

AlmaTourism Special Issue N. 2, 2014: Bell A., Emanuel L., Engaging Communities in their Heritage: Collaboration between Higher Education and the Voluntary Sector in Wales and Ireland

AlmaTourism

Journal of Tourism, Culture and Territorial Development

Engaging Communities in their Heritage: Collaboration between Higher Education and the Voluntary Sector in Wales and Ireland

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on an **Interreg** funded pilot project entitled ‘Heritage and Culture for Learning, Empowerment and Sustainable Tourism’. The project was a collaborative development between a Higher Education Institution in Wales and a Voluntary Sector Organisation in Ireland and adopted an innovative approach to engaging communities in their heritage. The central aim of the project was to develop and promote joint opportunities for the creation of sustainable tourism products which build on the natural assets (people and landscape), built assets, culture and heritage of the Wales Ireland cross border region. In practice this was achieved through an innovative approach combining research, lifelong learning, higher level skills development, networking, marketing and business development through active engagement of local communities. The pilot project ended in July 2013, and the focus of this presentation is an evaluation of the project outcomes and experiences.

Keywords: Higher Education, Sustainable Tourism, Local Communities, Wales, Ireland

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Introduction

This paper focuses on the outcomes and experiences of an innovative project aimed at engaging communities in their heritage by adopting an approach which involved them in considering and sharing their sense of place. The HERCULES (Heritage and Culture for Learning, Empowerment and Sustainable tourism) project was centred on the concept of sense of place. In recent years, tourism, heritage and planning strategies have increasingly drawn on the 'sense of place' concept. Many authors have tried to put into words what sense of place means - fundamentally 'Sense of Place' is about people, the way in which throughout time they have stamped their mark on the landscape, the way they have interpreted their personal and social history and the way in which they have interacted, and continue to interact with each other, and with their locality, '*a way of seeing, knowing and understanding the world*' (Creswell, 2004, p.11).

Malpas (2008) outlines:

'Sense of place' refers us, on the face of it, both to a sense of the character or identity that belongs to certain places or locales, as well as to a sense of our own identity as shaped in relation to those places—to a sense of 'belonging to' those places.' Malpas (2008, p. 199).

The project piloted elements of training and a cross-border social network with the aim of contributing to community capacity building and acting as a catalyst for sustainable tourism business opportunities and jobs.

In order to achieve this the project was awarded an Interreg 4A ERDF grant of 394,731 euros, which would be matched by the partners (University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD) and Dunhill Rural Enterprises Limited (DREL)) by a contribution of 131,678 euros. The Ireland Wales Territorial Co-operation Programme 2007-2013 (INTERREG 4A) aims 'to further develop Irish Welsh co-operation in the areas of employment, innovation, climate change and sustainable development', and this project was successful in gaining funding under Priority 2: Climate Change and Sustainable Regeneration, Theme 2: Sustainable Regeneration of Communities. In many ways the project was unique in respect of its project partners representing the Higher Education sector in Wales (UWTSD) and the voluntary sector in Ireland (DREL), combining higher level learning with grassroots focused community involvement.

The pilot project, which ran from July 2011 to June 2013 and was centred on the counties of Waterford in Ireland and Carmarthenshire in Wales, comprised six work packages – research, community engagement, training, project management and marketing, equal opportunities and sustainable development. The two counties which were the focus for the pilot project, Carmarthenshire and Waterford have similar profiles – waterfront towns set within a rural hinterland, both experiencing issues associated with depopulation and agricultural/ industrial decline. Tourism, and specifically sustainable tourism built on the heritage and natural assets of the counties had been identified as an opportunity.

Aims and Objectives of the Project

The key aim of the project was to contribute to economic competitiveness by developing skills, engendering a lifelong learning culture and maximising opportunities for indigenous tourism which reflect the character and sense of place of the Wales Ireland cross border region. It was planned that the project would achieve this through the facilitation of a regional learning community benefiting from information technology and higher level skills development, knowledge and experience transfer and sustainable networking. The basis for the creation of this learning community was the acknowledgement of the identity and sense of place that transcends the region which draws from a common heritage, myths and legends, industry, landscape and language. The project team felt strongly that sustainable tourism should be embedded within this sense of place framework to emphasise the importance of identity and uniqueness of the project region in an increasingly globalised world. Tourists are interested in the uniqueness of place, and many diaspora communities search for links with their past to gain a sense of their cultural heritage.

Maximising the potential of sense of place requires a collaborative, grassroots approach enabling the exchange of ideas, stories and good practice. It also requires that the tourism micro-businesses and Small and Medium sized Enterprises (SMEs) characteristic of the region engage in learning and skills development which will enable them to respond to issues of identity and competitiveness. Within the project this was achieved by an innovative approach to learning using information technology, and specifically social media, to create a flexible, collaborative learning environment where skills are developed, knowledge exchanged and sustainable partnerships and networks are created. It was planned that the learning community and social network created would itself act as a marketing tool and communicative bridge between the region and the external world, and would hopefully act as a catalyst for the development of cross border working partnerships, tourist trails and the creation of social enterprises.

The project was designed in cumulative layers which engaged communities in skills development, regional competitiveness and product development:

1. Initial research (drawing from previous) on identity and sense of place of the region which will inform the development of postgraduate training and online social network. Development of training in online social networking tools.
2. Engagement of project beneficiaries – tourism and related SMEs, micro-businesses and potential start ups.
3. Networking events to facilitate training in online social networking tools and techniques.
4. Development of and engagement in online social network to share experience, stories etc. Concurrent development of online Postgraduate Certificate in Sense of Place.

5. Pilot, refinement and launch of online postgraduate certificate enabling collaborative learning.
6. Identification and facilitation of products emanating from online social network and learning community e.g. trails, learning vacations, social enterprises.
7. Launch of online social network as a marketing tool aimed at the region's diaspora communities e.g Irish/ Welsh societies overseas.

(Interreg 4A Application HERCULES, 2010)

The Significance of Community-Based Cultural Tourism

At regional, national and international levels the importance of heritage has, in recent years, been highlighted by developments in policy, funding targeted at existing sites and the development of new heritage resources and sites. The Cultural Heritage Blueprint (2008) expressed:

"The UK cultural heritage sector is a world leader. Along with the rest of the UK's creative and cultural industries, cultural heritage plays a central role in shaping our national identity, supporting the development and sustainability of local and national economies and providing a source of inspiration and creativity."

The relationship between Heritage and Tourism is self-evident. The Wales Tourism Strategy, 'Achieving Our Potential' outlines the importance of embracing a sustainable approach to tourism development which benefits society, involves local communities and enhances Wales' unique environmental and cultural assets, suggesting that

"Tourism has a major role to play in developing a dynamic, attractive identity for Wales through the active promotion of its rich cultural diversity which in turn would provide mutual benefit to support cultural regeneration in all parts of Wales." (p81)

In recent years, tourism, heritage and planning strategies have increasingly drawn on the 'sense of place' concept. The Welsh Assembly Government defines that '*Sense of Place embraces the distinctive sights, sounds and experiences that are rooted in a country, those unique and memorable qualities that resonate with local people and visitors alike.*' Sense of place is not so much a distinct tourism product – it is about distinctiveness and belonging. All sustainable forms of tourism need to be about sense of place, because it is about drawing from and maximising your natural, distinctive assets such as people, language, landscape, myths and legends.

In other words, sense of place in the context of tourism is sustainable cultural tourism which has indigenous people and places at its heart. The relevance and level of demand for this has been well documented. The United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) states that cultural tourism represents between 35-40% of tourism worldwide and is growing at a rate of 15% per annum. ATLAS demonstrated that across Europe, since 1997, the proportion of visitors taking cultural holidays has increased from 17.5% in 1997 to 27% in 2004. It is worth an estimated € 5.1 billion

annually to the Irish economy, and within Wales the annual value of cultural tourism by UK residents is estimated at £120 million (VisitWales), whilst the 2003 International Passenger Survey suggested that 90% of all international visitors to Wales are cultural Tourists.

The 'Review of Cultural Tourism in Wales' (2008) stressed that

'in an increasing world of homogeneity people are instinctively seeking individuality and search for places and experiences that are genuinely different. Indigenous culture, sense of place and the way of life of local people is at the heart of achieving the distinctiveness of any destination.'

It also suggests that a step towards achieving this is to:

'work with town and community groups to enhance the cultural tourism experience. Local communities and volunteers could be encouraged to act as ambassadors for their area and for Wales and appropriate training offered.'

The importance of ensuring the community is involved is also stressed by the Gothenburg Declaration on Cultural Tourism.

Key Outcomes

1. The Online Sense of Place Social Network

One key feature of the project was the use of social media to create an environment where both Irish and Welsh participants could engage in a sustainable network to share stories, learn from each other and develop opportunities for product development. The online social network was essentially a forum for exchange of experience, knowledge and stories relating to the cross border region, which in turn facilitated a shared understanding of the sense of place, opportunities and challenges of the cross border region. The social network was designed using the Ning platform, which was locally adapted to become 'my sense of place.' The Ning platform offered the opportunity for participants to upload videos, photos, audio files and to use blogs and discussion fora. It was intended that all activity centred on the sense of place of participants. Participants were also able to invite new members in. Within the pilot we had set a target of 40 participants engaging in the social network. In fact, the number engaging in the network actually surpassed this with 134 participants, including the project team. 68 of these were from Ireland, 61 from Wales and the remainder from Canada and the United States. On the site participants shared over 1,000 photographs, 39 videos and over 40 blogs, as well as contributing to forum discussions and posting news of events.

2. Postgraduate Course in Sense of Place

Building on the sense of place concept within the project, the aim was to create a programme which would enable people to learn together and draw from their own

contexts, developing skills and understanding of how to create sustainable tourism products which are embedded within the fabric of places and build on the social capital and physical assets of communities. Although within the original bid we had not committed to an accredited award during the project's lifetime, the project team decided to pursue validation within the project lifetime to give course participants added incentive and added value. The Postgraduate Certificate in Heritage Tourism: Sense of Place was therefore developed to draw from aspects of heritage, tourism and sustainable thinking to engender students in sustainable approaches to understanding and interpreting the places they live and work in. The resulting programme is a Postgraduate Certificate, which is 60 UK credits at level 7. It consists of two modules of 12 weeks of online learning each, with three assessments per module.

This first module, 'Sensing Place' aims:

- To engender a critical understanding of the concepts of place, heritage and sustainability;
- To enable students to apply concepts within their own practical contexts.

The second module, 'Interpreting and Promoting Place' aims:

- To develop an understanding of the principles and practices of interpretation, including objectives, audiences, integrated planning, media and techniques.
- To provide opportunities for critical appraisal of interpretation, and foster community based approaches to promoting place through digital media
- The ability to identify, source and contextualise ones sense of place

The programme used the Moodle Virtual Learning Environment for both modules and employed a collaborative learning approach which was based on a series of activities. Face to face induction courses were run in both Carmarthenshire and Waterford with participants prior to the start of online delivery. Weekly activities were posted for students to engage in; within the activities we wanted to try to get to the core of the authentic and engage learners in reflection about their own role within the learning right from the beginning. The focus of the activities was therefore initially centred around the students' ability to reflect on their own context and place themselves at the centre of their learning. Discussion focused on topics such as sense of place, local legends, food and sense of place, heritage, authenticity, sustainability and interpretation. The eclectic nature of the participant group meant that discussions and responses to weekly activities often offered a multi-dimensional approach.

3. Community Outcomes

Within the Postgraduate Certificate in Sense of Place, the course participants started to develop their ideas for further opportunities related to the sense of place concept. These included:

- Sense of Place Photography
- Genealogy Businesses
- Community Guides
- Community Trails
- Interpretive Plans
- Sense of Place Podcasts
- Sense of Place creative writing workshops
- 'Power Clan Gathering' in Waterford
- Storytelling
- Cultural Events

Final Thought

This project was about realising the human capital of the Wales Ireland region and acknowledging that the culture and heritage of regions is about people and communities as well as the natural and built environments they live within. Places are socially constructed by the people who contribute to them and interpret them. Sense of place is a starting point for sustainable tourism, not a product.

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