# The Emergence of Green Drive Tourism: A Comparative Study of Existing Drive Tourism Routes

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## Introduction

The ability to "provide almost unrestricted land travel" (Prideaux and Carson 2003, p. 307) continues to make drive tourism popular for tourists. This popularity has led to the expansion of drive tourism routes, the development of new "branded" routes and the eagerness of peripheral destinations to enhance their accessibility through the adoption of strategies that facilitate drive tourism opportunities. Tapping into tourists' sense of freedom, governments at varying levels are increasingly looking to drive tourism as a strategy to increase the tourist potential of peripheral places, to connect fragmented communities and to inject economic benefit into local destinations. The Wild Atlantic Way (WAW) in the Republic of Ireland is a perfect and timely example of such developments. Since its inception in 2010, the WAW has accounted for approximately 72% of registered tourist accommodations in the area, with an estimated 12 million bed nights recorded in 2013. Additionally, the revenue in the area brought approximately €2 billion to the economy in 2013, an increase of approximately 6% from 2010, while the WAW currently accounts for an estimated 45% of the labor supported by national tourism (Failte Ireland 2015).

To date, the drive tourism literature has covered a variety of topics from day trips to influential factors in the destination selection process (Opperman 1995; Laws and Scott 2003). Studies have also focused on drive tourism as an opportunity for economic development in rural areas to the opportunities professional sports have in the self-drive tourism market (see for example Taylor and Carson 2010; Taylor and Young 2005; Yi, Day and Cai 2011). More recently, studies have explored the relationship between drive tourism and the wider sustainability agenda with a number of broader trends serving as the catalyst for greener, more energy-efficient, clean energy forms of drive tourism (Fjelstul 2014; Fjelstul and Fyall 2015). In the specific context of the U.S., from electric charging in Orlando, Florida, to specially tailored electric vehicle itineraries across the state of Arizona and the coast of the Western United States, evidence exists that change is in the air with the gas-guzzling days of heavy RVs making way for more light-weight, green fuel-friendly vehicles which directly, and indirectly, are beginning to change drive tourism and drive tourism destinations. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to evaluate the emergence of more "green" clean-energy forms of drive tourism and determine how likely they are to impact the future of drive tourism and drive tourism destinations.

## Literature Review

*Drive tourism*

Drive tourism is defined as tourism that centers on traveling from an origin point to a destination by a mechanically-powered passenger carrying mode of road transportation, i.e. automobiles, motorcycles, four-wheel drive vehicles, recreational vehicle travel, and caravanning, as well as engaging in tourism-related activities during the journey (Prideaux and Carson 2011; Prideaux, Wei and Ruys 2001). Olsen (2002) determined that the drive tourist is someone who identifies themselves as a traveler as opposed to a tourist and further research suggests that drive-tourists feel that the pursuit of satisfaction and enjoyment is limited by the length of time available and by travel distance thus making the route selection, with consideration to amount of travel costs, time to travel, and quantity of places that can be visited, paramount (Hashim, Ismail and Ahman 2013).

*Drive tourism destinations*

Gartner (2014) defines destinations as being dynamic, living entities consisting of economic forces, an environmental setting and local residents. In the context of drive tourism, as destination development grows, it becomes increasingly important to understand what network characteristics of drive tourism destinations in a particular area are formed for planning, where new facilities need to be located, what type of facilities to locate, and what kind of themed touring routes to promote (Shih 2006). In short, the destination is advised to adopt a holistic approach and engage drive tourism routes from a destination-wide sustainability approach.

*Sustainable drive tourism*

Sustainability, which in the context of this study refers to emerging green technologies as they reflect in the electrification of drive tourism routes, is often utilized as a framework in which to examine the impacts of a variety of activities across social, economic, and environmental dimensions of communities and their surroundings. This framework has served as the foundation for a vast majority of research in rural or eco-settings (Miller, Merriless and Coghlan, 2015; Timur and Getz 2009), and can also be linked to what is termed the "emerging green tourism market". This market, which falls under the umbrella of sustainable tourism, focuses on pro-environmental efforts such as energy efficiency, and renewable energy (Bergin-Seers and Mair 2009). With the emergence of electric vehicles and the utilization of drive tourism as a tool for sustainability, the question is raised as to just where does drive tourism fit within the wider sustainability debate?

*Slow tourism*

One answer to the above question may be slow tourism which has been referred as a socio-cultural phenomenon, with a focus on slowing down, traveling shorter distances and gleaning the most of the travel experience both in the journey to and at the destination (Conway and Timms 2010; Lumsdon and McGrath 2011). Additionally, research in this area indicates that there are possibilities of environmental benefits to this form of travel, making this a potential partnership to be explored within the area of drive tourism.

**Research Propositions**

The rationale behind the research propositions and the conceptual model in this study are to provide a holistic overview of those forces for change impacting on the future domain of drive tourism. A holistic vision of the identified forces will allow for both practitioners and academics to better understand the changes within the drive tourism industry, evaluate the sustainability of existing drive tourism routes (specifically in the context of clean energy technologies), and sustainability practices on the drive tourist, the drive tourism experience, and the drive tourism sector (Fjelstul and Fyall 2015). As a result of the literature review, the following research propositions, chosen as the most likely to shape and influence the future of sustainable drive tourism, are presented for advancement (Fjelstul and Fyall 2015).

(1) *Emerging clean energy technologies are an important future influence on the sustainability of the drive tourism industry.* While new clean technologies are just one of the emerging forces for change, they represent the most tangible force for change and are thus anticipated to have the most sustained impact on the industry.

(2) *Emerging clean energy technologies are an important influence on the future behavior of drive tourists.* Change will only occur if the market (i.e. drive tourists) embraces more fully

the clean technologies on offer. If adoption takes off then there will be significant implications vis-à-vis trip duration, single trip versus multiple trips (destinations), drive routes, accommodation, travel distance, trip itineraries or routes (i.e. "Green" routes, experiential trails), planned or spontaneous travel, trip cost-effectiveness, vehicle type, and drive tourist demographics.

(3) *Emerging clean energy technologies are an important influence on the future provision of supply drive-tourism infrastructure.* Supplier impacts may include the location, type and cost of charging stations, single or dual system electrification and car manufacturing trends and marketing.

(4) *Emerging clean energy technologies will impact significantly future models of drive tourism.* They will impact each of the four dimensions of the model (i.e. demand and supply factors, the tourist, the drive experience, and push and pull factors).

**Methodology**

Exploratory in nature, this study builds upon an existing framework by Fjelstul and Fyall (2015). The study follows an exploratory content analysis approach to interpret and compare data gleaned from a systematic and in-depth exploration of various web sites connected to notable drive tourism routes across the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Europe, and Australia/New Zealand. Past research has utilized theory-driven approaches coupled with an inductive data analysis mode to conduct exploratory content analysis, with this study mirroring this method (Murray et al., 2016; Naipaul, Wang, & Okumus, 2009). A general inductive approach for raw data analysis allowed for an in-depth analysis of the raw content, such that frequently occurring themes and categories that fit the research model could be identified (Murray et al., 2016; Thomas, 2006). This approach has been utilized in other studies where literature is limited and the study is exploratory in nature, as is the case with this particular study (Naipaul et al., 2009).

Routes were chosen based on traveler popularity, history, and as a result of the researchers' knowledge as well as the use of a variety of popular travel websites that highlight 'road trips' both within the United States and abroad (Bleiberg, 2014; Perkins, 2015; theplanetD, 2015). The research model for the study was used as the foundation from which criteria and sub-themes were derived. The researchers focused on key criteria such as purpose of the route, location/length, history, funding, marketing, policies, and provider, all of which were driven by the push/pull model as enhanced by Fjelstul and Fyall (2015) and used as a basis for gathering key data. To obtain valid information regarding each route, three popular search engines, Google, Yahoo, and Bing, were used as a starting point to generate a list of websites for which to begin an in-depth analysis of information pertaining to each route. The information was then indexed according to the sub-themes that had been initially identified as a result of the push-pull model.

**Results**

Fjelstul and Fyall (2015) introduced a push/pull model to dissect the various elements that can be used to analyze sustainability in drive tourism. The current study utilized this model to provide structure and context to the content analysis of web sites. When analyzing push and pull factors several major areas emerge to fit the model in support of drive tourism themes.

**Push factors**

*Decision Criteria*

A number of the routes analyzed were purpose built transportation routes and over the years have seen their purpose change in line with broader tourism or destination branding agendas. For example, *The Atlantic Road* originated in the 1970s as a railway line. It then became a toll road before later being classified as a National Tourist Route with its minimal environmental footprint and accessibility key features for drive tourists. Others, meanwhile, were designed specifically as "sustainable" routes. *The Wild Atlantic Way* in the Republic of Ireland was designed specifically as a dedicated coastal touring route as a means to grow tourism in the region. With an extensive investment in its brand, this route is hoping to establish previously peripheral coastal destinations as core to the Irish drive tourism experience.

*Marketing*

Marketing is a key component to making these routes visible to the touring public. Many of the routes are marketed via collaborations between non-profit organizations and public entities, at local, regional, and national levels. *Route 66* in the US, for example, has one of the most complex online marketing collaborations, with promotion of the route stemming from the National Park Service Corridor Preservation Program, Route 66 Alliance, the National Historic Route 66 Federation and various associations in each of the eight states the route runs across. This type of marketing collaboration is a common occurrence in all of the tourism routes chosen for analysis.

*Policies*

Fjelstul and Fyall (2015) noted in their work that policy initiatives were mostly directed to the supply side of drive tourism. This was greatly evidenced in many of the findings regarding policy for all routes explored. Many of the routes have been designated as part of sustainable tourism policies, with funding for the routes designated to ensuring the preservation of the routes and ensuring sustainability of the region(s) that the route passes through. For example, Save the River Murray Levy and Fund was established under that Water Industry Act 2012 by the South Australia Government. *Touring the Murray* is a route that follows the Murray River, a route identified as being of social, economic, and environmental importance to South Australia with sustainability identified as a key issue for this region due to its importance to ensuring the longevity of environmental and economic health of this key agricultural and tourist region.

**Pull factors**

*Attractions*

Many of the routes, while being attractions themselves, provide direct access to natural and cultural attractions that identify with being "green", either as a result of the natural landscape in which it is housed, or as a result of planned marketing efforts. *The Great River Road National Scenic Byway*, boasts several eco-tours that promote both the Byway itself and the scenic, historic, and recreational assets of the route.

*Accommodation*

The analysis of the routes found that there is a commonality between the 'green-ness' of the accommodations offered and the route. Hotels along parts of the *Lord of the Rings* route in New Zealand, utilize the underground thermal activity for heat and spa treatments and work in conjunction with local heritage areas. A plethora of eco-lodges can be found along *The Great*

*Ocean Road*, in Australia. As mentioned by Fjelstul and Fyall (2014), the extent to which the 'green' agenda is visible can be related to the local/regional/national agenda.

*General and specific infrastructure*

The vast majority of the routes examined showed to be 'drive tourist friendly', with a vast amount of attractions, lodging, and dining options available to support the needs, wants, and demands of the drive tourist. *The Atlantic Road,* in Norway, has been established not only as a scenic byway, but is marketed to attract drive tourists, promoting the eco-friendliness of the route. T*he Pacific Coast Highway,* in California, USA, has recognized the importance of maintaining the general infrastructure, and has sought out funding to widen portions of the road and improve road safety for various portions of the route. This has hit a stall in some areas, pending opposition from local residents and environmentalists, showing that collaboration with the local population can be critical to the continued success of the routes.

**Conclusion and Discussion**

The purpose of this paper was to evaluate the emergence of "green" clean-energy forms of drive tourism and determine how likely they are to impact the future of drive tourism and drive tourism destinations. In this regard, the content analysis indicates that there is an underlying "green" theme found in various aspects of the drive-tourism routes evaluated. Interestingly, although the routes are being recognized by destinations as a vehicle for sustainability more broadly, few of the routes are showcasing their 'green-ness' openly. Rather, it is threaded into the underlying fabric of the route in the shape of accommodations, attractions, or political policies. For the most part, drive tourism remains a traditional tourist activity with drive tourists demonstrating a somewhat traditional pattern of behavior. However, as evidenced with the new West Coast Electric Highway (an extensive network of electric vehicle DC fast charging stations located every 25 to 50 miles along Interstate 5 and other major roadways in the Pacific Northwest), green infrastructure is beginning to surface as a reality rather than a utopian ideal. Although not quite as advanced as the West Coast Electric Highway, other states including Arizona are beginning to recognize the growing number of fully-electric vehicles on the road and the infrastructure necessary to support it. For example, unique itineraries, driver resource packs and directories of electric-friendly lodging are just some of the new green, clean-energy, drive-tourism initiatives in Arizona that combine points of touristic interest and charging stations! Such initiatives are beginning to make inroads into the world of drive tourism, with clean energy technologies slowly moving towards the forefront of the drive tourism agenda. Their influence already spans certain drive tourism destinations through an integrated network of green infrastructure as evidenced with the West Coast Electric Highway. Clearly the cost and long-term commitment to clean-energy infrastructure will be a cause for concern for many destinations and drive-tourism routes that cross administrative and political borders where collaborative decision making and funding is required. That being said, such commitment offers considerable potential for new markets, such as millennials, previously not excited or engaged with more traditional models of drive tourism.

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