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The Wild Atlantic Way: a Tourism Journey

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An Cumann Tíreolaíochta na hÉireann

The Wild Atlantic Way – A Tourism Journey

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Abstract: The Wild Atlantic Way is possibly the most celebrated, high profile tourism initiative to be launched in Ireland in recent years. It consists of a defined touring route along the western seaboard, one of the most scenic, remote, and sensitive stretches of Irish landscape. This paper presents the principal findings from a survey of 341 tourism and hospitality product providers along the Wild Atlantic Way. The main aim of the research was to investigate the perceived impacts (economic, environmental, and socio-cultural) of this new tourism initiative on the local areas through which it passes. The results paint a generally positive picture of the effects of the route so far. However, a number of significant issues are of concern to many of the respondents; these include insufficient or inappropriate infrastructure, heightened traffic problems, increased pressure on local facilities and the perception of imbalance with regard to the dispersal of economic gain from the route. The importance of striking a balance between accessibility and sustainability is a key message which can be taken from the study.

Keywords: *tourism, sustainable, Wild Atlantic Way, tourism routes, impacts, community perception.*

Introduction

This paper explores the issue of sustainability with regard to branded tourism routes, and in particular, it examines one of the most high-profile driving routes in Europe, Ireland's Wild Atlantic Way. Developed as a branded coastal road, the Wild Atlantic Way (WAW) was launched in 2014 as Ireland's first long distance touring route, and at 1,600 miles (or 2,300km) it is claimed to be 'one of the longest defined coastal routes in the world' (wildatlanticway, 2020). The route, which stretches from Donegal to Cork, has proven to be one of the most successful tourism initiatives ever developed in Ireland. This article examines the concept of developing and selling geographical places such as tourism routes and investigates sustainability issues related to such products. In particular, the area of tourism geography is explored, with issues such as rural development, place

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commodification, and tourism sustainability being examined. To this end, the results from a survey of 341 product providers, exploring the economic, environmental and socio-cultural impacts of the Wild Atlantic Way are presented and discussed.

Routes and Trails

The interaction and connection between geographical spaces and tourism has long been a subject of interest to academic geographers, with geography positioned at the heart of tourism, since holiday-taking is inseparable from the places in which it is created, imagined, and experienced (Ateljevic and Doorne, 2004). Rural spaces, in particular, have garnered significant interest given their diversity, complexity, and sensitivity. Light (2014) points out that in an era where rural places are increasingly trying to re-imagine themselves in order to deal with the broader issues of rural change and reorganisation, there has been a growing movement away from what have been referred to as landscapes of production to landscapes of consumption. This ties in with the concept of place commodification whereby the place becomes a product that can be packaged, presented and sold (Urry, 1995). A tourism landscape is thus, 'both a represented and presented space…both a package and the commodity inside the package' (Mitchell 1994, 5). The notion of commodification of spaces has been frequently addressed in tourism research (Aitchison *et al.*, 2000; Meethan, 2001; Mosedale, 2006; Cloke and Perkins, 2002; Hayes and MacLeod, 2007; Shaw and Williams, 2004). However, the theorisation and conclusions drawn from such work has been somewhat variable. In particular, there has been a lack of consistency as to how (i.e., through what specific methods) spaces become saleable commodities, and what features spaces take on when they assume product form. According to Young and Markham (2020), to date, no author has presented a convincing explanation of what exactly is produced and sold in these circumstances, aside from generalised notions of the 'tourist experience.'

   This ambiguity is particularly evident with regards to tourism routes where the geographical product offered to visitors is often spatially quite extensive and topographically quite diverse. Theoretical ideas such as 'relational thinking' as presented by the likes of Jones (2009) or Pierce, Martin and Murphy (2011) may be useful in teasing out the meaning of geographic units such as tourist trails. These authors discuss ideas of space and even 'phase space' in the context of 'geographic becoming'. This may be conceptually useful for framing the transforming of geographical units into tourism 'spaces' via notions such as the structuring of space and 'relational place making'. The challenges in deconstructing the meaning of an ephemeral 'route' is in marked contrast to more tangible or site-specific tourism products such as particular locations and places. Thus, tourism route products pose a number of challenges for both academics and tourism practitioners. Even defining or classifying such linear attractions in very practical terms can be problematic. In the literature tourism routes are referred to using a variety of terms including; scenic route, tourist road, tourist drive, holiday route, theme route, and scenic byway. Timothy and Boyd (2015) categorise tourism trails/routes into two

types, those they term 'purposive' which are designed specifically for tourism, and those they call 'organic', which are ones that had an initial alternative purpose but have evolved over time into having a clear tourism function. Dinu and Cioaca (2008) identify different types of tourism routes based on their geographical importance. They point out that routes can be of international importance (Silk Road, Asia), national importance (Route 66, US), regionally significant (Romantic Road, Germany) or locally significant (Black Mountain Road, Wales). However, all tourism routes tend to share a common purpose – to attract tourists by offering them complementary services and experiences of both a physical and intangible nature. Moreover, Dinu and Cioaca (2008) claim that tourism routes are made up of three main components: a well-defined and attractive theme, a geographical aspect, and a cultural heritage aspect. The geographical aspect in particular is a major factor in most driving holidays with scenery and landscape playing a central role to the tourist experience. A study by Jacobson and Grue (1997) in Norway concluded that the principal aspect influencing the motorist's choice of their particular route is the view from the road. Urry (1990, 1) states that when we go away and become tourists, 'we look at the environment…we gaze at what we encounter…and the gaze is socially constructed.' The view therefore is central to the tourist route product as it provides the main sensual experience for travellers on a route-based holiday.

The significance of ancient walking routes such as the Via Francigena, or Camino de Santiago pilgrimage trails (Trono, *et al*. 2017; Kurrat, 2019) has ebbed and flowed over time (see Olsen and Trono, 2018), but in recent decades, due to their growing popularity, the development and promotion of linear trails has become a central strategy in tourism development for many agencies (see UNWTO, 2019 and Ward-Perkins, Beckmann and Ellis, 2020). Briedenhann and Wickens (2004) point out that the potential of tourism routes has long been realised, especially in developed countries. They suggest that routes can potentially increase demand for a variety of tourism types such as cultural tourism, ecotourism and rural tourism and can be particularly beneficial for less-mature areas with high cultural resources. Similarly, Greffe (1994) highlights the usefulness of developing travel routes in less-advanced rural areas as a means to create business opportunities for local populations. This is important and reflects one of the key motivations for developing travel routes in rural areas.

Impacts and Sustainability of Tourism Routes

One of the best ways to evaluate the success of a tourism initiative is to examine its various impacts. Like most tourism products, travel routes can have both positive and negative impacts on the areas and communities in which they are based. Assessing these impacts is a crucial aspect in developing successful tourism. Many studies have covered the positive impacts of various routes and trails (Murray and Graham,1997; Moore and Shafter, 2001; Dolesh, 2004; Timothy and Boyd, 2006; den Breejen 2007; Lemky, 2017; Albrecht *et al*. 2020) including the gains felt by both host communities and visitors. However, in order to provide a deeper examination of such products, sustainability is

often utilised as a framework whereby impacts (positive and negative) of a variety of activities can be explored across social, economic, and environmental dimensions of communities and their surroundings (Fyall, Templeton, Fjelstul, and Sonmez, 2016). This framework has served as the foundation for a vast amount of research in rural or eco-settings (Miller, Merriless and Coghlan, 2015; Timur and Getz, 2009). There have been a number of studies examining the sustainability of tourism routes over the years, with the focus of these studies differing quite significantly. Some have concentrated on specific aspects of sustainability e.g., the economic implications (Briedenhann and Wickens, 2004; Yi, Day, and Cai, 2011), environmental impacts (Fjelstul and Fyall, 2015), social and cultural influences (Moulin and Boniface, 2001; Snowball and Courtney, 2010) and community engagement (Hanrahan, Maguire, and Boyd, 2017). However, few have looked holistically at these sustainability elements in the context of a tourist route. This study addresses this gap as it investigates the WAW tourist route from economic, socio-cultural, and environmental perspectives. It does this from the viewpoint of the tourism product providers along the route.

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), which has been involved in developing one of the largest and most ambitious tourism routes in the world (The Silk Road), points out the main benefits that tourism routes offer. These include; the potential to increase tourism demand and income; supporting the regional division of wealth; reducing pressure on key attractions; providing a catalyst to produce new and innovative products and helping to boost partnerships between public and private sectors. The WTO also mention that tourism routes can help to secure and maintain both tangible and intangible heritage in the natural and cultural environment and enhance cultural understanding amongst local, regional, national, and international communities (UNWTO, 1999).

All these benefits of course represent the ideal. In reality the advantages gained from such tourism products will vary in terms of their occurrence and concentration and will often depend on the nature of the route itself, the amount of planning involved, and the extent to which negative impacts can be mitigated. These negative impacts can be numerous. Tourism routes in rural areas in particular can exert great pressure on local resources such as energy, food, land and water, some of which may already be in short supply. Mukherjee (2013) points out that tourism concentration in space and time can exert significant pressure on the environment of the destination. Thus, tourism developments such as routes can negatively impact biodiversity by competing with wildlife habitats and natural resources. In addition, Mason (2016) emphasises the possible negative economic impacts of tourism including inflation, opportunity costs and over-dependence on tourism by local communities. He also points out the negative impact on socio-cultural values which can include commercialisation of local culture, incidences of culture clash, and the lack of professional training for those in low-paid tourism jobs.

The Wild Atlantic Way

The scale of analysis in this paper is a single linear route – The Wild Atlantic Way, which is one of the most significant and successful tourism products to have been launched in Ireland in recent years. This 'way' was initiated at a national level, and implemented by the National Tourism Development Authority, Fáilte Ireland[1], in conjunction with the local authorities through which the route passes. Prior to its development, other major tourist routes such as the Great Ocean Road in Australia, the Garden Route in South Africa, Highway 101 and the Pacific Coast Highway in the United States were examined for insights into what was needed to attract visitors (Sheehan, 2014). The project initially involved a €10 million investment and represented one of the main planks of the tourism authority's strategy for attracting visitors to the west of Ireland. It is described as Ireland's first long distance touring route with the overall aim of achieving greater visibility for the west coast of Ireland in overseas markets.
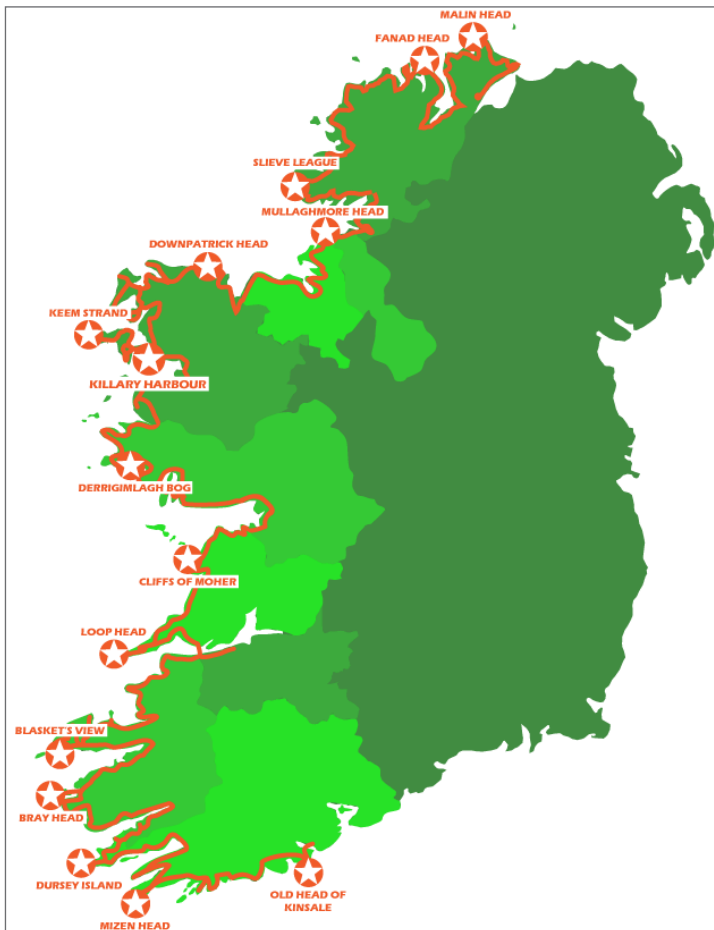
Figure 1. Wild Atlantic Way Route Map
Source: https://www.wildatlanticwayonline.com/

The concept of the route's development is quite clever in that it links together a range of already existing roads of varying standards from Donegal in the north to West Cork in the south, stretching approximately 2,500 km along the Atlantic coast. The route consists of over 180 'Discovery Points' along the way. In general, these are scenic viewing points and lay-bys located in remote coastal areas outside of the main towns and villages. As such, they are intended to provide visitors with a viewing opportunity and to entice them to the more remote and peripheral areas of the coast. Fifteen of these Discovery Points have been identified as 'Signature Discovery Points' (see Figure 1), in other words iconic 'must-see' sights along the western seaboard such as Malin Head, the Cliffs of Moher, and Mullahgmore Head. The most recent development of the product by Fáilte Ireland has been the investment of €3.5 million on photo-friendly marker spots and interpretation panels at each Discovery point, with the intention of providing points of reference for each location and encouraging visitor engagement with the site.

WAW and Sustainability

Fjelstul and Fyall (2015) note that many routes have been developed as part of sustainable tourism policies, with funding often being designated to ensure the sustainability of the region that the route passes through. For example, 'Touring the Murray' is a road that follows the Murray River, a route identified as being of social, economic, and environmental importance to Victoria and South Australia with sustainability identified as a key aspect (Fyall *et al*. 2016). Similarly, the Wild Atlantic Way tourism route has a strong sustainable element to it. The goals and outcomes of the project from a sustainability perspective are presented by Fáilte Ireland under the headings of the 'VICE' model (see Table 1). This is an internationally recognised tool for sustainable tourism development in which tourism initiatives are analysed under four key and interdependent elements: Visitor, Industry, Community and Environment.

Table 1. VICE Model and WAW Goals.

Sustainable goals in relation to the Wild Atlantic Way
• **V**isitor: to ensure that the Wild Atlantic Way brand is compelling to our target market segments and that the Wild Atlantic Way itself becomes a world-class visitor experience. • **I**ndustry: to ensure that the Wild Atlantic Way delivers balanced and sustainable revenue and jobs growth with greater geographic and seasonal spread. • **C**ommunity: to ensure that the Wild Atlantic Way delivers benefits to local communities in the west of Ireland and contributes to a better place to live for everyone. • **E**nvironment: to ensure that the implementation of the Wild Atlantic Way Operational Programme facilitates the protection and enhancement of the environment of the west of Ireland – as the fundamental asset that is the basis of the Wild Atlantic Way – in association with other key stakeholders. (Fáilte Ireland (2015). *Wild Atlantic Way Operational Programme 2015-2019*)

The VICE model is designed for use in monitoring the impact of tourism initiatives by considering the wider impact of tourism performance. It recognises that tourism affects more than just the visitor and the tourism industry alone, it also has social and environmental impacts which can be either positive or negative for the wider community. This practical application is why the model has been used in the development and evaluation of the Wild Atlantic Way.

Due to the fact that the WAW is a relatively new tourism product there has been little academic literature and evaluation on its impacts on the rural communities through which it passes. It is in this context that research was conducted by the authors to investigate the economic, social, and environmental impacts of the initiative from the perspective of the product providers along the route.

Methods

In order to gather information on the impacts of the Wild Atlantic Way from the tourism providers' viewpoint an online self-administered survey was employed. This was distributed over a 3-month period between December 2017 and February 2018. The software package Survey Monkey was utilised. This method was chosen because it has a structured format, it is easy and convenient to use for respondents, and it is relatively cheap and quick to administer when dealing with large numbers of people across wide geographical areas (Tuten, 2010). This was essential as it was intended to target a large number of product providers along the west coast of Ireland. Most questions were designed using a closed format where respondents could choose from a set of given responses which were easy and fast to answer (Oppenheim and Oppenheim, 2000). The last question was open-ended where respondents were encouraged to give their opinions and suggestions in relation to the Wild Atlantic Way project.

The survey was divided into a number of sections with the principal focus covering tourism sustainability and in particular the main pillars of sustainability, i.e., economic, environmental, and socio-cultural factors. Each of these pillars was examined using a variety of questions which aimed to uncover the extent of the impacts of the WAW on the local areas and populations along the route. These questions consisted of statements which respondents were asked to either agree or disagree with.

The sampling frame consisted of individual tourism and hospitality businesses located along the route. These were categorised according to their main purpose of business (accommodation, attraction, restaurant, etc., see Figure 2). It was important to get a varied mix of product providers in order to achieve a balanced view of the impacts. The respondents were provided with a link which they could click on to complete the survey online. A reminder email was sent to those who had not completed the questionnaire within two weeks. The research was carried out in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Dublin Institute of Technology (now Technological University Dublin). Overall, 341 surveys were completed and returned by the product providers. This represented a 20% response rate from a total number of 1,700 survey invitations. Responses were

received from tourism providers located in all of the counties along the Atlantic coastline. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, which offered the most concise way to present the results to meet the goals of the study. In instances where respondents did not complete all answers under a particular theme, to maintain the integrity of the data, all of their responses in that particular theme have been omitted from the analysis, see Figures 4, 5 and 6. In relation to the final open-ended question the findings yielded a significant volume of rich textual data which were initially categorised according to the three main impact areas (economic, environmental and socio-cultural). This information was then further coded using Text Analysis procedures (Popping, 2015) and revealed a number of interesting themes and sub themes; some themes had been anticipated, but some of the issues and concerns of the respondents had not been considered in advance by the researchers. These open-ended details are presented throughout the findings, with use direct quotes to illustrate the views of the respondents.

Results

The survey yielded a large amount of information relating to the impacts of the Wild Atlantic Way on local communities and businesses. The closed questions produced data of a statistical nature while the open questions at the end provided significant insights into the perceived future sustainability of the route.

　　Respondents were drawn from a wide range of tourism and hospitality businesses with the largest number coming from the accommodation sector (47%). This was followed by the restaurant and food sector (20%), the activity sector (19%), and the attraction sector (13%). The remaining respondents were tour providers, venue providers, tourism offices, tourism transport companies and 'other' tourism businesses. Figure 2 shows the breakdown of categories (please note that the total percentage number does not add up to 100%, as some respondents own more than one type of business).
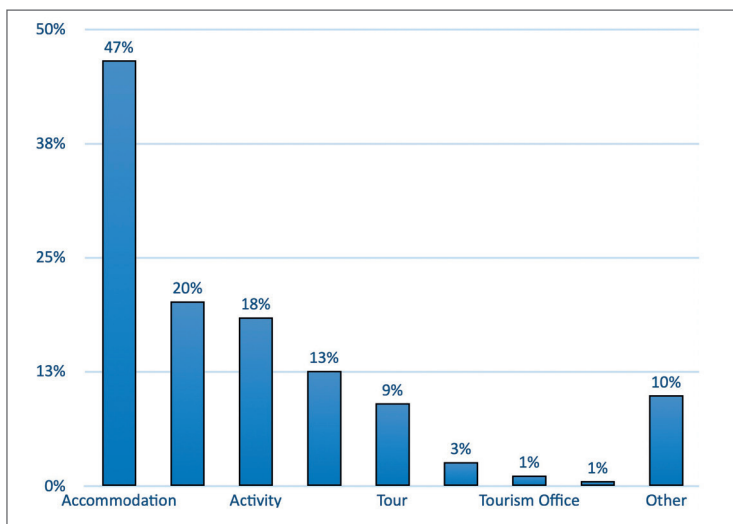
Figure 2.
Respondents by their specific tourism business sector (n=341)

The findings show that the largest groups of respondents were from counties Donegal (21%), Kerry (21%) and Cork (19%). This was followed by Galway (14%), Mayo and Clare (9% each), Sligo (6%) and Limerick (2%), with others at 1% (Figure 3).
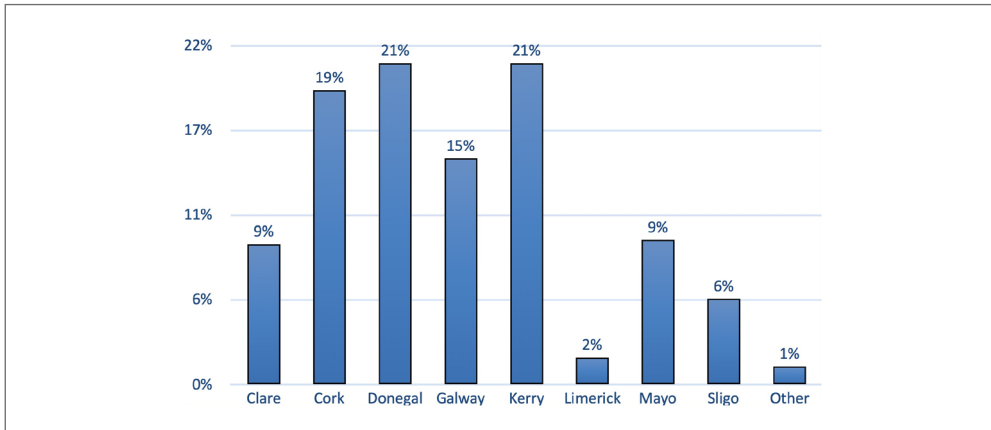

Figure 3. Distribution of Product Providers by County (n=340)

WAW Sustainability and Impacts

The results of the research show product providers to be generally quite positive towards the WAW initiative. Over 86% of respondents felt that the increased visitor numbers experienced in recent years was attributable (at least to some extent) to the introduction of the Wild Atlantic Way. There was a general feeling that previously, the west of Ireland had been neglected by tourism authorities and this was a step in the right direction.

> *'This is a welcome development for the western coastline. We have been struggling for many years and the WAW has helped in that regards.'* (Product Provider (PP), 12)

In relation to sustainability, the product providers' views and opinions on the impacts of the WAW were varied but on the whole quite positive. Indeed, one of the most striking features to emerge was how 'in tune' many of the product providers were with regard to sustainability issues in tourism. Most seemed to have a good understanding of both the merits and demerits of a major tourism initiative such as the WAW. The following sections present the results from the survey in accordance with the 3 main pillars of sustainability: economic, environmental, and socio-cultural impacts.

Economic Impacts

Product providers were generally in agreement that the WAW initiative has had positive impacts on their business and the surrounding area, through which the route passes (Figure 4). The most positively felt economic impact was personal to the respondents' own businesses – *increased economic benefit to tourism businesses*. This was recognised as an impact by 83.22% of respondents, who answered 'Yes'; only 9.09% did not think this

was a positive impact (answering 'No'), and only 7.69% stated that they 'Don't Know'. In addition to business-based benefits, the positivity extends to the local area also. 77.26% claimed 'Yes' the WAW has resulted in *Increased economic benefit to local businesses in general*. Only 12.27% of respondents said 'No' it has not had such benefit, with 10.47% uncertain. 60.26% of respondents believed the new tourist route has helped to provide new jobs in the area, but perhaps of some concern is that 67.25% felt that the jobs were mostly seasonal.
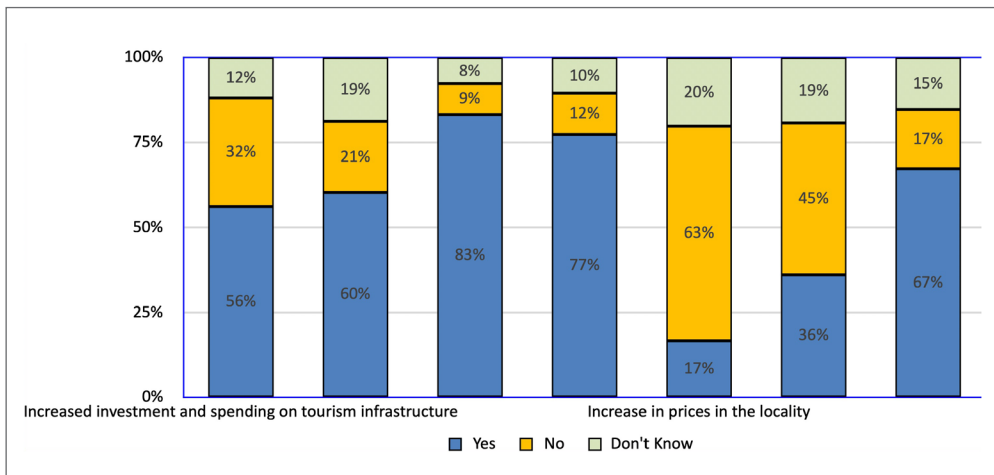
Figure 4. Economic impacts felt as a result of the introduction of the WAW (n=288)

The issue of jobs is very important for rural areas which very often have few alternative employment opportunities. As one respondent pointed out:

> *'Many rural communities are closing down. The WAW is important in helping to keep them alive.'* (PP, 114)

In terms of investment in areas along the route by tourism bodies and local authorities it is interesting to note that although the majority of people felt there had been an increase in such investment (56.14%) there was still a lot of concern in relation to how, where, and when this investment was happening. There was a sense that just erecting signs and engaging in a branding campaign was not enough. Significant investment in product was deemed to be necessary, although it was generally appreciated that the WAW project is still a work in progress.

> *'We need to keep investing in the product. We need more greenways, cycle routes, outdoor adventure activities, better equipped campsites and facilities, and more campervan overnight parking like European cities offer.'* (PP, 36)

Infrastructural investment in areas such as roads, footpaths, beach protection, and broadband were commonly mentioned as being crucial. In particular investment in the road network was cited by many as a significant need, particularly in light of the increased traffic that is now using the route, with many coastal roads struggling to accommodate large buses and campervans. This issue is further compounded by the fact

that the main bodies responsible for improving the road network are County Councils, nine of which have direct involvement in the WAW route. This dispersion of responsibility makes a cohesive effort at investing in roads and other infrastructure along the route very difficult. The absence of investment in broadband along some parts of the route was also pointed out as being a weakness and something that needed urgent attention. A lack of adequate internet coverage was seen as being a significant challenge for both tourists and local businesses, as well as hindering potential marketing opportunities.

> *'We want people to showcase the WAW as they travel along, but in many places, they do not even have internet or phone coverage.'* (PP 195)

Although over 83.22% of respondents believed that the WAW had resulted in increased economic benefit for tourism businesses in their area (Figure 4), there was nonetheless a strong perception that the economic gain was not being evenly distributed. Many product providers believe that there is a need to spread the economic benefits to businesses and communities located adjacent to the route as well as those on it. This is a common theme in tourism destination management and is one that is particularly pertinent to route-based tourism products. This issue of distance decay is a constant challenge for tourism bodies especially in rural areas (Mckercher and Lew, 2003). Thus, getting tourists to detour or investigate areas off the designated path can be very difficult, especially on larger routes such as the WAW where time may be an issue. This is why a number of respondents suggested that more effort should be made to market the route as something the tourist should do in stages and not in one go. This would allow tourists to explore each stage / geographical area in greater detail:

> *'they should develop loops off the WAW to destinations inland. This would allow the tourist to stay longer in one area and spread the economic benefits of tourism in the region.'* (PP, 70)

Theoretically, this fits with concepts of relational place making discussed earlier (Jones, 2009; Pierce *et al.,* 2011) whereby the notion of the WAW is emerging as it is being used, thus fulfilling Fáilte Ireland's ambition to create a 'discovery route' rather than just a 'driving route' (Fáilte Ireland, 2015). Tourists are encouraged to explore and go off the beaten track, developing their own internal conception of the WAW rather than accomplish a pre-determined set of goals as defined by external agents. This is a more sustainable approach and one that Fáilte Ireland is working to encourage into the future (a small selection of youtube videos entitled 'Stories from Ireland's Wild Atlantic Way' exemplifies this 'personalisation' message[2]).

Environmental impacts

The survey results in relation to the environmental impacts of the WAW reveal that traffic was by far the biggest issue for respondents. 72.18% identified an increase in traffic volume (Figure 5) since the introduction of the route.
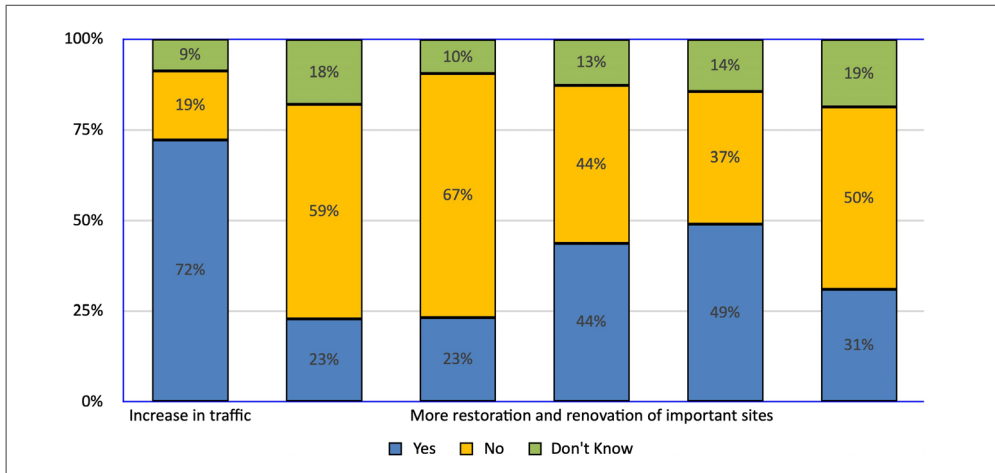
Figure 5. Environmental impacts felt as a result of the introduction of the WAW **(**n=284)

While this of course is often an inevitable consequence of successful tourism route promotion, it was the *type* of traffic that was of particular concern to many respondents, with bus tours in particular identified as problematic.

'Tour buses although licensed are left to their own devices unchecked and are forcing mass tourism on rural areas which are not equipped nor have sufficient infrastructure to cope.' (PP, 107)

There was a strong feeling among many product providers that the bus tours need to be managed and controlled better. It was felt that their environmental impact (such as congestion, litter, etc.) on small rural areas is often quite significant while the economic gain they provide can be minimal, often limited to a very small number of tourism enterprises. Many respondents believed that individual and small group travel would be less intrusive and more beneficial to rural areas as this type of tourist is more likely to linger and interact with host communities.

The second most salient environmental impact cited by respondents related to pressure on local facilities. Almost half the respondents (48.94%) stated that the WAW had resulted in increased pressure being put on local services. This again led to calls for further investment in facilities such as public toilets, parking and waste disposal facilities in order to help rural communities along the route to cope with the increased influx of visitors. As one respondent pointed out;

'Camper vans are parking on roads and blue flag beaches and using other people's toilets and showers for free, and then leaving rubbish on the beaches and roads' (PP, 21).

A number of respondents suggested that the route should be promoted to more environmentally friendly travellers such as cyclists and hikers. It was felt that these tourists tend to stay longer and interact more significantly and positively with host communities. They are also more likely to visit the less iconic tourist attractions and stay with smaller hospitality providers.

'I think a focus on environmentally friendly and sustainable ways (such as cycling) of seeing the WAW are important. Also, we need to advertise the small B&Bs along the Wild Atlantic Route. The small B&B owner has a wealth of local knowledge and interest in their area to give tourists an insight into things the guide books are not aware of.' (PP, 52)

This respondent's last point is an important one as it is central to the 'experience' based tourism approach that Fáilte Ireland and many other tourist bodies are trying to promote. This relates to the notion that tourists seek short, quality intensive, and life enriching travel experiences (Murray, Foley and Lynch, 2010). Such experiences are much more likely when visitors meet and stay with local providers making the encounter inherently personal and engaging.

In relation to damage to the natural environment, a negative impact associated with tourism, is the finding that the WAW had resulted in increased pressure on local flora (expressed by 30.99% of respondents). While 50.35% of the respondents do not recognise this impact at all, it is a serious risk, particularly if the number of visitors using the route rises in the coming years as the popularity of the route increases. This poses a common tourism development conundrum – how does Fáilte Ireland get the balance right between investing in roads and transport networks that will allow more tourists to access the less visited stretches of the route, while at the same time manage to preserve the natural and built heritage of these areas? The answer to this may lie in the type of tourist that the route is targeting and what criteria the success of the initiative is based on:

'It's important to ensure a sustainable management plan is in place, where we measure return in terms of revenue not visitor numbers.' (PP, 154)

However, such an approach may be difficult to implement given the varied geographical mix of destinations along the route, some of which could easily manage increased visitor numbers while others would be overwhelmed by them.

Socio-Cultural Impacts

When major tourism initiatives are introduced to rural areas a range of socio-cultural impacts can often be experienced by host communities. In this study the socio-cultural effects of the WAW were mostly seen as quite positive. The two most popular effects mentioned in the survey (Figure 6) were *Increased pride in local heritage* as identified by 73.14% of respondents and *Stronger community spirit*, evidenced by 62.19%.

The former is a regularly noted phenomenon in tourism where people often gain a newfound appreciation and pride for their local heritage on the back of the admiration and interest shown by tourists (Park, 2014). This is particularly the case for places that are remote and less visited by tourists. The increased pride in one's local heritage can often be the catalyst for a stronger community spirit developing as people begin to take more interest in their heritage and may even decide to get involved in its restoration, preservation, or interpretation. The WAW has helped in this regard.
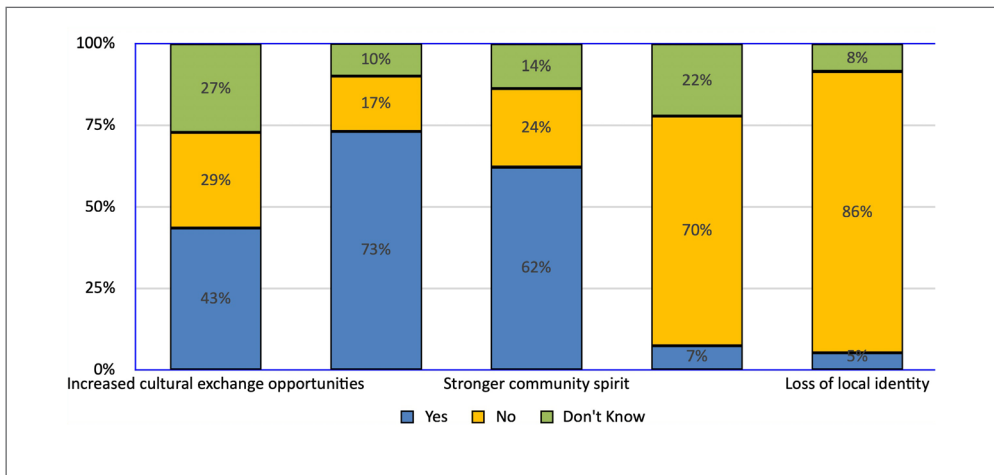
Figure 6. Socio-Cultural impacts felt as a result of the introduction of the WAW (n=281)

> '*A key component of this initiative is community pride and empowerment of people to take ownership of their local area*' (PP, 2).

This involvement of local people is a key feature in rural tourism. Areas where rural tourism is most successful and sustainable are usually characterised by an inclusive, bottom-up approach where all stakeholders in the community, not just tourism providers, get behind the initiative and drive it forward. Tourism in a rural setting by its very nature is an intrusive phenomenon, encouraging as it does, people from 'outside' to enter and partake in the local way of life. This leads inevitably to cross-cultural interactions and exchanges which can lead to any number of outcomes (both positive and negative). In this research however, there is little evidence of local irritation with only 5.30% of respondents seeing *Loss of local identity*, and only 7.42% recognizing *Increased incidences of culture clashes*. Despite the low numbers, there is no room for complacency and local 'buy-in' is essential in any such a scenario. This is more likely to happen if people feel they have a part to play in a development initiative and can benefit in some way from its success. One respondent points out what is needed;

> '*We need more awareness on a local level – outside of the tourism industry, i.e., your local shopkeeper and publican need to buy into it. Keep the focus on opportunities for cultural exchange, independent local businesses, and unique experiences.*' (PP, 198)

One note of warning in this regard is the fact that only 43.46% of respondents identified *Increased cultural exchange opportunities*, due to the introduction of the WAW, with 29.33% not seeing such opportunities. This perhaps suggests a certain distancing occurring between 'locals' and tourists, which is not desirable in a totally inclusive model (as espoused in theoretical frameworks such as the VICE-Model discussed earlier).

Conclusion

This paper has examined one of the most effective tourism initiatives ever launched in Ireland, the Wild Atlantic Way. This much lauded travel route takes in some of the most spectacular, pristine and vulnerable geographical landscapes in the country. For this study, the opinions and views of 341 tourism and hospitality product providers were sought in relation to the route's sustainability, with particular emphasis on the economic, environmental, and socio-cultural impacts of the project. These product providers represented all counties along the western seaboard and all the major tourism industry sectors involved in delivering the Wild Atlantic Way touristic experience.

In relation to economic sustainability the literature shows that most tourism routes are developed with economic goals incorporated. As Briedenhann and Wickens (2004) point out, tourism routes are often utilised for 'increasing the economic viability of marginalised areas, stimulating social regeneration and improving the living conditions of rural communities.' The findings of this research show that the vast majority of product providers have noticed economic benefits to local communities from the development of the Wild Atlantic Way. The main issue raised relates to the fact that not everyone is benefitting evenly. The need to disperse the tourist activity further away from the actual route was highlighted by many. Encouraging longer stay tourists and developing loop branches off the main route were some of the suggestions made.

The main environmental impacts raised by the product providers relate to traffic and congestion. For a tourist product that encourages drive tourism this was always going to be a potential issue. In their article Fyall *et al*. (2016) address the question of how drive tourism fits within the wider sustainability debate? They talk about the need for electric vehicles and more 'green infrastructure'. However, one of the major dilemmas that respondents raised related to the balance between developing a strong road infrastructure that facilitates visitor access and the need to protect certain sensitive environments from growing tourist numbers.

The increased prevalence of coach tourism was seen as a particular cause for concern for many product providers. On the positive side, most people had noticed improvements in relation to the renovation of cultural assets. Many monuments and cultural attractions have been revamped and restored as part of the development of the WAW. The results also highlight the increased pride that the WAW initiative has engendered in many local communities, leading to improved community spirit and attitude. The challenge going forward will be to develop these small communities to act as nuclei around which the local tourism industry can develop (Boyd *et al*., 2016).

The Wild Atlantic Way project has managed to capture the imagination of the travelling public like no other tourism product in Ireland and importantly, has managed to translate this into actual increased visitor traffic. The economic and 'touristic' success has been such, that Fáilte Ireland has initiated two other major development projects in Ireland using a similar participatory structure with an overarching theme – *Ireland's Ancient East* and *Ireland's Hidden Heartland*. What is less clear however is how sustainable the WAW initiative will be into the future. Although it has clearly delivered a number of economic,

environmental, and socio-cultural benefits to many communities along the western seaboard, there is little doubt that some significant issues still remain. Chief among them is the balance that needs to be struck between accessibility and sustainability. Fáilte Ireland and the breadth of relevant stakeholders have an obligation to work towards balancing these outcomes, to ensure that as this geographical entity develops and takes form, that the local communities will continue to prosper, while maintaining the quality of their landscapes long into the future.

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Endnotes

[1] Unlike Tourism Ireland which works to market the island or Ireland overseas, Fáilte Ireland is a National Tourism Development Authority and has responsibility for supporting the tourism industry in the Republic of Ireland. Their counterpart, Tourism Northern Ireland undertakes a parallel role in Northern Ireland.

[2] Stories from Ireland's Wild Atlantic Way, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC5b3zwVWh5alNlHcRTsC5og/videos