*The International Hospitality and Tourism Student Journal*

# The development of Sustainable tourism, with an emphasis on natural tourist attractions in the North Clare (Ireland) region

Siobhan Hogan, Majella Golden and Dr Noëlle O'Connor*

*Limerick Institute of Technology, Ireland*

* Corresponding author. Tel:  +353 (0)61 490166 E-mail: noelle.oconnor@lit.ie

**Abstract**

Tourism is one of the most successful industries, and largest employer, in the world.  A recent phenomenon in tourism involves sustainability and how this 'trend' is vital to the future of the industry. Sustainable tourism has evolved rapidly and is now in the foremost of stakeholder's minds.  It is essential that tourism's current resources are protected and sustained in order for the industry to remain viable in the future.  The main purpose of this paper was to reinforce this argument and apply it on a regional scale.  This paper also explores how practising sustainable tourism can benefit the provider, visitor and host community. Implementing a more sustainable approach was found to generate endless beneficial opportunities for the provider, including development, increased visitor numbers and a durable future for the business. Visitors can continue to enjoy amenities through a more managed approach and the host community can experience numerous subsidies such as culture promotion, employment, and environmental preservation. This research has assessed how sustainable tourism has developed the North Clare region into a successful tourist destination without compromising the environment or local people. Relevant literature was examined and evaluated and there were a number of gaps identified, including insufficient evidence to support regional perspectives on the topic. Another area of concern includes tourist's lack of understanding sustainable tourism. Sustainable tourism requires effective participation of various elements in order for it to reach its full potential. Proficient collaboration between stakeholders is an essential aspect and is a key participator in sustainability. Another crucial aspect is the development of a realistic 'carrying capacity' policy within tourist attractions. The primary data in this paper was generated through a number of sources including tourists visiting the North Clare region and tourism providers and their representative bodies. This information was acquired through a number of surveys and semi structured interviews.  Following the information generated by the researchers objectives, a significant lack of evidence to depict the level of sustainability being practiced by tourism providers in North Clare was ascertained. Greater awareness is also needed by tourism providers and local people on the importance of sustainability. This paper concludes that the concept of sustainable tourism is advanced, to a certain degree, but that further improvements need to be made by tourism stakeholders in North Clare to develop the industry to its full potential.

*Keywords:* : Sustainable tourism, natural tourist attractions, Clare, Ireland.

## 1. Introduction

The topic chosen for this paper was sustainable tourism. The researchers used a 'funnel-type' system when forming areas for the research to focus on.  Following a brief examination of the tourism industry on a global scale, the researchers then focused on the area of sustainable tourism and examined how it is practised.  Focusing further on this area, the researchers then examined sustainable tourism in Ireland and focusing further on County Clare and natural attractions.  The researchers then ended with a particular emphasis on natural attractions in North Clare and how practising sustainable tourism has developed each site into successful tourist attractions. After identifying all of these areas upon which the research would be structured, the researchers then began forming aims and objectives of the study to: Conduct a broad examination of tourism on an international scale and identify the concept of sustainability within the industry and how it is implemented and practiced, examine the 'spin-off' benefits that can be generated from the sustainable efforts of the two North Clare attractions for the Clare region, ascertain the level of sustainable tourism in County Clare, highlight the level of sustainable tourism being practised in North Clare tourist attractions, focusing on the Cliffs of Moher and the Burren, identify whether or not sustainable efforts have developed and created positive opportunities for the North Clare attractions in question and investigate into the development of the Irish tourism industry, highlighting sustainable tourism on a national scale. Research the rational of sustaining natural tourist attractions

The researchers decided to conduct both secondary and primary research in order to fulfil the aims and objectives outlined above.  The purpose of this choice is that more feasibility of the study would be achieved.  Primary research

was conducted in the form of both two semi-structured interview and one hundred surveys. The data collected from these methods was then analysed and presented and a number of key issues and trends emerged. Discussion surrounding these issues and trends was then conducted and a number of concluding arguments were formed.

## 2. Literature review

This paper aims to investigate the topic of sustainable tourism and how its development in North Clare has led to the growth of the region's tourism industry. This will be achieved by discussion based on, and with reference to, relevant academic literature and other secondary sources. The researchers aim to investigate the terminology of sustainable tourism and the development of this trend in Ireland and County Clare. Analyse on the importance, and benefits of sustaining natural tourist attractions will also be included, while investigating two examples in the North Clare region. The researchers will highlight how the sustainable efforts made in these two particular cases have led to the development of the region's tourism industry.

Jamal and Robinson (2012) describe the tourism industry as "one of the global economic success stories of the last 40 years" and that sustaining the industry's resources is "especially important". The researchers main aim, therefore, is to investigate this further and identify why the importance of sustainability is so pronounced. It is widely argued that sustainable tourism is an "adaptive paradigm", i.e. it relates to many different aspects of the tourism industry such as the economy, social and cultural aspects and the environment. Therefore the researchers were prompted to research this subject matter further, forming one of the main aims of this study. The rationale behind the choice to focus this research on natural tourist attractions in the North Clare region was made because; firstly the Cliffs of Moher has attracted over 800,000 visitors in 2011, a rise of over 12% since 2010 and therefore a prominent choice and also that the Cliffs of Moher and the Burren were recently awarded a Geopark status. Fáilte Ireland states that Ireland's tourism industry is highly dependent on the country's landscape and natural environment and for the industry to continue to strive upon this sustainability must occur; "The future of Irish tourism is inextricably linked to the quality of the environment. Our scenic landscapes, coastline, rivers and lakes, and cultural heritage are the bedrock upon which Irish tourism has been built. The economic viability and competitiveness of the Irish tourism industry can only be sustained if the quality of these resources is maintained"

The argument that sustainability is critical to the future of the tourism industry is evident. A recent study found that sustaining the industry "improves the quality of life for host communities, achieves visitor satisfaction, and protects natural resources in destination countries".This prompted the researchers to conduct further research to support this hypo research and uncover the rationale behind this concept.

### 2.1.1. Development of the tourism industry

The tourism industry has grown and developed rapidly since the 1840s into one of the most highly profitable and continually growing industries. There are many different definitions and understandings of the term 'tourism'. Cooper et al (2008) defines tourism as "a whole range of individuals, businesses, organisations, and places which combine in some way to deliver a travel experience", and similarly Harrisons and Husbands (1996; 1) describe tourism as "a large-scale movement of people and money". Aronsson (2000) sees tourism as "people's journeys to places other than those where they live and work and the activities carried out during the journey and at the destination". Therefore, one can see there are many variations of definitions on the term tourism, but there is one main theme running throughout; the movement of a person or group of people away from their home environment. Tourism involves a number of different providers such as accommodation, attractions, and transport, which all contribute to a tourist's 'experience'.

Tourism is now considered to be one of the most important contributors to the economy of a country. As stated above, Harrison and Husbands (1996) described tourism as a 'large-scale movement of money'. Cooper et al (2008) also describes tourism as 'economically important' and that which has "guaranteed increased governmental and international attention" because of its "significance and importance".

### 2.1.2. Examining sustainable tourism

The tourism industry is now considered to be one of the most important contributors to the economy of a country. It is therefore of paramount importance that the industry, and its resources, are sustained for the use by future generations, while at the same time utilising these resources in the present. One of the researchers main aims for this paper was to justify this statement. Sustainability is a vital process in the development and planning of the tourism industry, and is described as;

"a set of principles, policy prescriptions, and management methods which chart a path for tourism development such that a destination's environmental resource base (including natural, built, and cultural features) is protected for future development"

There are many interpretations of the term 'sustainable tourism'. As described by Hunter (1997) above, sustainability in tourism needs to occur in order to develop our resources as best we can for the future. Similarly, Harrisons and Husbands (1996) describe sustainable tourism as a concept that manages, in a successful combination, an area's resources and develops them "in harmony with the environment". Castellani and Sala (2010) also view sustainable tourism as "enhancing local development as well as protecting natural environment and traditional and cultural heritage". Therefore, one can see that by protecting and sustaining the environment as well as local culture, the future of the region's

tourism industry will be successful. 'Green' or 'Eco' tourism are other concepts often associated with sustainable tourism. According to Mathews, manager of Fáilte Ireland's Environment Unit, "In Irish tourism, a green environment is not an add-on but a key business asset". The tourism industry can be viewed as revolving around the environment and that "its core resources are the natural and built environments of the tourist destination" and this, together with the culture and heritage of the area, arises the need of sustainability. There are many ways in which sustainable policies and practices can be implemented at a tourist attraction, and if done so successfully the business can flourish and develop into a profitable strategic operation, without compromising the ability of future generations to do likewise.

### 2.1.3. Effective implementation of sustainable tourism

Sustainability can become a 'key asset' of a tourism business and one which can sustain and develop the company's or attraction's natural resources for future generations. In the case of natural attractions, the primary focus of this paper, it is vital to sustain the environment and culture in which it set upon in order for 'future development' not just of the attraction itself, but also of the tourism industry in the region. Sustainability has become an important practice in tourism, as the industry becomes increasingly profitable.

Kim (2009) describes successful sustainable management as "a set of principles, policy prescriptions, development strategies, and managerial and marketing activities that incorporate the goals of sustainable development into tourism". Similarly, Front and Harris (2004) also state that sustainable policies, environmental performance measurements and social standards are all important factors to incorporate into sustainable practice. The researchers also believe that "ensuring that procedures are in place to identify and correct impacts related to environmental issues" is also critical in making sustainable tourism a success. The division for Sustainable Development, under the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs state that through an initiative known as 'Agenda 21', fully integrating "economic, social and environmental factors at the policy, planning and management levels" will result in achieving the main objectives of sustainability; "to ensure socially responsible economic development while protecting the resource base and the environment for the benefit of future generations".

Harrison and Husbands (1996) describe the process of sustainable tourism as managing one's resources and "communicating with and involving the local population in planning and management decisions". To moderate and control the resources upon which tourism is based is key to making sustainability work (Harrison and Husbands 1996) and that "balancing growth through the use and conservation of resources such that those resources remain intact and available for succeeding generations". This research primarily focuses on sustainable tourism in Ireland. One of the

researchers' main aims was to therefore examine how sustaining Ireland's resources has advanced its tourism industry.

### 2.2. The development of tourism and its sustainability in Ireland

Sustainable tourism is an important process towards achieving a successful tourism industry practice. In 2010, there were over 170,000 people employed in the Irish tourism sector, therefore one can see how significant the tourism sector is to the country. As this research is primarily concerned with the West of Ireland, and in particular County Clare, it is important to note that over 20,000 people are employed in the tourism sector in this region. It is due to the sustainable efforts of those involved in the past that these impressive figures have emerged. Due to the growth of tourism into the industry to date, and its contribution to the host's country economy, is where the importance of sustaining tourism's resources arises. Despite the positive impacts that tourism can generate, there are also negative aspects to the industry. Because of 'mass tourism', i.e. large amounts of tourists, there can be damage on the host's environment and local culture and heritage. The tourism industry has, therefore, been negatively viewed upon in the past. However there is a solution to this problem; sustainable tourism alleviates the negative impacts generated by tourism through conservation and preservation, while maintaining and developing the industry. Harrison and Husbands (1996) describe the concept as a "guiding principle to which all tourism should aspire", and if it is not practiced "the very resources upon which tourism is based will be lost".

'Agenda 21' was a global initiative established by the United Nations which established sustainable policies under which tourism organisations must follow. Prior to this, Ireland had introduced a sustainable strategy known as "Sustainable Development: A Strategy for Ireland, April 1997". This was to mark the beginning of sustainability in Ireland. Highlighting the importance of this initiative, former T.D. and Minister for the Environment stated "Sustainable development is one of the most universally endorsed aspirations of our time". The main aim of the strategy was to "allow sustainable development to be taken forward in Ireland" resulting in "in a series of discrete new initiatives".

Following this strategy was what developed and became known as "Local Agenda 21". The main purpose of this 'Local Agenda' was to "facilitate sustainable development at community level" and to "respect the social, cultural, economic, and environmental needs of the present and future citizens of a community in all its diversity and which relates that community and its future to the regional, national and international community of which it is a part". National stakeholders, including government bodies, then provided a platform through the basis of "a forum for exchanging experiences and examples of good practices as well as assisting a coherent implementation of Local Agenda 21 across the various local universities".

Tourism in Ireland has developed into a very successful industry and is considered to be one of the most significant contributors to the country's economy. This research is primarily based upon County Clare and the main objective is to uncover the sustainable tourism activities that are taking place in the North Clare region. The researchers also aim to discover how sustainability is developing the area's tourism industry.

### 2.2.1. An examination into sustainable tourism in County Clare

Sustainable development will work to a region's advantage if everyone involved makes a unified effort in their sustainable policies and practices. Similar to the tourism industry itself, which relies on all tourism providers in a destination to work together towards making the tourist's experience unique, and to make the industry a success. Following the research conducted for this paper, the researchers believes that the tourism industry in Clare can truly be seen as a prime example of sustainable tourism. One of the researchers aims was to uncover the opportunities which arise from practicing sustainable tourism, which will be achieved in the following dialogue.

For the tourism industry to become a success, tourism stakeholders must collaborate in their sustainable efforts. The tourism stakeholders involved with County Clare include; Faílte Ireland & Tourism Ireland, Shannon Development, Clare County Council, Clare Tourism Forum and all tourism providers and organisations within the county. The Local Government Act brought out in 2001 states that local bodies must promote and enact the interests of their local communities; "the functions and role of local representatives have been further expanded to include: "a measure, activity or thing, deemed to promote the interests of the local community if it promotes, directly or indirectly, social inclusion or the social, economic, environmental, recreational, cultural, community or general development of the administrative area"

Clare County Council, urban district councils, Shannon Development and Faílte Ireland have, together with tourism providers in the county and tourism boards and organisations within the county such as Clare Tourism Forum, developed tourism in the region very successfully through sustainable initiatives. In their tourism strategy 2010-2014, Clare County Council's main objective is to develop the county's tourism industry by sustaining its distinctive resources and make it;

"A County where people want to sustainably live, work and visit because of its unique quality of life. An inclusive County of sustainable communities that have respect for their environment, a sense of awareness of place, a sense of shared purpose and a sense of civic pride"

This can be seen through the main vision of the strategy; "To support and facilitate the development of a cohesive and sustainable tourism sector in County Clare that will make a significant contribution to the local economy". Through their tourism strategy, Clare County Council has made it their mission to promote sustainable tourism to all of the providers in the region. By doing this they hope to achieve "visitor experience, product development, value for money, employment, information provision, and economic activity in the county". A SWOT analysis is a useful business tool in analysing any business environment, and the Council devised one in their tourism strategy which identifies the core competences that Clare tourism holds, and also identifies areas within the industry that needs improvements. It is these areas that are lacking development, upon which the strategic actions of Clare tourism stakeholders are being tackled. It is because of these efforts that tourism in Clare has developed to such a high standard and that it has become such a success. "Shannon Development believes there is tremendous potential to generate additional visitor numbers, revenue and jobs in rural areas through the development of eco-friendly tourism projects". Visitor numbers, both international and domestic, for the region in 2010 were recorded to be 2,281,900; this was an increase of 12% compared to recordings in 2006. These impressive figures portray the success that the tourism industry in Clare has become. Another one of the researchers' aims for this paper was to examine, in reality, how sustainable tourism is practiced at a tourist attraction.

### 2.3. Sustaining natural tourist attractions

Natural tourist attractions depend on the quality of their surrounding environment, landscape and local culture and heritage. They form a significant part of the tourism industry and therefore sustaining them and their resources is becoming increasingly important. The growing trend in popularity of natural attractions was identified at the Earth Summit in 2002, where sustainable tourism at such sites was also highlighted as being a 'high priority';

"The natural environment is an important resource for tourism. With increasing urbanisation, destinations in both industrialised and developing countries with significant natural features, scenery, cultural heritage or biodiversity are becoming increasingly popular sites for tourist destinations. Efforts to preserve and enhance the natural environment should therefore be a high priority for the industry and for governments"

The purpose here is to uncover the reasons as to why sustaining natural tourist attractions are of paramount importance. "Tourism is one of the world's largest industries" with an estimated 650 million international visitors recorded in 2000. Because of mass tourism, there can be negative effects on the environment and in relation to natural tourist attractions; the very resources which their business relies on can be destroyed. For example, large amounts of tourists visiting natural environments can cause pollution of land, air and sea, damage eco-systems and cause socio and cultural problems in the surrounding area, causing the attraction to "lose its original attraction"

Further to this, Deng et al (2003) also identified a negative impact on the environment at such sites are the "development of infrastructure and facilities". This may lead to some of the causes as identified above in the Earth

Summit 2002. Deng et al (2003) describes the tourism activity at a natural attraction as "nature-based tourism", and the mass numbers of visitors to such sites can lead to "some disturbance or damage". Deng et al (2003) also state that "sustainability is the final goal for such forms of tourist activity, and also that;

"No type of tourism can be sustainable in the absence of appropriate planning, monitoring, evaluation, and management; and sustainable nature-based tourism or ecotourism development can only be achieved when the behaviour of destination managers, stakeholders, and tourists is ecologically, economically, and ethically responsible"

If natural tourist attractions adopt sustainable policies and practices, this may lead to new and profitable opportunities and also develop tourism in the region. Sustainable tourism can be a challenge to some, as identified by Newsome et al (2004);

"The challenge facing the industry is how to translate principles into practices and to attain the seemingly irreconcilable objectives of tourism development with ecological conservation"

Based on successful cases, the advantages of other businesses adopting a more sustainable approach can become evident. The Cliffs of Moher and the Burren are the two most widely known natural attractions in Ireland. The Cliffs are internationally recognised as one of the most impressive, natural attractions in Europe, with over one million visitors every year. Sequentially, the Burren is also a major attraction for tourists with the only landscape of its kind in Western Europe. One of the aims of this paper is to uncover what exactly are the policies and practices in sustainable tourism, and how, in reality, they are performed at a natural tourist attraction.

*2.3.1. Sustainable tourism at the Cliffs of Moher*

One of the natural attractions focused on in this paper is the Cliffs of Moher in North Clare. Management at the attraction continually monitor the following resources to comply with sustainability; Electricity usage, water usage, waste management, gas usage and carbon footprint. The attraction's main strategic objective is to "establish the Cliffs of Moher at the forefront of Ecotourism initiatives in the region" and other initiatives at the attraction include; preserving natural habitats and the use of renewable energy resources. One of the impacts that tourism can create are the negative 'visual impacts' caused by the development of infrastructure in order to meet facility demands. To alleviate this, the visitor centre at the Cliffs of Moher site was constructed in such a way as to represent a "cave like structure", built "into the hillside". This was done, in-line with the attraction's sustainable policies, in order to "minimize the visual impact on this fabulous scenic location and uses a range of energy saving and eco-friendly features including geo-thermal, solar energy and water recycling". Sustainable management at the Cliffs of Moher is practised throughout the site. It is also vital that "communication of the principles of sustainable development" takes place,

which, again, is continually highlighted throughout the Cliffs of Moher attraction. The sustainable policies are on view inside the visitor centre, along with requests that visitors adhere to them. The attraction's mission statement mirrors this argument;

"Our mission at the Cliffs of Moher Visitors' Centre is to develop and improve the delivery of a world class visitor experience in a safe, welcoming, and informative manner while adhering to best practice in the conservation of the Cliffs of Moher, their environs and heritage".

Sustainable practice at a natural tourist attraction can lead to astounding opportunities for the business. Deng et al (2003) also noted that, in relation to natural tourist attractions, "nature-based tourism is dependent upon the quality of the environment", and that "Where destinations are well managed and tourists are knowledgeable and aware, these elements complement the natural attributes and contribute to satisfaction". Therefore without sustainable practices taking place, the attraction could not develop to its full potential and become successful. One of the aims of this paper is to examine the benefits which can be generated from practising a sustainable business.

*2.3.2. Developments at the Cliffs of Moher of Moher*

The opportunities that arise from successful implementation of sustainable tourism policies at an attraction can lead to a number of benefits; including the development of tourism in the region and an increase in visitor numbers. The success of the activities at the Cliffs of Moher has led to a significant increase of visitor numbers to the attraction;

"Visitor numbers at the Cliffs of Moher visitor attraction in County Clare jumped by 19% in the first six months of 2011, compared to the same period in 2010"

The successful, sustainable management of natural attractions can lead to attractive development opportunities, as identified by Shannon Development;

"Promoting a greater distribution of tourism across the regions is essential. There is considerable untapped potential to develop tourism in many areas of the country, particularly around nature and heritage".

What this means for the Cliffs of Moher attraction, is that they now have achieved an international platform for the cliffs and surrounding area, and the opportunity to further attract tourists to the region. The New 7 Wonders of Nature was a global campaign which began in 2009, where voting took place around the world. The Cliffs of Moher were voted as Ireland's entry to the competition and the attraction reached the final twenty-eight. The Cliffs were not successful in achieving the title as one of the New 7 Wonders of Nature; however "the campaign has provided positive PR and exposure for the Cliffs of Moher". Similar to this, Newsome et al (2004) states that "when adequate and appropriate planning, practice and monitoring occurs then tourism in natural areas will provide a sustainable future for many of the world's great natural ecosystems". Without the sustainable policies and practices adopted by the Cliffs of Moher tourist

attraction, the successful developments examined would not have occurred. Without the collaboration of all tourism stakeholders in Clare, the County's tourism industry would not be as successful as it is. Another attraction examined in this paper is the Burren. One of the researchers main aims was to examine how the Burren has practised sustainable tourism.

*2.4. Sustainable tourism at the Burren*

The Burren in County Clare is one of the County's main tourist attractions and is a huge contributor in attracting tourists to the region because of its unique landscape, which is described as "one of the finest examples of a glaciated karst landscape in Europe". Described as 'Ireland's most distinctive and internationally celebrated landscape', internationally renowned for its distinctively abundant flora and fauna, breath-taking scenery and 'numerous historical and archaeological features', the Burren attracts large numbers of visitors all year round. The attraction has been described as "outstanding, in terms of its cultural, socio-economic, and environmental characteristics" and has a "landscape of the highest quality". Sustainable tourism is the core concern of the attraction, and the importance of this has led to the development of the Burren Connect Project. The Burren Connect Project (the sustainable policies compiled by the Burren Connect Project) is a new initiative which was established in 2007. The organisation works with tourism stakeholders in the county such as Clare County Council, Shannon Development and National Parks and Wildlife Services, along with the local community. Its aim is to "link the environment, community, and tourism to conserve the Burren". The project focuses on a number of areas concerned with sustainable tourism within the attraction; "eco-tourism, information and training, traffic management, conservation, education, research, development of trails and Geopark". It is because of these sustainable efforts that the Burren has become the successful attraction it is to date and that these same resources upon which the attraction flourishes will remain readily available for enjoyment in the future.

Harris et al (2003; 27) argue that "tourism can do potential harm" on the environment, disturbing habitats and natural biological eco-systems and degrading the quality of the landscape, and that sustainable practices should be at the forefront of tourism destinations. Similar to the stated arguments presented earlier, it is also indicated under this study that "controlling the impacts of tourism" is central to sustainability. The Burren Connect Project has made significant efforts to "manage visitor impacts on the environment" through a number of developments; Fanore dunes conservation programme, traffic management, access to private lands and trans tourism. Fanore beach and sand dunes are located in the vicinity of the Burren, and there have been many developments made to conserve this attraction including "protective fencing and replanting of marram", car parking facilities and access facilities to the beach, viewing platforms and signage portraying the sustainable policies of

the area. Traffic management in the area is strictly monitored because of "the impacts on the landscape, local land-ownership issues, and the needs of people living in the area as well as those visiting or passing through". 1500 hectares of the Burren is accessible to the public, with the remainder being privately owned. Much of this privately owned land contains "geological, botanical, or cultural interest" and the ever-popular walking trails throughout the Burren pass through here. However, due to the notable collaboration between locals and the representatives concerned, this has not become a problem.

The socio-cultural impacts often associated with tourism are not an issue in the Burren, due to the effective implementation of sustainable tourism policies. The local communities surrounding the Burren and tourism activity in the area have developed a harmonious relationship, which favours developments at this natural attraction. Walking and cycling trails are an exceptionally beloved activity among tourists visiting the Burren. In order to prevent any damage being impeded upon the landscape because of this, Burren Connect have developed "managed access" for visitors to comply with their sustainable policies. Trans Tourism was another initiative established by the Burren Connect Project which "implements new and improved public transport and related information services" in order to "develop innovative, long term and sustainable solutions for transport services" in the area. Efforts relevant here, to date, have included the sustainably effective public and private transport services throughout the region.

The local communities surrounding the Burren were thoroughly informed and consulted before implementation of any developments by the Burren Connect Project. As mentioned previously, it is because of this admirable relationship between the host community and the tourism organisations involved, that this natural attraction has evolved to become a 'tourism hot spot' in County Clare. "The project has also invested in education and training programmes to enhance awareness and appreciation of the Burren within Burren communities, schools and businesses". Education and training programmes are held regularly for members of local communities. Another initiative which is encouraged and managed at the Burren includes 'carrying capacity'. Carrying capacity has been defined by Jamal and Robinson (2012) as "the maximum number of visitors for whom an area is able to provide a quality experience at any one time". The researchers also argue that this concept is vital to sustainable tourism as it "recognises the detrimental impacts on local populations which will occur if tourism exceeds a certain level". The ethos of the Burren Connect Project is to continually research, examine and implement "ways of increasing the positive contribution tourism makes to the local economy and to minimise the negative impacts it makes on the environment". One of the main aims of this paper is to examine how sustainable tourism has developed the tourism industry of the North Clare region.

*2.5. Utilising Sustainable Tourism to develop Clare into a successful tourism destination*

The Cliffs of Moher visitor attraction and the surrounding area of the Burren attraction have been so successful in their sustainable tourism efforts that they were awarded a UNESCO–supported global Geopark Status, in September 2011. Pat Hayes, Mayor of Clare, states "As part of this UNESCO supported initiative, The Burren and Cliffs of Moher region now enjoy global recognition for this unique landscape. Global Geopark status is in recognition of the established network of specific sites of geological interest and a group of environmentally-conscious tourism businesses". This was an exceptional achievement by both attractions, and has accomplished admirable advantages for the tourist attractions themselves, which in turn will have a 'spin-off' effect and heighten tourism interest in County Clare. This recently attained title will increase global awareness of the Cliffs of Moher and the Burren in a positive light and in turn develop the tourism industry of the county. Increasing interest among international and domestic tourists and visitor numbers will boost business for providers in the area. Following these positive developments leads to the creation of new jobs in the industry, as demand rises.

Sustainable tourism, as mentioned earlier, requires the effective collaboration of stakeholders within the tourism threshold, including the local communities. However, this may not always occur and may lead to "power inequalities" as suggested in a recent study. To the contrary, this did not occur within the sustainable initiatives in County Clare. One of the organisations involved in achieving the Geopark status for the two natural attractions was Shannon Development. Its Chief Executive, Mr Vincent Cunnane states that on behalf of the organisation they were; "very pleased to have worked on this initiative and be part of the group that achieved this global recognition. This award now gives a platform for the further development of eco-tourism businesses and other initiatives in the area".

Subsequent to this literature review it is evident that tourism is a thriving and prosperous industry. The employment, economic and social contributions the industry contributes to is undoubted. However, despite the positive aspects, tourism can impact negatively on the environment and local culture and traditions of the host community. It is because of these negative impacts that 'sustainable tourism' originated. It is apparent to the researchers that if sustainable tourism policies and practices are utilised in a diligent manner, the entire region, including tourism attractions and local communities will benefit. Unmistakeably there is a vast amount of literature to support the argument that tourism impacts can be both negative and positive and that sustainability is vital to counteract destructive impacts. However it became clear to the researchers that there are significant gaps with insufficient support to highlight the level of sustainable tourism in Ireland. As this research focuses on the tourism industry in the North Clare region, primary research was needed to examine how sustainability was being

utilised in the area and its contribution to the success of branding Clare as a tourism destination.

# 3. Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to identify and examine the concept of sustainable tourism and its application in natural tourist attractions. Following the sequence of the research process, this paper identifies how the researchers aims to achieve this, outlining the 'nature and style' of its undertaking (Fisher 2007; 39) and 'the approaches, strategies and methods' used (Saunders et al 2007; 2). The various aims and objectives established by the researchers will be achieved through various primary and secondary research approaches and techniques. This paper will also identify the challenges and issues faced by the researchers when conducting the research, and finally a conclusion will be met highlighting a summary of the research process in relation to the methodology ensued. One of the main aims, and prime focus, of this paper is to examine the practise of sustainable tourism in the North Clare region. The researchers found insufficient secondary information to fully achieve this aim. The following paper outlines and discusses the methods chosen in order to pursue primary sources. Primary research conducted for this paper will examine the development of tourism in County Clare and the contribution of sustainable practises towards achieving this success.

## 3.1. Approach

A number of different research approaches will be taken in order to achieve the aims and objectives of the researchers. However, before the intended research approaches are outlined it is useful to highlight the fundamental question underlying all research projects; what is research? Research has been defined by various researchers. Johnson 1994 defines research as "a focused and systematic enquiry that goes beyond generally available knowledge to acquire specialised and detailed information, providing a basis for analysis and elucidatory comment on the topic of enquiry". Similarly, Brannick and Roche (1997; 1) discuss research as "a dialogue of ideas (theory) and evidence (data)" which come together and represent, or indeed contrast with, the researchers argument. Saunders et al (2007; 5) also devised their definition of research as "something that people undertake in order to find out things in a systematic way".

As one can see research is a combination of both general and easily attainable information, e.g. secondary resources such as hard copy books and internet sources, and knowledge and information in which the researchers had to put significant effort and time into attaining such as primary information, e.g. conducting interviews and surveys, compiling primary, unpublished information. The researchers can therefore be seen as the 'collector' of such information and one who compiles the information and presents the findings. It is argued by many that research is divided into two distinctive categories, or "opposing

approaches"; quantitative and qualitative research, and sequentially follows suit. Wherein quantitative research "deals with numbers" and qualitative research "deals with experience and meaning which can only be described in words". However, generally this is not found to be correct and most research forms a combination of both. Saunders et al (2007; 3) states that 'research method' and 'research methodology' can sometimes be used 'interchangeably'. Therefore, it is important to note that research methods are described in this recent study as "techniques and procedures used to obtain and analyse data" and that research methodology is highlighted as meaning "the theory of how research should be undertaken". This paper is focusing on research methodology, which is defined by Brannick and Roche (1997; 3) as the "decision-making process". The first step taken by the researchers in writing this paper was to devise a research question or title from a subject area or topic. The next step included the formation of a number of aims and objectives which, when answered or achieved, would back up the main question of the research, i.e. form the argument the researchers set out in the title. The topic chosen by the researchers was sustainable tourism, with the title being "The development of Sustainable tourism, with an emphasis on natural tourist attractions in the North Clare region".

### 3.2. Inductive and deductive approaches

The researchers aim to conduct the research, or 'working hypo research', through a combination of both inductive and deductive reasoning, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The reason behind this choice of approach was, due to the nature of social research in which the researchers research lies, an all-round, 'unbiased' or 'valid' finding could be achieved (Griffin 2010). A recent study (Saunders et al 2007; 117) defined a deductive approach as one where "you develop a theory and hypo research (or hypotheses) and design a research strategy to test the hypo research" and an inductive approach as one where "you would collect data and develop theory as a result of your data analysis". The concept that a combination of both deductive and inductive approaches follows and produces what is known as the 'research cycle', and this concept is one that will be closely followed by the researchers (Griffin, 2010).

As mentioned above, a combination of both deductive and inductive research approaches will form the basis of this research. A deductive approach to research or what can also be known as 'testing theory' is a widely used concept and hence defined in many studies. Saunders et al (2007; 117), defines the concept as "the development of a theory that is subjected to a rigorous test" and similarly Dillane (2010) argues that a deductive approach is one in which "the researchers develops a theory and then designs a research strategy to test the theory". An inductive approach to research, also commonly known as 'building theory', has a generally accepted definition or understanding; it involves the researchers collecting the data, analysing it, presenting it and finally producing the theory. Correspondingly, Dillane (2010)

also states that "the researchers would collect the data first and then develop a theory based on that data analysis". The choice to combine both approaches to this research was made because, as identified by Saunders et al (2007; 149) the researchers findings will have more 'credibility' as opposed to research that would follow just one approach. Also identified as another advantage would be that the research would have more "reliability and validity" (White 2007; 21). Reliability is defined as "the extent to which your data collection techniques or analysis procedures will yield consistent findings". Validity is concerned with the degree of truth behind researchers findings, as described by Griffin (2010). There are, however, limitations to both methodologies. As identified by Robson 2002, there are 'four threats to reliability'; subject or participant error, subject or participant bias, observer error and observer. These 'threats' may be controlled through "specific data collection techniques and analysis procedures".

### 3.3. Secondary data collection

There are two types of data in the research process; secondary data and primary data. As part of the collection of data for this research, the researchers will collect both types of information. Secondary data is defined as "data that has already been collected for some other purpose" (Saunders et al 2007 p. 246) or "information that has been published before" or "in print somewhere else" (White 2007; 84). There are many sources of secondary information, such as hardcopy books, internet websites, electronic books, journal articles, magazine and newspaper articles, hard copy government or legal documents, etc. Most research will use a mixture of both primary and secondary information, and there are advantages and disadvantages in using both.

### 3.4. Primary data collection

As mentioned above, this research will also contain primary data collection methods. Primary data is commonly known to be more 'valuable' information in comparison with secondary data. This is because it "is new and original at its date of publication, is detailed and accurate and tends to be very specialised" (White 2007; 84). There are many types of primary data such as "conference proceedings, official publications and statistics, patents and trademarks, periodicals, reports, research in progress, standards, theses and trade literature" (White 2007; 85). As stated above, the researchers intend to carry out primary data collection. Types of primary data collection methods include interviews and surveys, which are the two methods the researchers intend to use.

### 3.5. Interview approach & techniques

An interview is defined as "a purposeful discussion between two or more people" (Kahn and Cannell, 1957). There are many types of interviews, including "structured, semi-structured, unstructured or in-depth, standardised or

non-standards, respondent and informant" (Saunders et al 2007; 312), and various ways in which they can be carried out. The researchers conducted two interviews, one with the Director of the Cliffs of Moher visitor experience and the other with the Marketing Director of the Clare Tourism Forum. The researchers contacted the interviewees via email and arranged the interview dates and times. Background information on the researchers and pre-determined questions were made available to the interviewees prior to the interviews taking place. The choice to carry out an interview was made because it is the "dominant… technique in the field of qualitative research".

Both interviews followed the format of a non-standardised, semi-structured, face-to-face interview, with "a list of themes and questions to be covered" with a "social interaction" between the researchers and the respondent. The questions asked were written previous to the interview taken place. Different to a structured interview, a semi-structured interview allows for minor changes to the pre-determined questions to be made, such as the wording of certain questions to be altered in line with the "specifics of the organisational context that is encountered in relation to the research topic". New questions may be asked throughout the interview, if the interviewer feels it is needed in order to fully accomplish the aims and objectives of the interview. A semi-structured interview allows for "additional discussion" to take place, which is an advantage as the researchers is given the opportunity to create valuable discussion on a topic or question that otherwise may not have been asked, due to the nature of pre-determined questions.

### 3.6. Survey approach & techniques

The researchers will also carry out a number of surveys on tourists visiting North Clare, and in particular tourists at the Cliffs of Moher and the Burren. The reason behind choosing to question visitors to these natural attractions is due to the time constraints under the researchers and the very nature of this paper.

As outlined above, the research upon which this paper is based is essentially qualitative, and therefore the decision to carry out surveys was easily made. There are many types of surveys as identified by Saunders et al (2007; 356-7); self-administered, incl. internet-mediated, postal and delivery and collection surveys, and interviewer-administered, incl. telephone and structured surveys. The "choice of survey will be influenced by a variety of factors related to your research question(s) and objectives" (Saunders et al 2007; 357). The type of survey chosen by the researchers was interviewer or self-administered and structured due to the nature of the researchers' aim and objectives, i.e. the questions being asked here requires mostly qualitative data, and the research's title, this type of survey was chosen. The researchers chose the population in which they intended to survey, therefore the data collected would be relevant. The researchers chose to randomly approach a number of visitors to the area, as due to time constraints, the entire population could not be surveyed

and this 'random sample approach' would allow the researchers to 'generalise back'.

The length of the surveys and the amount of questions being asked was quite limited. This was due to the fact that that the answers being sought would be time consuming for the respondents to answer. Therefore the number of questions being asked by the researchers was reduced to avoid the respondents becoming annoyed, which could hinder the results achieved thus making it 'un-reliable' and 'invalid'.

The choice of questions when designing the survey, and including interviews in the collection of primary data, allowed the researchers to approach the research in a variety of ways, giving the research more 'credibility'. This was done in order to produce what is known as 'triangulation', which described by White (2000; 66-7) "gives far more information about the topic under investigation" and "strengthens the overall argument" of the researchers. A 'pilot' or trial run of the survey was administered to the researchers' friends and family so as to ensure the survey was easily understood. The researchers was satisfied with the feedback received from the pilot survey, and so therefore no amendments were required. A number of various issues and challenges arose throughout the process of conducting research for this paper.

## 4. Data analysis and Findings

After careful consideration of primary data collection methods and techniques, as discussed in paper three, the researchers then presented their findings, which will form the following discussion. The collection methods chosen included a self-administered, structured survey and a semi-structured interview. The following sections will present and discuss, firstly the results of the researchers' surveys and secondly the key or emerging issues following the researchers interviews.

The researchers conducted a number of self-administered, structured surveys amongst tourists visiting the North Clare region at the Cliffs of Moher and the Burren. The number of surveys administered totalled one hundred and a range of data was collected. The researchers then presented the findings in the following charts and discussed the results achieved throughout the following analysis.

### 4.1. The respondent's nationalities

The first question in the researchers' survey asked the respondents what their nationalities were, i.e. their country of origin. The purpose of this question was to allow the researchers to build a profile of the respondents in question. The results gained presented the researchers with a varied response and so therefore the researchers was satisfied that the findings presented would contain an overall, unbiased view of the topic in question. The researchers found that the majority of tourists that were surveyed came from America (33%), Germany (22%), and France (30%), while other minorities included England (10%) and China (5%). The subsequent sub-sections examine the sequential questions that were included in the survey.

### 4.2. Age profile of respondents

The second question in the researchers' survey asked the respondents to choose the age profile in which they fell into. This was done in order to further build the profile of the tourists that participated in the survey. The majority of tourists which participated in the survey fell between the age brackets of 18-29 (38%) and 30-39 (24%). Other minority groups included 0-17 year olds (13%), 40-54 year olds (17%) and finally the smallest group recorded were 55+ year olds (8%). The researchers was satisfied with the age mix between the various groups as it enabled overall, valid findings upon which there was no biased group.

### 4.3. Motivations of tourists to the area

The third question in the researchers survey was a 'closed' question upon which the respondents were asked to identify the reason behind what motivated them to visit North Clare, upon which they were provided with a variety of responses to choose from. The results achieved were varied and included reasons such as the landscape and scenery, educational purposes, the nature experience and the uniqueness of the area. 59% of those surveyed were motivated to visit North Clare because of the landscape. This suggests that, because of this reason, those people would not visit the area if the landscape was not of a certain quality. The conclusion the researchers came to after carrying out the survey was that sustainable tourism was the essential reason behind the area's success.

### 4.4. Reasons why tourists would revisit North Clare

The fourth question the researchers asked in the survey was to discover why, if it was the respondents first time visiting the area, they would consider visiting a second time. The respondents were required to outline the reasons why they would revisit the area and were given options from which to choose, providing the researchers with invaluable insight into one of the main aims and objectives of the research; to investigate into the level of sustainable tourism being practised in the North Clare region and why/how this practice can or is increasing visitor numbers. The results shown here suggest the main reason why tourists would revisit the area again would be for the landscape. After numerous discussions with various respondents, the researchers found that people felt there was no other place like North Clare in Ireland, and that they would 'definitely come back' because of the sheer beauty of the place. It was found that, after analysing the data recorded from the surveys that a staggering 61% of tourists' surveyed were of this opinion. Other reasons included friendliness of the locals with 14%, having a 'great' experience with 12% and the enjoyment people had on their first visit with 11%. All of these reasons conjured the thought in the researchers mind that without the strong sustainable tourism practices already in place within North Clare, tourism would not be as

successful as it is in the area and visitor numbers would not be increasing in the way that they are. A mere 2% of people surveyed said they would not revisit.

### 4.5. Tourists' understanding of sustainable tourism

The fifth question on the survey asked the respondents a 'closed' question where they were asked did they understand the concept of sustainable tourism. The purpose behind this question was to discover whether or not the public understood this relatively new phenomenon and to uncover what level of knowledge tourists had regarding this as they themselves play an important role. The results included; 38% answered yes when asked did they understand the concept of sustainable tourism, 29% said they had limited knowledge while 33% said they did not understand it. These results therefore did not present a very clear understanding, for the researchers, of whether or not there was understanding on the tourists' part or not. 38% of the tourists surveyed said they had full knowledge of sustainable tourism while 33% did not, a difference of 5%. The researchers therefore identified a 'gap' and concluded that further education of tourists needs to be done in order to develop sustainability in the tourism sector and improve it.

### 4.6. 'Green' tourists

The sixth and final question on the survey asked the tourists that were surveyed whether or not they would consider themselves to be 'green tourists'. The researchers explained this term as one who behaves in an environmentally conscious fashion when on holiday, an important aspect of sustainable tourism as caring for the environment in tourism destinations plays a significant part of this development. The options given to the respondents to answer formed a closed-ended format where they were asked to choose yes or no.

The researchers found that 76% of tourists considered themselves to be 'green tourists' while 24% did not. This result presented some interesting data to the researchers. One of the main aims of this research was to uncover the significance of sustainability in the tourism industry and to discover whether or not sustainable practices at natural attractions could increase visitor numbers. The fact that 76% of tourists surveyed considered themselves to be 'green' supports the argument that sustainable tourism is a significant development and one which holds a high degree of viability.

## 5. Highlighted themes post-interviews

The researchers decided to conduct semi-structured interviews with both the marketing executive of Clare Tourism Forum, Ms Maureen Cleary and the Director of the Cliffs of Moher Visitor Experience, Ms Katherine Webster. These interviews were conducted as part of the researchers primary data collection, and following which, a number of issues were highlighted, forming the argument or hypo research of the researchers and answering the aims of this

research. Other questions were asked throughout the interviews taking place in order to fully reach the researchers aims and objectives and to adapt to the context of discussion between the interviewer and interviewee. Each issue and/or trend, in relation to North Clare, which emerged during the process of the interviews taking place will form the basis of the following sections; beginning with how managing visitor numbers is an essential part of sustainable tourism, followed by a discussion on how important collaboration between various stakeholders is, then examining how sustainable tourism is a major driver of success behind the two natural attractions being focused on in this research and the various successful opportunities that have come their way because of their sustainable approach and finally ending on the importance of preserving the culture of the region in relation to tourism development.

### 5.1. Managing visitor numbers is an integral part of sustainable tourism

One of the main aims of this paper was to uncover if and how sustainable tourism used in natural attractions could lead to positive developmental opportunities for the attraction. Some of these 'opportunities' may include positive publicity which could further generate valuable awareness of the attraction, and therefore attracting visitors into the area. This is how tourism develops an area; however mass tourism can bring with it negative effects and this is where sustainable tourism comes into play. While it is understandably beneficial for any tourism provider to gain increased visitor numbers there has to be a point where these numbers need to be managed. This type of management is vital in order for 'carrying capacity' not to be exceeded as, if this occurs it can have devastating effects on the environment, local people and even the local economy. Mass tourism can damage the environment by pollution, the local culture and traditions can become diluted in order to meet consumer demands and the local economy can also suffer if tourists do not buy local. This type of management formed the first main issue which emerged following the researchers interviews.

The Cliffs of Moher in North Clare is one of the natural attractions the researchers is focusing on for this research. This attraction has been described as "the third most visited attraction in Ireland… the most visited natural attraction" and one which is therefore "very much a site of mass tourism" (Webster 2012) Visitors come to this site solely because of its natural beauty and scenic landscape. Therefore one can assume that if this asset or amenity was not preserved and sustained then visitors would no longer be attracted to the area. One of the main aims of the researchers was to uncover how the benefits of practising sustainable tourism can in-turn improve visitor numbers, but it is argued by Webster (2012) that with regards sustainability, this improvement needs to managed; "while it's great to have large numbers of visitors coming here we have to be conscious of the fact that what we do in relation to the number of visitors coming is actually managed so that it doesn't have a negative impact on the environment, on the

wildlife and on the natural habitats that we have here". The resources which tourism relies upon, needs to be preserved and this was one of the main arguments formed by Webster. If practical management occurs, such as carrying capacity management, then attractions can truly enjoy the benefits that tourism can create. The success of sustainable tourism management requires a number of different approaches, another one being the collaboration between stakeholders which is the next issue that arose during the researchers interviews and this will be examined in the following section.

### 5.2. Evidence of strong collaboration

Another aim set out at the beginning of this research was to examine the level of sustainable tourism in practice in North Clare. The purpose of this aim was to identify the level of sustainability in the tourism sector of this region and to identify any issues regarding this. Following the researchers interviews it became apparent that collaboration between tourism providers, locals and semi-state bodies was very strong and that this has contributed to the success of tourism in the area. Collaboration, or working together, is a vital part of sustainable tourism as tourism providers, locals and representative bodies must join forces in order for the concept to work in an effective and beneficial manner for all those involved. As part of the researchers primary data collection, two interviews were conducted; one with a tourism provider in North Clare and the other with the tourism representative semi-state body for County Clare. It was found that collaboration between those involved in sustainable tourism in the region was strongly evident.

One of the researchers interviews was conducted with the Clare Tourism Forum, which is an organisation "responsible to promote and market County Clare as a tourism destination" (Cleary 2012). It was discussed at the beginning of the interview that the organisation comprises of "representatives from Clare County Council, Shannon Development, but also the tourism trade in County Clare" who "meet on a monthly basis, and they dictate what the Clare Tourism Forum does". Any issues which arise in these monthly meetings are then enacted by the forum representatives; the actions of the forum are "influenced by what state bodies and tourism providers want". This type of collaboration has been extremely successful and has developed the tourism industry in the region to a very high standard. It is also because of these alliances between those involved that sustainable tourism in the County has become a thriving initiative. Collaboration has been identified as a steadily growing trend at the forefront of tourism in County Clare and that "people are wanting to work together more" so that tourism providers in the County can enhance the visitor experience. This 'trend' is highly regarded as being important and that it is an essential part in "how we (County Clare tourism industry) need to move forward".

The other interview conducted by the researchers was with the Director of the Cliffs of Moher Visitor Centre. Similar views on the significance of collaboration were identified here, as the Director defined their role as one that

includes "working with the local community and also other tourism providers in the area and fitting into the overall tourism strategy for both for County Clare, the West of Ireland and Ireland as a whole". At this stage of analysing the researchers primary data, it became clear that there was a pattern occurring and that sustainable tourism was a high priority of tourism providers in North Clare. Following in this path, the successful approach the Cliffs of Moher Visitor Centre and the Burren have adopted is the focus of the following section.

### 5.3. Sustainability is the driver of tourism's success

The concentration of this research is on sustainable tourism, how it can develop an area and improve the tourism industry in the long-term. One of the aims of this research set out from the beginning was to examine if and how this initiative was being implemented in North Clare and to identify the advantages it incurs. Following the researchers interviews it became clear that sustainable tourism clearly was at the forefront of success behind both natural attractions used as examples in this research. County Clare, and in particular the northern region, is well known for its unique landscape which is one of the main reasons why tourists are attracted to the area. In relation to this, marketing executive of the Clare Tourism Forum Maureen Cleary is of the opinion that "within County Clare we realise we need to protect it and keep it. And we need to monitor it and we need to observe how people are using it so that we can preserve why people are coming there". It was noted that this wasn't solely the view of this interviewee but rather feedback from the tourism trade within the County and it was stated that "it's all about minding what they have".

The other interview the researchers conducted was with the Director of the Cliffs of Moher Visitor Centre, who describes the attraction as being very much part of Ireland's "popular culture" and "an icon for Ireland, for the scenic and landscape values that people come to see". One of the main issues that emerged from the interview was that the main reasons why tourists come to the region (visitor numbers in 2011 reached 800,000) was because of the "landscape...the natural, the wildlife, the protected habitats, the flora in the Burren". It was also noted that "tourism just couldn't continue to grow without a level of management and sustainability". It is obvious that tourism is flourishing in North Clare and that sustaining this is of the upmost importance to the tourism providers in the area so that 'future generations' can follow suit; "one doesn't go without the other". The tourists themselves are participating in and supporting this trend;

"That's all extremely important to the visitor and they want to know that when they are coming here, they are coming here to spend time in tourism businesses that are actually giving back to that community and helping protect that natural environment".

One can conclude that yes, the way forward for the tourism industry is sustainability and if practiced and implemented effectively tourism can continue to be a profitable economic activity for generations to come. This initiative requires "hard work" but can also create endless positive opportunities for providers to develop their attractions. Because the tourism industry relies on tourists it is essential that they themselves be involved in any developments. Sustainable tourism is becoming increasingly important even in the tourists' minds; "they want to experience nature but they want to experience nature with… businesses which take the business of tourism very seriously and responsibly with a green agenda and an eco-tourism agenda". Businesses, government bodies, locals and tourists need to work together in enjoying all that tourism has to offer. The reality that this is happening in North Clare, various opportunities have arisen for tourism providers in the area and in particular the Cliffs of Moher and the Burren. These 'opportunities' will be discussed in the following section.

### 5.4. Sustainable tourism generates positive opportunities for North Clare

Another issue that was identified during the researchers interviews, as part of the primary data collection for this research, were the opportunities of which the Cliffs of Moher and the Burren are now taking advantage of because of their sustainable efforts. These 'opportunities' include the Cliffs being used as a film location, the New 7 Wonders of Nature and the recently awarded Geopark status. The researchers found that these 'spin-off' results, following the adoption of a more sustainable approach by the two natural attractions, have boosted their success.

### 5.5. The Cliffs of Moher being used as a film location

The Cliffs of Moher are now described as being part of a 'popular culture' by the Director of the Visitor Centre. It was also noted earlier, that one of the main reasons why the attraction is so popular is because of its natural beauty. Due to these 'assets' being sustained, the attraction is now enjoying many benefits, such as being used as a film location. The Cliffs have played host to a number of different films over the years, including Ryan's Daughter in 1970, The Princess Bride in 1987, Into The West and Far And Away in 1992 and more recently Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince in 2009. All of these movies included the Cliffs as part of their film locations and the attraction has reaped the exposure benefits ever since. The movies were shown on worldwide screens and became huge successes. The Cliffs substantially benefited from this global exposure as people from all over the world became more aware of the attraction and "word of mouth has spread" on an international scale. The Cliffs of Moher have experienced many positive developments since adopting a more sustainable approach, and since preservation and conservation activities began at the site the attraction has developed into an extremely popular tourist attraction. Another one of these 'positive developments' included the nomination of becoming a finalist in the global campaign to find the New 7 Wonders of

Nature. This competition brought huge attention to the Cliffs of Moher, and indeed North Clare and will be reviewed in the following sub-section.

*5.6. New 7 Wonders of Nature campaign and the Geopark status*

The Cliffs of Moher achieved a finalist place in the international campaign to name the New 7 Wonders of Nature. The Cliffs were not successful in gaining the title, however because of being part of the final stages of the competition the attraction gained huge benefits in terms of exposure, marketing and word-of-mouth. When discussing the success of being part of the campaign, Katherine Webster Director of Cliffs of Moher Visitor Experience stated "it was beneficial. It definitely kept the Cliffs of Moher front-and-centre in the minds of people both Irish visitors and overseas visitors".

Another achievement of the natural attraction, and also the Burren, was the awarded Geopark status. The significance of this achievement is fundamental to Sustainable tourism in the region, identified by Webster (Director at the Cliffs) as it gives a "stamp of approval on this area for its geological, its natural and cultural heritage". Both attractions have been substantially recognised for their efforts and are now part of a global network of similar tourist attractions and regions;

"It's an additional world recognised credential for the region to say yes this an area of significance from a geological point of view but it's also one where's there's a management plan in place and people are taking that responsibility seriously"

It is apparent that, following the analysis from the data collected during the interview process, that sustainable tourism and successful developments for the attraction in question go 'hand-in-hand' and the tourism provider only benefits from taking such an approach. Another factor which is involved in sustainable tourism includes the local region's culture being preserved so that traditions do not 'die-out' and the area keeps its authenticity.

*5.7. Preserving North Clare's culture leverages visitor numbers*

The culture and local traditions of an area are very important and it is vital that they be preserved and sustained. The danger that tourism can dilute these attributes of a region is high and to counteract this it is essential that sustainable involvement take place, giving tourists an authentic experience. Emphasising the importance of this issue, Katherine Webster Director at the Cliffs, states;

"It is very much part of our responsibility and our ethos that we would see ourselves as working with the local community, We do a lot of work with the local schools…we do our best to buy local, use local suppliers, local craftsmen, local food suppliers"

More and more tourists are looking for that 'different' holiday, i.e. one that is not the norm of sun, sea, and sand, and instead they are looking for an authentic experience and one which is 'set-out' from the rest. County Clare, especially the Northern region, is particularly well-known in the tourists' minds as an area where "the cultural heritage of the music, tradition, song and dance, storytelling and the people who you meet" is particularly appealing. Speaking about this, Ms Webster states that it "is what really differentiates us in the visitor's mind" and so therefore, because this is why tourists are drawn to the area it is vital that these characteristics and qualities be sustained in an authentic and 'real' fashion. North Clare is well-known for traditional Irish music, locally produced food products retail outlets such as the Burren Smokehouse, farmer's markets which sell locally sourced goods such as the Ballyvaughan Farmers Market and traditional Irish dancing. Tourists are drawn to the area because of this, and if it were not for the sustainable efforts of all those involved then these 'pull-factors' would not exist. This issue formed the final part of discussion in the researchers interviews and in the section 4.3. The final part of this paper will finish with an overall conclusion summarising the primary data analysis and findings.

The researchers was satisfied with the overall findings following the primary data collection for this research. One can conclude that motivations for visiting and revisiting the North Clare region were solely because of the area's unique landscape with an average of 60% of tourists surveyed. It was found that, following the interviews conducted by the researchers, tourism providers in the area were aware of this and acting upon it by adopting a more sustainable approach in order to retain and grow visitor numbers. However, a number of negative issues or 'gaps' were also identified throughout the primary data collection, such as the lack of understanding about sustainable tourism from the tourist's point of view.

## 6. Conclusion and recommendations

The main aim of the research was to support the argument that sustainability is essential to the development of tourism within North Clare. Through collecting, analysing and presenting the various sources of secondary and primary data, the researchers was satisfied that this aim was achieved. It was found that sustainable tourism was one of the main reasons why the region has become a successful tourist destination. There were various other aims established for this study, upon which the researchers can conclude on. It is clear from the secondary research conducted an abundance of literature supporting the concept of sustainable tourism exists. The researchers also found substantial evidence to support the argument that sustainability should be at the core of any natural tourist attraction which seeks future development. The researchers primary data analysis and findings and in particular they indicate a high level of sustainable tourism being practised in the North Clare region. This has developed the tourism industry in the region to a very high standard and created numerous beneficial opportunities for the area. Following the researchers' secondary and primary data collection and analysis it became clear that a number of gaps existed within the study.

The final section of this research includes a number of recommendations made by the researchers following the research process for tourism stakeholders in the Clare region, the future and for further research which may be conducted by others. Recommendations are listed and discussed below and are based solely on, and emerged from this study. More research needs to be conducted and published on sustainable tourism in County Clare. The researchers found it difficult to obtain secondary sources which focused on this region even-though Clare, as a tourism destination, is a significant contributor to the tourism industry in the West of Ireland. It was because of this, the research tended to have more emphasis on its primary data which can question credibility. The researchers also found that there was a substantial amount of published secondary sources focusing on sustainable tourism with a general focus and not enough emphasising on natural tourist attractions. The researchers therefore also recommend that further research be done with regards this.

A significant gap was identified during the researchers primary data collection and analysis; the findings following the surveys presented the researchers with the fact that 38% of respondents felt they understood the concept of sustainable tourism, 29% felt they had limited knowledge and 33% said they did not. These figures suggest that further education is needed in order for tourists to become more aware of sustainability when on holiday and how their actions can have a significant impact on the host's community and environment. In order for the tourism industry to become sustainable, the researchers feels that more businesses and tourism providers need to adapt a more sustainable approach. Providing that further traders practice sustainable policies, the researchers feels that the concept that tourism can continue to develop without harming the environment and culture and traditions of its host can become a reality. Everyone is responsible for their actions and if stakeholders adapt this attitude then the concept of sustainable tourism can be developed to its full potential. The researchers' main aim for this research was to further understand sustainable tourism and the benefits of adapting a sustainable approach. It therefore became apparent that if all stakeholders became involved, then everybody could reap the success.

It is recommended that tourism providers become more actively involved in managing the impacts that their business is creating. Following the researchers interviews conducted for primary research, it became clear that those providing a service to tourists have some degree of control over consumer or visitor impact through an effective visitor management policy. Controlling the flow of visitors through an attraction is essential in order for carrying capacity not to be exceeded. Carrying capacity is an important aspect with any tourism business as it controls the "the maximum number of people that may visit a tourist destination at the same time, without causing destruction of the physical, economic, socio-cultural environment and an unacceptable decrease in the quality of visitors' satisfaction". The researchers recommend that more businesses follow this

sustainable policy in order for sustainable development to reach its full capability.

## References

Aronsson, L. (2000) the Development of Sustainable Tourism, London and New York: Continuum

Ask About Ireland: The reading room; The Burren, 2008 [Online]. Available: http://www.askaboutireland.ie/reading-room/environment-geography/flora-fauna/Flora-and-fauna/the-burren/ [Accessed: December 1st, 2011]

Brannick, T. And Roche, W. (1997) Business Research Methods: Strategies, techniques and sources, Ireland: Oak Tree Press

Burren Beo Trust: Burren Visitor Conservation, 2011 [Online]. Available: http://www.burrenbeo.com/visitor-info/conservation [Accessed: December 1st, 2011]

Burren Connect: Burren Code, 2008 [Online]. Available: http://www.burrenconnect.ie/burren_code/burren_code.html [Accessed: November 30th, 2011]

Burren Connect: Burren Signage Plan, 2008 [Online]. Available: http://www.burrenconnect.ie/UserFiles/Image/file/BCP_part1.pdf [Accessed: December 1st, 2011]

Burren Connect: Community; Community Participation, 2008 [Online]. Available: http://www.burrenconnect.ie/community/community.html [Accessed: December 1st, 2011]

Burren Connect: Environment, 2008 [Online]. Available: http://www.burrenconnect.ie/environment/environment.html [Accessed: November 30th, 2011]

Burren Connect: Environment; Access to private lands, 2008 [Online]. Available: http://www.burrenconnect.ie/environment/geo_park_status.html [Accessed: November 30th, 2011]

Burren Connect: Environment; Development of Trails, 2008 [Online]. Available: http://www.burrenconnect.ie/environment/test.html [Accessed: November 29th, 2011]

Burren Connect: Environment; Traffic Management, 2008 [Online]. Available: http://www.burrenconnect.ie/environment/traffic_management.html [Accessed: December 1st, 2011]

Burren Connect: Environment; Trans Tourism, 2008 [Online]. Available: http://www.burrenconnect.ie/environment/transtourism.html [Accessed: December 1st, 2011]

Burren Connect: The Burren Connect Project, 2008 [Online]. Available: http://www.burrenconnect.ie/ [Accessed: December 1st, 2011]

Burren Connect: Visitors; Ecotourism, 2008 [Online]. Available: http://www.burrenconnect.ie/tourism/tourism.html [Accessed: November 30th, 2011]

Castellani, V., Sala, S. (2010) Sustainable Performance index for tourism policy development, Tourism Management, Vol. 31 (6) pp.871-880, available: sciencedirect.com [Accessed: November 25th, 2011]

Central statistics Office Ireland: International Movement of Passengers (Number) by Year, Travel Mode and Passenger Direction [Online]. Available: http://www.cso.ie/Quicktables/GetQuickTables.aspx?FileName=TRBA1.asp&TableName=International%20Movement%20of%20Passengers%20(Number)%20by%20Air%20and%20Sea&StatisticalProduct=DB_TM [Accessed: November 29th, 2011]

Clare County Council: Tourism Strategy 2010-2014 [Online]. Available: http://search.clarecoco.ie/search?q=tourism+strategy+2010-2014&site=clarecoco_new_collection&client=clarecoco_newsite&proxystylesheet=clarecoco_newsite&output=xml_no_dtd [Accessed: November 20th, 2011]

Clare County Council: Tourism Strategy 2010-2014 [Online]. Available: http://www.clarecoco.ie/recreation-culture/news/clare-county-council-launches-tourism-strategy-2010-2014.html [Accessed: November 21st, 2011]

Clare Herald (2011): Eco Tourism Key to Sector Growth - Shannon Development, November 2011, available: http://www.clareherald.com/business-and-finance/tourism/3584-eco-tourism-key-to-sector-growth-shannon-development.html [Accessed: November 28th, 2011]

Cliffs of Moher Visitor Experience (2012) 2011 Visitor Numbers, Ireland: Cliffs of Moher Visitor Centre

Cliffs of Moher: About Us [Online]. Available: http://www.cliffsofmoher.ie/AboutUs.aspx [Accessed: November 20th, 2011]

Cliffs of Moher: Facilities, Visitor Centre [Online]. Available: http://www.cliffsofmoher.ie/Facilities/VisitorCentre.aspx?rowid=12220 [Accessed: November 19th, 2011]

Cliffs of Moher: New 7 Wonders [Online]. Available: http://www.cliffsofmoher.ie/New7Wonders.aspx [Accessed: November 29th, 2011]

Cliffs of Moher: News [Online]. Available: http://www.cliffsofmoher.ie/News.aspx [Accessed: November 19th, 2011]

Cliffs of Moher: News, 2011 [Online]. Available: http://www.cliffsofmoher.ie/NewsDetail.aspx?article=284395&type= [Accessed: November 17th,2011]

Cliffs of Moher: Press Releases [Online]. Available: http://www.cliffsofmoher.ie/NewsDetail.aspx?article=280347&type=press [Accessed: November 20th, 2011]

Cliffs of Moher: Sustainable policies [Online]. Available: http://www.magico.ie/files/admin/uploads/W127_Field_2_57655.pdf [Accessed: October 28th, 2011]

Cooper, C., Fletcher, J., Fyall, A., Gilbert, D., Wanhill, S. (2008) Tourism: Principles and Practice, 4th ed. England: Pearson Education Limited

Deng, J., King, B., Bauer, T. (2002) Evaluating Natural Attractions for Tourism, Annals of Tourism Research, Vol. 29 (2) pp.422-438, available: sciencedirect.com [Accessed: October 14th, 2011]

Dillane, M. (2010) Research methods lecture notes: Introduction to research methods, Ireland: Limerick Institute of Technology

Earth Summit 2002 [Online]. Available: http://www.earthsummit2002.org/es/issues/tourism/tourism.pdf [Accessed: November 30th, 2011]

Environment, Community & Local Government: Environment; Environment: Local Agenda 21, 2007 [Online]. Available: http://www.environ.ie/en/Environment/LocalAgenda21/ [Accessed: November 27th, 2011]

Environment, Community & Local Government: Publications; Environment; Sustainable Development; A Strategy for Ireland, 1997 [Online]. Available: http://www.environ.ie/en/Publications/Environment/Miscellaneous/FileDownLoad,1825,en.pdf [Accessed: November 25th, 2011]

Failte Ireland Press Releases: Almost 50,000 Visit Newly Crowned Greenway [Online]. Available: http://www.failteireland.ie/Information-Centre/Press-Releases/2011/Almost-50,000-Visit-Newly-Crowned-Greenway [Accessed: November 18th, 2011]

Failte Ireland Tourism Employment Survey 2010 [Online]. Available: http://www.failteireland.ie/FailteCorp/media/FailteIreland/documents/Research%20and%20Statistics/Surveys%20and%20Reports/2010-Tourism-Employment-Survey.pdf [Accessed: November 18th, 2011]

Failte Ireland: Environmental Action Plan 2007-2009 [Online]. Available: http://ebookbrowse.com/failte-ireland-s-environmental-action-plan-200-1-d18318580 [Accessed November 17th, 2011]

Fisher, C. (2007) Researching and writing a dissertation: A guidebook for business students, 2nd Ed, England: Pearson Education Limited

FQM: Forum of qualitative social research, advantages and disadvantages of four interview techniques in qualitative research, 2006 [online] Available: http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/175/391 [Accessed: 10th January, 2012]

Griffin, J. (2010) Research methods lecture notes: Induction & Deduction, Ireland: Limerick Institute of Technology

Harris, R., Griffin, T., Williams, P., (2003) Sustainable Tourism: A global perspective, ed. 2, UK: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann

Harrison, L. C., Husbands, W., (1996) Practicing responsible tourism: International case studies in tourism planning, policy, and development, Canada: John Wiley & Sons

Holloway, J., Humphreys, C., and Davidson, R. (2009) The Business of Tourism, Eighth ed., England: Pearson Education Limited

Hunter, C. (1997) Sustainable Tourism as an Adaptive Paradigm, Annals of Tourism Research, Vol. 24 (4) pp.850-867, available: sciencedirect.com [Accessed: October 16th, 2011]

Jamal, T. & Robinson, M. (2012) The SAGE Handbook of Tourism Studies, London: SAGE Publications Ltd

Kim, D. (2009) Cases in Sustainable Tourism: An Experiential Approach to Making Decisions, Annals of Tourism Research, Vol. 36 (1) pp.153-155, available: sciencedirect.com [Accessed: October 16th, 2011]

Newsome, D., Moore, S., Dowling, R. (2004) Natural Area Tourism: Ecology, Impacts and Management, GB: Cromwell Press

O' Connell, K., Fahey, M., Ruane, S., Horan, K. (2011) Tourism and Hospitality Research in Ireland: Current Challenges and Future Opportunities, Ireland: College of Business, Public Policy and Law, NUI Galway

Saunders, M., Lewis, P. and Thornhill, A. (2007) Research Methods for Business Students, 4th Ed, England: Pearson Education Limited

Shannon Development: Tourism Strategy for the Shannon Region [Online] Available: www.shannondevelopment.ie/media/Media,7543,en.pdf [Accessed: November 20th, 2011]

United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs: division for Sustainable Development, Agenda 21 [Online] Available: http://www.un.org/esa/dsd/agenda21/res_agenda21_08.shtml [Accessed: November 25th, 2011]

White, B. (2000) Dissertation skills for Business and Management Students, England: South-Western Cengage Learning

World Tourism Organisation, cited in biodiversity.ru [online] Available: http://www.biodiversity.ru/coastlearn/tourism-eng/con_capacity.html [Accessed: March 1st, 2012].