tourism strategy for the whole country and specific territories, and to consider the enabling role of spatial planning. The workshop’s objective was to show and discuss how ESPON knowledge can both inform and inspire the development of national policy instruments and to consider how national and regional stakeholders can make (better) use of trans-European knowledge and case studies from other countries.

Out of the 186 registrations, an average of 80 participants from 21 member states attended the event. The largest proportion of attendees were from Ireland, Italy, and Belgium. The people registered belonged to three groups: professionals (36.5%), public servants (35%), or academics (28.5%). Overall, the event has proven to be successful with a high level of satisfaction.

Summary

The event started with a general introduction of the ESPON programme, its goals and tools for stakeholders by Michaela Gensheimer (Senior Project Expert - ESPON EGTC), focusing on the Peer Learning workshop as the selected choice for promoting a wider practical use of ESPON research outputs and knowledge transfer.

The opening session was moderated by Maria Prezioso (University of Rome Tor Vergata and ECP Italy) who gave a few introductory words highlighting the role of the sustainable approach for the recovery of the tourism sector.

This session focused on the contribution of ESPON on tourism-related issues, with a focus on two ESPON programmes. The first approach concerns an original carrying capacity methodology for tourism, developed by the ESPON Tourism project, which aims to provide a decision support tool in terms of the interactions of tourism and the regional setting and territorial specificities. Bernd Schu (ÖIR GmbH - Austrian Institute for Regional Studies), as project lead, explained the methodology by means of an Irish case study, which involved applying the methodology to the Burren and Cliffs of Moher UNESCO Global Geopark especially for this workshop.

The second approach explores the central role that green infrastructures and ecosystem services could play in building a sustainable tourism strategy by means of their operationalisation within spatial planning. Gemma Garcia-Blanco (TECNALIA) – Project Lead of the ESPON GRETA project (GReen infrastructure: Enhancing biodiversity and ecosysTem services for territoriAl development) – provided both general insights about Green Infrastructure approaches as a reference for integrated tourism and specific policy recommendations arising from an Irish case study for Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown.

The second session was moderated by Caroline Creamer (Maynooth University and ECP Ireland) and, following opening remarks on the crisis facing the Irish tourism sector, called on officials responsible for policy development to reimagine the tourism sector. This session illustrated the current approaches and visions underway.

Orla Carroll (Head of Product Development at Fáilte Ireland) gave an overview of the role that the tourism sector plays in an Irish context, both in terms of economic weight and as an impact on Irish society in terms of tourist presence and distribution in time and space. She further highlighted how tourism sustains communities and drives regional development in a manner that most other industries struggle to deliver, noting that from 2022 onwards, sustainable tourism would play an increasing role. Éanna Rowe (Western Regional Manager at Waterways Ireland), in considering the potential of nature-based assets, presented the Tourism Masterplan for the Shannon Navigation & Shannon Erne Waterway, explaining its strategic rationale, key pillars, and implementation structure. Martin Colreavy (Senior Adviser and Head of Urban Policy, Capital Investment and Regeneration at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage) discussed Ireland's urban regeneration approach, within the broad vision and investment choices of Project Ireland 2040, which is reflected in the National Planning Framework (NPF) up to 2040, and in the National Development Plan up to 2027. In this context, the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund mechanism was explained and Damien Ginty (Senior Planner at Kerry County Council) presented a range of initiatives planned for, or that are already underway, in one of Ireland's key tourism destinations Killarney, County Kerry.

The conclusion of the final session was moderated by David Kelly (Southern Regional Assembly and ESPON MC Ireland) and gave the floor to local and national stakeholders to speak about their efforts to sustain a sector in survival mode, recovery perspectives, and to reflect on the evidence presented.

Focusing initially on the Burren and Cliffs of Moher UNESCO Global Geopark, the Burren Ecotourism Network role was illustrated by its CEO, Jarlath O'Dwyer and by Carol Gleeson (Manager of the Burren & Cliffs of Moher UNESCO Global Geopark). The aim of the Network is to establish the Burren as a premier internationally recognised sustainable tourism region by adopting a code of practice for the activities involved in the Network and distributed among 12 rural towns and villages. Rob Rankin, as Managing Director of Sustainable Travel Ireland, a leading certification company, presented the benefits in the long term to promote sustainable and responsible tourism. Finally, Maria Melia (Head of Tourism Policy & Marketing Unit - Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media) spoke about the transitioning policy perspective for Ireland, explaining the contribution of the Sustainable Tourism Working Group in the elaboration of Ireland's Tourism Action Plan 2019-2021. The ambition of which is for Ireland to be among world-leaders in sustainable tourism practices.

Luuk Boelens (Ghent University) closed the event by highlighting some key elements of the discussion.

Main discussion

The present COVID crisis has pressed the reset button for tourism. It offers the opportunity to learn from the past and to build on research and on existing case studies. The application of the tool developed within the ESPON Tourism project to an Irish destination was very well received, stimulating the consideration of experimental use in other areas (e.g. the South-West of Ireland). Interest was also expressed in possible synergies with other industries by using big data.

Green infrastructures, when strategically planned, are a key element in sustainable tourism: connecting places and, given their multifunctionality, ensuring that sustainable tourism planning is very much linked to a diverse recreational offering. This has prompted reflections on the coherence of strategies aimed at international tourism attractiveness and strategies more linked to 'domestic' tourism and recreational functions in general. But the reality is that in an Irish context, tourist satisfaction (which was very dependent on international tourists up until 2019) goes hand in hand with resident satisfaction.

The emerging idea is that focusing on the promotion of activities that respond both to 'domestic' tourism and to the recreational needs of the resident population is a good approach to ensure liveability and synergy between the tourism sector and the territorial contexts. This needs to be integrated into an effective sustainable tourism strategy. Initiatives supported by national planning policy and associated urban and rural regeneration funds confirm this direction.

This, in turn, feeds into future international promotion strategies that aim to confirm the idea of a world-leading Green Ireland as a sustainable destination.

In Ireland's general policy context, the achievement of both the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) envisaged in Agenda 2030 and the objectives related to Climate goals need to be fully faced by the tourism sector. The holistic approach of UNWTO in defining sustainable tourism – "tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities" – is the reference shared by all the stakeholders. Then, tourism has to

take a full account of current and future economic, environmental, cultural, and social impacts addressing the needs of visitors, industry, the environment, and the host communities.

From 2015, tourism was a key element of the economic strategy in Ireland, with development in the tourism sector reflecting the high standard of environmental and economic sustainability, implementing specific biannual Tourism action plans. The pandemic wave stalled the roll-out of the last Action Plan 2019-2021 and has pushed for a New National Tourism Policy aimed at recovery and mainstreaming sustainability. However, in building an Interim Tourism Action Plan in this transition phase, the guiding principles elaborated in the framework of the Sustainable Tourism Working Group, comprising government departments and tourism industry representatives, still maintain their validity.

The whole idea of the balance between developing attractive tourism destinations and protecting the environmental ecosystem is a challenge that is necessary to address and develop in a new national tourism strategy. This strategy should also address the role of regional and local initiatives that build on existing 'products', such as Ireland's growing greenways network.

In this framework, it is necessary for national and local agencies to better collaborate and coordinate activities, and together with all stakeholders to reimagine tourism and take steps towards more sustainable tourism.

Conclusion

Overall, one might conclude that Ireland is on a good road towards more sustainable tourism. The intention to integrate international tourism with domestic needs and interests, and vice versa, that had already started some years ago, seems to progress bit by bit. Moreover, there are already good signs that within Ireland a sustainable tourism strategy is beginning to be built within the various realms and levels of governance, including spatial planning and stakeholders from outside the government. However, this also opens up a myriad of possible cross-overs between not only tourism, recreation, and cultural-natural preservation, but also with other sectors, such as the caring and medical hospitality sector, digital technologies, sustainable food production, etc. These possibilities are not yet fully explored, and might give not only an extra boost to sustainable tourism, but also to those other sectors. Next to that, there is still a need to think about how international tourists would travel to Ireland. At the moment, this is often not done in the most sustainable ways. More sustainable alternatives (like hydrogen airplanes, electric ferries, or sustainable public transport) are not easily available. Here, one might conclude that there would be a need to focus a bit more on specific lifestyles and/or age groups, in order to also enhance a more sustainable and slow travel from abroad. It would then close the package deal. Therewith, there is still a lot of work to be done.



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The ESPON EGTC is the Single Beneficiary of the ESPON 2020 Cooperation Programme. The Single Operation within the programme is implemented by the ESPON EGTC and co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund, the EU Member States and the Partner States, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland.

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