

## **The Wild Atlantic Way as a catalyst for tourism and sustainable employment development in the North West of Ireland.**

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In March 2014 Fáilte Ireland launched a new coastal drive, 'The Wild Atlantic Way' (WAW). This new initiative provides a signposted route along the Atlantic coast from Kinsale in West Cork to Malin Head in County Donegal. The WAW presents a unique opportunity for peripheral areas that heretofore have failed to realise any substantial benefit from the tourism industry. For the first time an active campaign will direct tourists into areas that are often neglected and overlooked by tourism promoters (Fáilte Ireland 2014a).

The focus of this study is to determine what efforts, if any, communities and business owners have made or intend to make, in order to take advantage of this new opportunity; to determine what level of co-operation, if any, exists between stakeholders; to examine what initiatives they are currently engaged in to take advantage of this unique opportunity and to uncover possible shortcomings in terms of readiness to take advantage of the WAW development by identifying strategic gaps.

A key factor will be in determining the impact of the changes which key stakeholders will be encouraged to make. It is envisaged that these will involve elements of marketing, service delivery and customer service in the first instance and the research project will adopt or adapt established evaluation frameworks in order to do this.

**Keywords:** Rural tourism, community engagement, action research, sustainable development.

### **Introduction and background**

The North West coastal area is often regarded as among the most scenic in the country. However, numerically, tourist visits both domestic and international compare unfavourably with other coastal regions along the Atlantic coast, Fáilte Ireland (2014b). Consequently communities in the North West region have not benefitted from the tourism dividend that is enjoyed by their southern neighbours. Within the Northwest, Inishowen is selected as an exemplar for this study because it is a peripheral, coastal, isolated area, typical of the western seaboard along the Donegal coast, (Figure1). Furthermore Malin Head in the north of Inishowen is the location for one of fifteen 'Signature Discovery Points' outlined in the WAW literature, and there are a further eight 'Discovery Points' located around the peninsula (Fáilte Ireland 2013).



2007, Iorio and Corsale 2013). Tinsley and Lynch (2001) note that discourse around tourism development is usually confined to tangible elements such as infrastructure and physical development while intangible features such as network development or attitude assessment are often overlooked. Ritchie and Goeldner (1994) confirm this by noting that there is often failure to match growth in tourism with a corresponding infrastructure in planning and development.

Evidence of this can be seen in the contrast between the perception of stakeholders in Inishowen and the image portrayed by the promotion of the WAW; on the one hand this new touring route, the longest of its kind in the world (Fáilte Ireland 2013) was being promoted aggressively internationally (Fáilte Ireland 2014c) while on the other hand many stakeholders and locals alike were unaware of its impending arrival, only learning about the venture when signage was being erected. It was evident from early interaction with research participants in this study that the process of communication around the impact and arrival of the WAW was and continues to be wholly inadequate.

A top-down approach can foster a sense of dis-engagement, an undeveloped sense of ownership, Fraser et al (2006) and was borne out in some of the respondents. This manifested itself in the second category described above, whose approach might be described as one of wait-and-see, this cohort attended the meetings out of a sense of curiosity, were cautious in their contributions to discussions and appeared to need convincing as to the potential of the WAW.

This reminds us of Blackstock's (2005) warning against assuming that tourist destinations are peopled by cohesive collaborative consensual communities, for as she points out these communities are often a heterogeneous mix of contrarian values more used to defending self-interest than to operating within an idealistic communal society. Her contention is that the community development ethos, grounded in a bottom-up approach can offer a more robust framework going forward, one that engages the community in a collaborative process rather than one of simply legitimisation Blackstock (2005).

## Methodology

The methodology for the research utilised a qualitative mixed methods approach combining Action Research and in-depth semi-structured interviews. Key stakeholders from the Inishowen Community were recruited to join small cross sectorial groups in an effort to explore different aspects of the WAW. For example, sessions discussed the brand identity of the WAW, other workshops focused on identifying possible areas for collaboration and joint ventures while the medium term sustainability of the WAW formed a focal point for discussions among the participants. The research was very much of an applied nature, as demonstrated in Table 1, with the emphasis on the participants being encouraged and supported to make small changes to their business models so as to harness the potential of the WAW.

Table 1: overview of research plan

Stage	Research Method
<b>Stage 1: Participant Recruitment</b>	
	Word of mouth,

	Personal contact, Collaboration with local community and business development groups
<b>Stage 2: Cycle 1</b>	
Problem definition	Case Studies, seminars and workshops
Data collection	Moderated online forum
Interpret evidence	Small group discussion and Workshops
Act on evidence	Business plan templates
Evaluate results	Agreed measurement Criteria
Dissemination event	5 public fora
<b>Stage 3: Cycle 2</b>	
Problem definition for second round of activities	Focus group with emphasis on agenda setting
Data collection	Interactive online forum
Interpret data	Small group discussion
Act on evidence	Refine business plan
Evaluate results	Agreed measurement criteria
Dissemination event	2 public fora
<b>Stage 4: Cycle 3</b>	
Problem definition for third round of activities	Focus group with emphasis on partnership/network
Data collection	Interactive online forum
Interpret data	Small group discussion and workshops
Act on evidence	Refine business plan
Evaluate results	Agreed measurement criteria
Dissemination event	2 public fora

The focus of this paper is on outlining the key findings at the end of stage 2 and highlighting the main concerns raised by the participants in the early phases of the project.

Initially a reconnaissance process of in-depth semi-structured interviews was undertaken among five stakeholders within the Inishowen community. Candidates for this process were chosen using purposive sampling Silverman (2010) ensuring that primary and secondary stakeholders were represented in this cohort. These included an equestrian centre, a bicycle-hire business and a camping site owner. This cohort was chosen because of their almost total reliance on visiting tourists. Added to this group, was a supermarket owner whose business is located on the Wild Atlantic Way route and subsequently benefits from passing trade particularly those looking for tea/coffee and sandwiches. The fifth interviewee was a local County Councillor, this interviewee was chosen in an effort to gauge the importance attached to tourism from the standpoint of a representative of local government.

A recurring theme of the reconnaissance process was that that a general lack of awareness prevailed as to the implications, positive and negative, of the WAW. Knowledge ranged from ignorance to ambivalence and even bemusement. However participants were willing to engage in a process of Action Research which explored the possible benefits of inclusion in a stakeholder network.

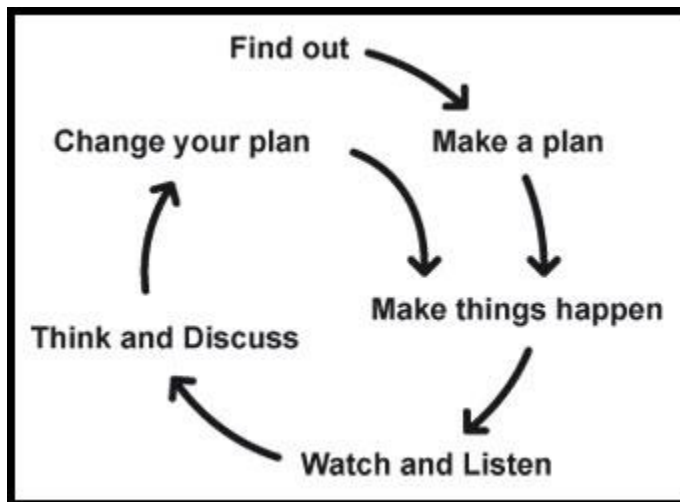
Action Research is defined as:

Action research is deliberate, solution-oriented investigation that is group or personally owned and conducted. It is characterised by spiralling cycles of problem identification, systematic data collection, reflection, analysis, data-driven action taken, and, finally, problem redefinition. The linking of the terms “action” and “research” highlights the essential features of this method: trying out ideas in practice as a means of increasing knowledge about or improving service provision, new product development, and strategic planning.

(Kemmis and McTaggart 1988 p.5)

Recognising that there was a need to disseminate information while at the same time promoting a framework of learning informed the selection of research vehicle and the mode of delivery, thus adopting Stringers (2007 p.12) suggestion that Action Research is, “a practical tool for solving problems experienced by people in their professional, community or private lives”. Action Research descriptions variously outline the process as a cyclical system (Figure 2) of problem identification, deciding what action might be taken, implementing action, taking stock and learning from the results before starting the process again as necessary Bryman (2012), Coghlan and Brannick (2001), Greenwood and Levin (2001).

Figure 2.



In deciding to utilise Action Research the researcher was mindful that the process is not without its critics, Chisholm (2001) for example notes the criticism that sometimes the emphasis on action, is not matched by an equal emphasis on research while Bryman (2012) notes the accusation by academics that the process “lacks rigour” (p.397).

### **Networks in communities**

However Literature demonstrates that community stakeholder interests are best represented within a local cooperative network or cluster (Timothy 2002, Lynch *et al.* 2009, European Commission 2012). The term network is defined by Giddens (2006) as, “all the direct and indirect connections that link a person or a group with other people or groups”(p. 669). There is a direct corollary between a bottom up community development and action research through the creation of Action Learning Sets.

Networks with their inherent fabric of cooperation, information-sharing and trust are seen as essential for the development of sustainable rural development (Morrison *et al.* 2004, Hall 2005). The centrality of cooperative networks operating in rural communities is seen as implicit in rural development (Hall *et al.* 2005). Indeed Murdoch 2000 (cited in Aylward 2009) suggests that networks can provide a “new paradigm” (p.4) for development in rural areas. The case for networks is further advanced by Sundbo (2007) noting the capacity of a strong network to ensure stability.

### **Wider benefits of networks**

The increased social capital that accrues from association with a network creates confidence that empowers people thus affording them flexibility and adaptability in addressing new and evolving situations (Oliver and Jenkins 2003, Giddens 2006). An understanding of benefits arising from networks is extended further by Morrison’s (2004) suggestion that networks have the capacity to become “learning communities” (p. 201). Her contention is that the inherent benefits associated with networks: collegiality, information sharing etc. will in turn foster a source of knowledge dissemination, a bank of resources servicing members of the community.

### **Building a network**

Creating a community network is a difficult process (Zehrer *et al.* 2014), it requires a shared vision which is a prerequisite for the establishment of a community network (Aylward and Kelliher 2009). Strong leadership qualities which include innovation and the ability to foster collaboration within a management framework are fundamental to the success of networks in a community setting (Iorio and Corsale 2013, Zehrer *et al.* 2014). The need for a robust structure for the dissemination of information among actors as a way of building strong network allegiance and for avoiding negative outcomes due to failings in the communication process is identified. While acknowledging the inherent difficulty in building an effective network, noting issues such as building trust, adopting rules and sharing resources, Zehrer *et al.* (2014) suggest that the process of managing these multi-faceted issues can in itself identify areas of mutual dependency leading to new products and new developments within an overall context. This in turn can evolve into a more professionalised entity enabling the full potential of the network to be realised.

Notwithstanding these obvious requirements Lynch (2009) notes the dearth of research on the practical stages in the creation, development and management of a tourism network. Blackstock (2005) warns against assuming that cooperation and support will naturally ascribe to plans for a new network. She points out that the notion of communities being peopled by cooperative, like-minded individuals' intent on working for the common good, is very often a gross misrepresentation of reality. She suggests that instead, communities can be a mix of heterogeneous, contrarian individuals more focused on individual gain than collective benefit.

### **Third level support for networks**

The benefits of collaboration between third-level institutions and stakeholders in rural community based tourism is well established Johnson *et al.* (2000), Hjalager (2003), Hussey *et al.* (2011). However, in Inishowen the concept is a relatively novel phenomenon. The involvement of Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LYIT) in the research process added an interesting dimension to the project both in terms of bringing additional resources to the table and in providing an overarching framework to the which bridged the aims and objectives of the overall research study and the micro-level discussions of individual meeting. The theoretical base used to frame this activity was Communities of Practices as espoused by Etienne Wenger (2000) who defines a community of practice as a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do, and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.

The meetings quickly opened up a rich stream of issues requiring attention. At times the scope and variety of needs expressed appeared overwhelming, indeed, caution was advised by one attendee, a successful businessman and a veteran of many tourist related initiatives when he suggested that, 'it would be wise not to try too much, if we try to fix everything up there [on the flip chart] we'll end up getting nothing done, we'd be better to stick to one or two things'. However this presented an opportunity for the college to offer help to stakeholders in a spirit of support and mentoring which allowed for the development of relationships, seen by some participants as a new unexpected source of assistance. Two businesses from within Inishowen are currently collaborating with LYIT lecturers following their attendance at the meetings confirming Johnson's (2000) suggestion that for rural tourism to be sustainable and successful third level collaboration may be an invaluable component of any proposed network. The level of engagement between the college and stakeholders in Inishowen suggests a possibility for future interaction in a symbiotic relationship where stakeholders gain from professional expertise and college students benefit from the opportunity to engage in a real life business environment.

## Findings of research phases 1 and 2

The delivery of the Action Research programme was divided into three cycles of meetings in a process of examination of the status quo, discussion around possible actions to address emergent issues, implementation of emergent strategies with a commitment to analyse the results, all within a cyclical process described by Stringer (2007p.8) as one of, “look, think, act”.

The first round of meetings, five in number, was productive in uncovering issues among stakeholders. The meetings took the format of a presentation followed by discussion. The presentation was used to inform attendees and to deliver up-to-date information about the WAW with an emphasis on the potential of this new venture. This proved thought-provoking for stakeholders and allowed them to gain some understanding of the scale of the WAW development. The discussion provided a platform for stakeholders to articulate issues that were of concern to them. It also allowed for discussion as to perceived weaknesses in the delivery of their own product. A further benefit was the opportunity presented by the gathering for stakeholders to meet and interact with other business operators, in several cases for the first time. Feedback after meetings confirmed the lack of previous understanding and a growing awareness of the potential of the project. The process allowed the researcher to gain a broader understanding of the issues that occupy the thoughts of the tourism stakeholder and confirmed the assertion by Stringer (2007) that the solutions to local problems cannot be developed without first acquiring local knowledge.

The potential for the development of a network emerged slowly within meetings as people began to communicate with others present. In many cases these interactions took place among people who may have been in competition with each other confirming Bernstein et al's (2003) point that communication can pave the way for cooperation. The need to “work together” was voiced at all meetings, and arising from this *The Wild Atlantic Way Business Development Network* was formed. This phenomenon confirms the assertion by Chisholm (2001) that Action Research can contribute to the process of creating a network in a relatively short space of time.

There were some consistent findings across all meetings particularly around signage and lack of facilities for tourists. It became obvious that there was a dearth of knowledge among operators as to the features available among other operators in the peninsula with many contributors admitting that they “hadn't time” to explore their own area. The necessity for Inishowen to refine its identity from a place to go on a day trip; to a destination in its own right emerged as a significant finding. It was acknowledged that Inishowen has suffered in the past from its close proximity to Northern Ireland with all the negative publicity that the conflict there attracted. As a consequence the tourism industry has had relatively little impact on the area heretofore, therefore the concept of tourism having the capacity to generate significant employment and revenue is somewhat alien to some operators.

Overall the perception that emerged from the series of meetings was one of guarded optimism in relation to the future of tourism in Inishowen. However there was a feeling of disconnect between attendees, many of the participants appear to operate in isolation and seemed only vaguely aware of other operators in the peninsula. This was apparent in most of the meetings with people introducing each other, evidently meeting other operators for the first time.

It was evident that there was weariness about the prospect of “just another tourism initiative”, it emerged that several piecemeal initiatives had been introduced over the years with varying degrees



of success. This manifested itself in a guarded approach to the meeting, with some people slow to engage in conversation. This phenomenon was more evident among attendees from an older cohort, in general stakeholders from the younger generation were more willing to engage and participate.

There also appeared to be a malaise around the promotion and marketing of the tourism business. Many of the attendees were of the impression that it was the job of a local community based NGO to promote business on their behalf, this delegation of responsibility for marketing stems from the requirement for businesses to pay a stipend to that organisation for inclusion in their marketing campaigns. Consequently, many stakeholders appeared to feel that the promotion of their business should be adequately served by this arrangement. However this was in contrast to one highly successful individual business owner who aggressively promotes his own business. This contrasting approach helps to explain the success of his business while others apparently fare less well.

Although collectively around forty five points were raised at the first round meetings, due to space constraints five are discussed here. These are chosen because they help illustrate some of the more pertinent issues relating to tourism provision in the Inishowen Peninsula. The first issue discussed, signage, relates to a recurring theme discussed at most meetings and points to failings in infrastructure. The four other issues discussed here are intangible issues that can only be resolved by local input and represent the challenge facing operators in Inishowen i.e. the success of the WAW requires significant engagement from those wishing to benefit from it.

- **Signage**

Inadequacies in signage was a regular point of discussion among participants. This fell into two categories: insufficient signage and confusing signage. The researcher travelled the route and found many instances that confirmed the findings. Problems included a complete absence of information at some road junctions leaving the traveller confused as to which direction to follow. In other instances the information provided was contradictory, for example, north pointing signs advising the traveller that they are travelling south and vice-versa. It was recognised that this anomaly can present particular difficulties for non-English speaking tourists. The issue was raised with Fáilte Ireland and apart from advising people to inform their office of particular problems it was difficult to get acceptance that a problem existed. There was no sense that the issue would be addressed in a meaningful way.

- **Provision of traditional music**

The delivery and provision of traditional music was discussed in most meetings. It was widely accepted that traditional music plays an important role in the tourism offering and is often central in promotional material creating an image of the 'Irish experience'. However lack of structure in both the delivery and in promotion was highlighted as issues worthy of addressing. It became obvious that the present status is somewhat ad hoc with at times music available but the event not adequately publicised, while at other times when there is a demand for music there is none available. The discussion around the music theme led on to a general realisation that communication between stakeholders was inadequate. The possibility of developing a centralised booking system was discussed in the context of having a facility where visitors could find information and make arrangements to visit not just traditional music sessions but all attractions that might be of interest to the visitor. This has led to one stakeholder exploring whether he might develop a business offering such a service.

- **Creating awareness among stakeholders as to facilities and attractions available in Inishowen**

There was widespread acceptance among participants that local knowledge pertaining to attractions in Inishowen was inadequate, both among stakeholders and among the general public. Although many stakeholders at the meetings accepted that their own knowledge was inadequate, some suggesting that it was 'hard to find the time' they were loath to commit to exploring the peninsula in an effort to expand their own knowledge base. This insular approach was fairly widespread across stakeholders who while stating that they intended to visit other attractions and facilities seemed unwilling to make a commitment to engage.

- **Programme to create greater awareness of tourism potential among the younger generation**

The prospect of delivering an education programme through the Transition Year facility featured in several meetings. There was recognition of the need to develop awareness among the younger generation as to the potential of the tourism industry within Inishowen. In response to this the researcher has contacted schools delivering Transition Year programmes, and all have agreed to partake in a programme designed by the research project. One school has already developed their own programme and are currently engaged in delivering a module centred on tourism. The design of the proposed programme aims to fulfil the twin objectives of increasing awareness of the tourism offering across Inishowen while at the same time demonstrating to an emerging generation the potential for tourism to create business opportunities within the local community.

- **Ownership**

It was apparent that there was a lack of WAW ownership among those present. Stakeholders thus far have failed to embrace the project fully. There was no evidence that stakeholders were planning to develop changes to their operations in preparation for an increase in visitor numbers, instead there was a feeling of 'business as usual'. There appeared to be no understanding that businesses need to upskill or adapt to meet a changing environment. A recent initiative highlights this phenomenon: in response to an identified need for greater professionalism among front-line staff, Fáilte Ireland organised a seminar addressing this issue. The event was fully funded and facilitated in a hotel central in the peninsula. However, only seven people from within the peninsula attended and there were no representatives from the hospitality sector.

### **Emerging picture**

Several points become evident following the early stages of this research project: there is a clear deficit of planning and interaction between those charged with delivering the WAW and stakeholders in Inishowen, however, there is recognition that the WAW has enormous potential. Strategies for exploiting this potential are poorly developed if they exist at all. This in part is the responsibility of local stakeholders as well as the parent body that delivered the WAW. The lack of engagement with and by local businesses manifests itself in a lethargy of commitment. One symptom of this is the slow uptake and adoption of the WAW logo onto business shop fronts and to their promotional material, at time of writing 15 months after the official launch of the WAW there is little evidence of WAW logos anywhere in Inishowen. In a recent initiative aimed at upskilling front line staff (something identified as necessary among many research participants in this study) less than ten people attended a training workshop provided free of charge by Fáilte Ireland. This apparent lack of engagement and ownership may be a consequence of the top-down approach, and may ultimately prove detrimental to long term future of the WAW. It confirms the assertion by Ritchie and Goeldner (1994) that, rapid growth in the industry is sometimes not matched by equal development of infrastructure.

Few remote rural communities can be successful in tourism without input from external sources, and these agents often provide leadership that can drive an initiative successfully, Iorio and Corsale

(2013). However, the leadership role provided by an external force is not one that can continue indefinitely. This reinforces the need for involvement at community level to ensure ownership and direction that favours local sentiment, Blackstock (2005).

In general business operators that contributed to the project, (both those that attended the meetings and those that offered opinions to the researcher outside of the formal meetings) can be categorised into three typologies:

- **Businesses that have already embraced the WAW.**

These businesses have already taken steps to exploit the opportunity presented by the WAW. In some cases this is evidenced by the creation of mini-networks, small scale collaboration between limited numbers of business operators. This is usually localised, confining itself to a narrow geographic area. These businesses embrace the concept of the WAW and are happy to display the logo on their promotional material. The perception is of a cohort that are willing to take steps on their own initiative rather than wait for outside help.

- **Businesses that are waiting for help, direction.**

Some businesses appear to have made little or no adjustment to their normal operations in anticipation of increased visitor numbers, they appear to be adopting a wait-and-see approach to gauge whether the WAW will be successful. The mind-set seems to be one of waiting for some entity to arrive that will deliver a programme enabling them to engage with the WAW. Many operators in this cohort are open to change but appear to lack the confidence or commitment to move forward positively.

- **Businesses that are mired in historic negativity.**

There is an unfortunate negative legacy in Inishowen arising from disputes within a community based NGO. It was difficult to find a business that could express any positive sentiment about the organisation, indeed there was outright antipathy towards them. This appears to have absorbed the energy of some operators leaving them unable to move forward in an attempt to embrace any new opportunities. The issues referred to above have left an unfortunate legacy, although there appears to be some willingness to move on in an emerging younger cohort.

## **Conclusion**

The adoption of Action Research for the delivery of this investigation has facilitated an interpretative process of discovery consistent with the strengths of qualitative research Creswell (2014), Bryman (2012), Guba and Lincoln (1994).

The first stage of this study suggests that awareness of the development of the WAW is increasing as is recognition of the potential it brings to tourism stakeholders. It is clear also that communities in the research field have not been adequately prepared in terms of maximising the potential the WAW brings.

The role of a third-level institution in coming to the aid of the tourism business community may have significant potential. Businesses in this study appear to be receptive to the idea of assistance from an educational institution. This suggests that there is scope for the development of this relationship in a spirit of symbiosis, where the third-level institution can offer practical assistance to businesses who in turn can present real life exercises for case studies within the learning environment. In this setting students gain practical experience which will lend depth and a greater understanding of their subject choice. Ultimately the process increases human capital in rural isolated communities and has the potential to enhance employment opportunities for emerging generations. This concept of interaction between educational establishments and the community is well documented for as

Johnson (2000) suggests collaboration between stakeholders in rural settings and third level institutions may be the key to the creation of successful, sustainable rural development.

Literature suggests that extracting the maximum benefit from tourism is best achieved within a stakeholder and community network, Johnson (2000) Aylward (2009). An inescapable conclusion emerging from this study though, is of the need not just for a functioning network but for leadership also. It is well documented that good leadership can help a group reach its potential Bernstein (2003), Buchanan and Huczynski (2004), as is its capacity to influence and energise groups in the pursuit of a common objective Northouse (2010). The sense of frustration at the perceived lack of leadership by the community based NGO was voiced in many interchanges with stakeholders.

However the development of leadership within or alongside a network such as this one requires further analysis. It is not clear whether the perception among many stakeholders that the community based NGO are obliged to provide a leadership role is justified. This gap in understanding suggest that there is a fundamental failure in communication between parties as to their understanding of each other's role. As the study progresses this area will be explored further.

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