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## **INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT**

Ecotourism is advocated as a method of supporting economies in peripheral, developed, resource dependent areas of the world (Che, 2006; Fennell, 2009). Ireland provides one such example where ecotourism has been promoted, as part of a quest for sustainable long term development, in areas impacted by outmigration and reliant on agriculture. Two ecotourism destinations, The Greenbox and The Burren, have been designated in Ireland, both of which are located in UNESCO Geoparks, in recognition of a distinctive geology and high landscape value. This paper discusses the Greenbox, the longer established of these destinations. The central objectives are to assess the understanding of ecotourism held by providers and the future development of ecotourism in northwest Ireland. The objectives were addressed through interviews which sought the views of ecotourism providers with regard to the definition of ecotourism, the role of the Greenbox in its promotion, and the potential future development of ecotourism in northwest Ireland. Wider implications for the promotion of ecotourism in peripheral areas of developed countries are considered.

Ecotourism has been defined in many ways in the international literature and has been found to be based on a number of underlying principles. Hetzer (1965) qualified the concept by discussing ecotourism in terms of four pillars of minimum environmental impact, limited interference on host communities, maximum economic benefits and utmost fulfillment for tourists. These four pillars have been used as the foundations of many contemporary definitions. A consistently cited definition was developed by Ceballos-Lascurian (1988, p. 14), who described ecotourism as “travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas”. At a tourism trade level, The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defines ecotourism as “responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and improves the welfare of the local people” (TIES, 1990). The similarities in these definitions lead to ecotourism being discussed in the context of the central unifying factors of: occurring in nature; minimal environmental impacts; provision of gains for host communities; and activities that have an educational remit (Fennell, 2001).

The origins of ecotourism are associated with various eras. Some scholars suggest that ecotourism always existed as travellers were repeatedly visiting natural landscapes and the concept was only perceived as innovative because it was being marketed as such (Wall, 1994). However, the concept could also have origins in the legalisation of hunting in 1950s Africa and the development of eco-lodges and safaris (Miller, 2007). Others posit that it emerged at a later date, through the 1970s eco-development literature or the sustainable development movement of the 1980s, following the Brundtland Report (Fennell and Weaver, 2005). Ecotourism has been engaged as a development tool in many urban and rural, developing, and developed world contexts. Most relevant to this study is its application as a rural regeneration tool in developed world areas that historically were dependent on agriculture, extractive industries and natural resources (Che, 2006). Certification labels in ecotourism have been devised and assigned to approved ecotourism products and destinations (Buckley, 2002). Concerns about ‘green washing’ saw an increase in the number of eco-labels worldwide (Font, 2002). The

endorsement of 2002 as the International Year of ecotourism by the UN further amplified the importance of the concept and the need for regulation through certification (Cater, 2006). These labels are uncoordinated and largely misunderstood (Buckley, 2002).

## STUDY AREA

The Greenbox was established in 2003 as a pilot project to develop ecotourism. The area occupies a cross-border location between Ireland and Northern Ireland and includes counties Fermanagh, Leitrim, west Cavan, north Sligo, south Donegal and northwest Monaghan (Figure 1). The rural nature of the area, the existence of low carbon outdoor activities, such as walking and cycling, and the presence of an established center for organic food production, led to ecotourism being proposed as an appropriate form of rural development in the 1990s. The proposed establishment of an ecotourism destination in this area emerged, following the signing of the Stormont Agreement in Belfast, on Good Friday, the 10<sup>th</sup> of April 1998, by the British and the Irish governments. This development marked the end of a 30 year period of political, and civil unrest in Northern Ireland. The Agreement related to a number of legal and democratic issues of merit to citizens across the island and called for cross-border collaboration on projects which included tourism. These projects were proposed to contribute to economic development which had been inhibited during the period of unrest.

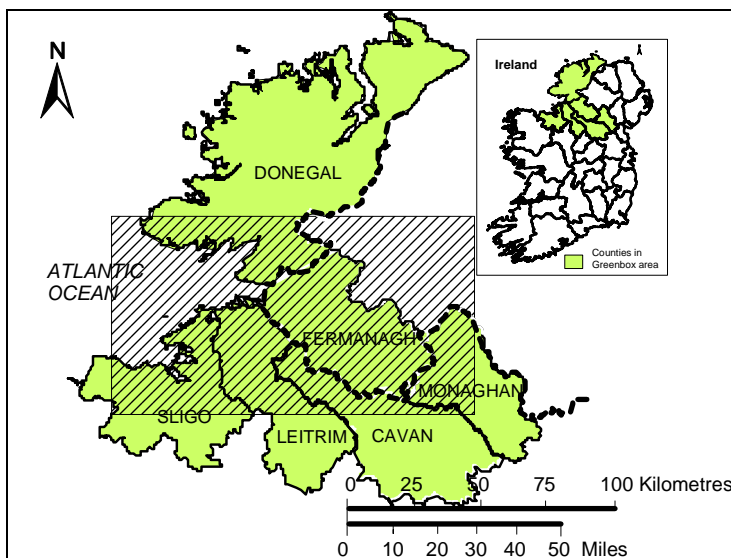


Figure 1: Greenbox area

The Greenbox project consisted of a management board that included organisational representatives from local authorities and the national tourism authorities in the two jurisdictions and other regional and local organisations relevant to tourism (Conway and Cawley, 2012). A separate provider network was also proposed. Tourism providers could become members of the project by paying a small fee. A professional staff was

tasked with developing ecotourism and advising the relevant organisations and ecotourism providers on how best to achieve successful ecotourism products and a thriving area in which ecotourism could be promoted. Ecotourism was defined, following a board level discussion, and the TIES definition was adapted for use as: “travel which is small scale, low impact, culturally sensitive, community orientated, primarily nature based, educational and capable of broadening people’s minds and enlivening their souls, but providing a unique experience, firmly grounded in sustainable principles and practices”.

The responsibilities of the Greenbox included the administration of a capital development programme and provision of grant aid to suitable ecological businesses, the development and regulation of the network of ecotourism providers, and the marketing and promotion of the Greenbox area as an ecotourism destination (OI #1: 2011). The project also had five main aims which related to: the creation of new tourism products; the establishment of the island’s first ecotourism certification programme; the promotion of the EU Flower ecological label for the certification of accommodation providers, who had reduced their environmental impact (<http://ec.europa.eu>); the development of ecotourism experiences to attract tourists; and the delivery of economic benefits for the tourism businesses and local communities (WDC, 2011: <http://www.wdc.ie>). Eco certification was a central focus of the project. Following Buckley’s (2002) terminology more emphasis was placed on physical structures and buildings (‘grey’ criteria) than on outdoor tourism activities and the natural environment (‘green’ criteria), in compliance with the EU Flower label which promoted a more technical accreditation focus. Assistance, in terms of ecotourism training and advice, was available to tourism providers who applied for the EU Flower and funding was also available from the Greenbox towards the technical upgrading of buildings, in order for businesses to meet the criteria. The EU Flower can currently only be obtained by tourism businesses that have an accommodation component. The label was monitored externally by the National Standards Authority in Dublin and the Department of Agriculture in Belfast.

The funding for the project was obtained from external sources and totalled c. €3 million. Seventy five percent of the total was granted by the European Union (EU) Interreg IIIA Programme and related to measures 1.1 and 1.4 which pertained to cross-border collaboration. The remaining 25% was covered by the EU Peace Fund, the International Fund for Ireland, two local authorities in the Greenbox area and a regional statutory authority in Ireland. The project was not deemed suitable for funding under the Interreg IVA Programme, and monies could not be obtained from other sources because of economic recession. Due to this lack of financial assistance at the end of the pilot phase (late 2007), when the available funding was expended, the Greenbox effectively ceased to operate.

## **METHODS**

The research followed a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. The total population of tourism providers in the area was identified initially (c. 200). Purposive sampling was used to select businesses. They included past members of the Greenbox and other businesses which complied with the definition of an ecotourism business in

the literature (Carter and Lowman, 2004). The latter were selected following analysis of individual company websites and the ecotourism practices and principles they promoted. In total, 37 representatives were interviewed and denoted a range of tourism business types (Table 1). Data were collected through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews of 1.5 hours duration on average. The business owner was interviewed in most cases but where a manager had primary responsibility for the business they were interviewed.

**Table 1:** Provider types

Type of Provider	Number Interviewed (n=37)
B&B	9
Caravan park	2
Country home	2
Guesthouse	1
Hostel	3
Self-catering	2
Small hotel	4
Educational centre	2
Surf school	5
Spa	1
Water based activity	3
Yoga centre	1
Boat charter	1
Fishery	1

The interviews were recorded, with permission, and transcribed verbatim into a data base. Analysis of textual statements was completed qualitatively and followed an iterative approach, through which central themes and sub-themes were identified (Bryman, 2004). The respondents were guaranteed confidentiality and quotes are attributed accordingly.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

### *Defining ecotourism and certification*

*Defining ecotourism:* Identifying how providers in the Greenbox area define ecotourism is important in order to gain an appreciation of its role as a form of rural tourism. In doing this, understanding may be gained about where and how ecotourism can be applied successfully in order to regenerate lagging rural regions. The responses relating to the definition of ecotourism varied. Two respondents defined ecotourism using the TIES definition. Eighteen respondents defined ecotourism in terms of preserving and protecting the environment, technical criteria and outdoor activities which complied with ecotourism principles. Others equated certification with the definition of

ecotourism. Seventeen providers did not define ecotourism. Many understandings of ecotourism provided did not reflect the holism of accepted definitions (Fennell, 2001).

**Table 2:** Defining ecotourism

<b>Definition</b>	<b>Number (n=37)</b>
Did not define	17
TIES	2
Preserve and protect environment	6
Technical criteria and EU Flower compliance	5
Outdoor activities which comply with ecotourism	7

The definition of ecotourism promoted by the Greenbox is the TIES (1990) definition of “responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and improves the welfare of the local people”. Two providers mentioned that they followed this definition. These were a hotel owner and an educational centre manager, both whom had been Greenbox members. While one of these respondents, a hotel owner in Leitrim, recognised this definition and stated that he followed it, he proceeded to state that he would define ecotourism more in terms of what the hotel did on a daily basis: “I would be aware of (and follow) the Greenbox definition, but I would define it more by what we do...” (BI# 2). This was one of the first hotels in Ireland and Britain to receive the EU Flower and therefore was used as a best practice example by the Greenbox, which possibly influenced the choice of definition. The second respondent who adhered to the Greenbox definition was the male manager of an educational centre, also located in Leitrim. He stated that the business would define ecotourism “as the Greenbox does really, that’s in some of our documents” (BI#7). This business had a role in the initial development of the Greenbox, which may also have led to the use of the accepted definition.

Others chose to define ecotourism by relating it to the impact of the business and tourists on the natural environment. The terms ‘preserve and protect’ were used many times, in a colloquial way and the actual understanding and implications of using such terms may not have been fully grasped. This combination of terms was used mainly by non Greenbox member businesses. The provision of outdoor activities such as cycling, walking and canoeing was also used as a method of defining ecotourism and is comparable to the ‘green’ criteria discussed by Buckley (2002). For example, the response of a hotel owner based in Fermanagh was: “I do get a lot of fishermen myself; I run a coarse fishing competition... and a lot of English fishermen come” (BI#22). A caravan park manager in a Sligo seaside town expressed a similar view: “Out and about, fishing holidays, cycling holidays, whatever, and Ireland has a lot more to offer ... than any other European country” (BI# 27). Other outdoor perspectives were given by surf school owners, none of whom were involved with the Greenbox, who defined ecotourism as preserving and protecting the environment by not littering and campaigning against sewage. Some respondents who cited the environment as being part of their role in ecotourism coupled this with other aspects such as ‘maximum satisfaction for the tourist’ and as a result began to formulate a more holistic view of

ecotourism: “We have a lot of people who go in that lane (the road) and would not come out again for the rest of the week, so it is the rural aspect just as well as the energy saving aspect” (BI # 21).

Seventeen providers reported not having a definition of ecotourism. There were several apparent reasons for this. These were: no awareness of the Greenbox; no involvement with ecotourism; owners or managers did not think their business could become part of the Greenbox; a cited negative experience with the Greenbox; and not promoting what they deemed to be an ecotourism product. These perspectives raised questions as to the regulation of ecotourism, as all respondents were chosen because their websites illustrated that they promoted ecotourism as defined in the literature. The relationship between the Greenbox, the EU Flower certification and how providers chose to define ecotourism in a technical (grey) way emerged as important. Those whose businesses were not certified by the EU Flower tended to define ecotourism by referring to ‘green’ natural environmental criteria (Fennell, 2001).

*Certification:* Certification more generally raised issues. Labels that had just one level of attainment were criticised and the need for multiple levels of certification within each ecolabel was highlighted (Buckley, 2002). Obtaining accreditation was generally viewed as an onerous process. Only businesses which had a well-developed ecological product prior to seeking the Flower did not indicate this. Some also mentioned that, had the Greenbox not paid for the initial certification, they would not have engaged in obtaining it themselves. All but one declared that they were not sure if they would apply for the EU flower accreditation again, when it was to be renewed, as they did not see an increase in tourist numbers and it was expensive to monitor and review. A respondent who was supported financially by the Greenbox mentioned that they had upgraded elements like insulation in order to obtain the EU Flower: “we had to do some stuff for the cottages...increased insulation ... recycling, and ... decreasing the water use ... things like that, that was for the EU flower (BI#6).

A manager, based in Northern Ireland, who was a member of the Greenbox and had received funding to obtain the EU Flower, discussed difficulties he had encountered with the accreditation. He discovered, having attended an EU Flower information and training event in Ireland, that the accreditation procedures were different in Northern Ireland. This was interesting as the EU Flower is a European label and may be perceived to have one clear set of requirements. This tourism business was located in a historic building which was protected under Northern Ireland’s planning laws. Consequently, he encountered problems relating to the different planning and development regulations that surround upgrading of listed buildings in Ireland and Northern Ireland: “we were told what to do from a southern Ireland point of view ... we were told (in the south of Ireland) that if you had a listed building category, you were exempted from ... insulation ... this is not true of the UK” (BI #19). This respondent took issue with the fact that a label that was purporting to be an EU wide programme was interpreted in different ways in different countries: “You can’t have one country interpreting it one way and another interpreting it another way, but they refused to budge, so I attained an EU flower for a year...” (BI #19).

He also discussed the Sustainable Travel Bronze award and how he could obtain this certification. Buckley (2002) highlights the importance of certification methods which

have various levels of attainment. With this award, businesses can start at the bronze level and progress to a gold level over a period of time. A weakness of the EU Flower is that it has only one very high level of certification. Other former Greenbox members had a more positive view of the EU Flower, as they had already been working towards various technical criteria that were necessary. One business manager explained that the owners decided to apply for the Flower because, “99% of things were in place anyway”, so there was very little additional work to be done. Therefore, in defining ecotourism, certified providers used the EU Flower as adherence to the technical criteria associated with the label. This illustrates a need amongst the providers for recognition of their ecological efforts but also highlights the role of certification in understanding the concept of ecotourism.

#### *Understanding of the Greenbox project*

Understandings of the project varied and could be linked to the geographical location of the business and levels of involvement. Understandings related to promotion and marketing, funding, networking, and education and training. The statements made are central in gaining a critical understanding of how ecotourism operates in the Greenbox as they relate to perceptions of the project and how providers used the services offered. Eleven providers discussed the role of the Greenbox in the context of promotion and marketing. Views expressed varied in terms of the type of promotion and marketing discussed. Some debated the role as the promotion and marketing of ecotourism providers, whereas others discussed the promotion and marketing of the area. Another view was that the role was to promote ecotourism, as a concept, more generally.

A Leitrim B&B owner who was not a Greenbox member stated: “Well I suppose it was to promote all the counties: Fermanagh, Sligo, Leitrim, and the others as well” (BI #15). Other respondents supported this. A former Greenbox member and B&B owner mentioned: “I think its role was to promote the area first and foremost, and then, to promote the facilities and the accommodation, and the facilities within the area” (BI #18). Raising awareness of the concept of ecotourism was the final way that promotion and marketing was viewed: “To promote and develop ecotourism, that’s what I would have thought anyway (former Greenbox member)” (BI #21). Two non Greenbox members mentioned the promotion of an ecofriendly approach and place to visit. Some used the word ‘green’ instead of eco or ecological: “to promote the area as green that was it, wasn’t it?” (BI #27). A similar view was expressed by a Greenbox member: “to promote green and eco, really” (BI #35). The interchangeable use of the terms ecotourism and green tourism is commonly discussed as difficult when defining ecotourism (Buckley, 2002). The promotion and marketing view was held equally by members and non-members of the Greenbox and, therefore, being affiliated with the Greenbox did not appear to have an impact.

Three providers discussed the role of the Greenbox in terms of funding provision and administration. A respondent who discussed funding as a role also discussed the role as marketing and ecotourism awareness: “I was never really sure...was it, funding, administration, marketing, ecotourism promotion” (BI #6). This provider was a former Greenbox member and appeared to understand that the Greenbox fulfilled a number of roles. Another respondent appeared to have more clarity in terms of their views on the



role: “the marketing and promotion of an ecotourism product along with the provision of capital funding” (BI #24), and in essence grasped the many roles involved. Here, a previous affiliation with the Greenbox appears to lead to a more nuanced understanding of the project.

The Greenbox staff engaged in networking with ecotourism providers and the project was originally designed to develop links and a network between providers. Three providers discussed the institution’s role as networking businesses. A member of *Blue Book Ireland*, a network of Irish country house hotels, manor houses, castles and restaurants, which promote environmental sustainability, stated: “It was a grouping together of ecofriendly tourism providers...there is nothing in its place, so you are on your own, I am trying to do everything, plus promote ecotourism, and I cannot do it... I need something like Greenbox” (BI # 19). This provider joined the Greenbox because he was developing his ecological image and felt that becoming involved helped this effort. He understood the role of the Greenbox as networking but he also lamented the loss of the project because he had to market and promote his product without external assistance. This sentiment was echoed by others and highlights the importance of a lead organisation to assist with the development of niche tourism products.

One of the assigned roles of ecotourism, as defined internationally, is to educate providers, locals and tourists about the merits of ecotourism. The Greenbox had an educational and training function. One non Greenbox member had a broad view relating to promoting sustainability: “I think it was to educate people on ... reuse, recycle, all of that” (BI #1). A former member who was more aware of the Greenbox activities, referred to improving the tourism sector and developing ecotourism in the northwest region (BI #7). Another former member discussed the multiple roles of education, environmental sustainability and the promotion of an ecotourism product (BI # 33).

#### *The future of ecotourism and perceived threats*

*Threats:* Threats to the future development of ecotourism in the Greenbox primarily related to ‘fracking’, the economic recession and environment mismanagement. Hydraulic fracturing or ‘fracking’ was seen as the greatest threat to ecotourism. Nine respondents cited fracking to extract natural gas from geological structures, for which licenses were sought in 2010, as the main threat because of the environmental degradation it would cause. An activity centre owner in rural county Fermanagh and former Greenbox member and EU Flower holder stated: “Fracking is definitely the main threat at the moment. The recession you can muster through... The fracking is somewhat bigger out of your control. If the lake is polluted you are not going to get people into it and your insurance wouldn’t cover it!” (BI#6).

Another activity centre owner and former Greenbox member in Leitrim concurred:

“Well fracking is a big one. You can forget it if that happens... we have an image of a green beautiful place, so that is the first thing that will go, and then the whole house of cards will tumble after that if fracking starts...forget the food industry, forget the agriculture industry, the tourist industry, it is all going to be lorries, quarries, dust, sickness and gas... I have seen it in America... where it has happened. It just poisons the whole place” (BI#10).

These sentiments highlight how threats to the environment, in which ecotourism is based, were considered to be detrimental to the future of ecotourism products which hinged on the high quality of the natural environment in the region.

Economic recession was cited as a threat by five respondents. One former member and B&B owner in County Cavan cited the rising cost of recycling as a deterrent for getting involved in ecotourism. “Well I suppose with the rising costs of recycling ...people might not recycle because of costs” (BI#11). Owners of a B&B and an activity centre run by family members, who were former Greenbox members, also discussed the higher costs required to get involved in ecotourism, associated with energy efficient measures. This perspective is interesting because developing energy efficient measures is generally employed as a cost saving method for households; however, these providers were aware that a prohibitive cost may be involved (Honey, 2002).

Other respondents cited environmental mismanagement and pollution as threats to ecotourism development. A Spa owner, based in a seaside town, discussed the potential threat of environmental pollution from oil spills and their impacts on the beach and the seaweed crop, which would directly impact his business (BI #26): “I suppose the biggest threat would be environmental pollution, god forbid there was a oil spill... that would be huge” (BI #26). He also referred to raising awareness and avoiding littering of beaches by groups drinking at night: “education through primary schools and to try and get people to buy in and have a love of the environment” (ibid). A B&B owner (non member) in a rural area of county Cavan discussed access, in relation to poor signage and access to points of interest in the area:

“Walking has become huge and there are good facilities... once again it is all about making sure they are kept up to date, and the angling in this area... a lot of lakes are not accessible...there are no stands on them, a lot ... have rotted away... I don't see any money being put into it ...making it accessible for people...” (BI#12).

A number of former Greenbox members, some of whom held the EU Flower and were conscious of the demands of ecotourism, referred to a range of issues. One mentioned that not maintaining high standards in ecotourism would impact negatively on tourist numbers. Lack of grants was mentioned by a Sligo based country house owner (with the EU Flower) as a possible threat, but he felt that it was necessary for people to seek aid or do the jobs themselves (BI#33). An accommodation provider in rural county Sligo mentioned the threat of cheaper hotels in Sligo city, which would affect his business directly and, consequently, ecotourism (BI #35). A small hotel in a county Leitrim village discussed how competition from other tourism businesses in the area was a threat (BI#9). This provider was a Greenbox member but stated that he had only joined in order to obtain funding and was not actively involved in ecotourism. It is evident that threats to ecotourism are not uniquely environmental; nonetheless, environmental threats were considered to be most significant. By contrast, seven providers did not feel there were any direct threats to ecotourism.

*Future:* Ecotourism is promoted increasingly in Ireland as a form of tourism that is appropriate in remote rural areas which comply with some of its inherent principles.

Although the Greenbox project had formally ended when the interviews took place, it was considered important to obtain the views of the respondents on the future of ecotourism. An accommodation owner in a rural area a short distance from Sligo city, who promoted accommodation of an unusual design using sustainable construction methods, discussed how, when the Greenbox was first established, there was a belief among the providers that “the whole mother earth were going to arrive on the doorstep” (BI#37). He also mentioned: “I don’t know if even 10% come here for anything eco ... the groups do... I don’t know if there is some nerdy person sitting somewhere in Bolzano, saying: ‘I will only go to eco places’, I don’t think so, but maybe there are!” (BI#37). This respondent was uncertain if ecotourism actually had a future. He stated that it would be hard to predict. He did state that it was not of central importance to him because his business primarily attracted international school groups, with whom he had long term links, who did not ascribe a central importance to ecotourism.

Respondents were also asked for their views on the evolution of ecotourism over the next five years. Six stated that ecotourism will progress and grow. Five providers were of the opinion that ecotourism would not progress further than it had already done, because of a lack of interest from tourists but also a lack of current organisational support. Five respondents considered that ecotourism needed to be promoted and marketed further in order to evolve. Others suggested that the development and promotion of new ecotourism projects may foster future success. One of these providers reflected on the fact that they felt the future of ecotourism was dependent on lobbying of local politicians by the providers, to get them to support the development of ecological packages, in order to attract tourists: “Em, I think the providers will have to probably start realising the value of what they have... they need to put pressure on their politicians ...it’s just a problem with people not knowing where they can go, what they can do, so that has to be addressed...” (BI#10).

Two providers mentioned the need for a new umbrella group locally, like the Greenbox, which would continue to develop and promote ecotourism. One of the respondents, a B&B provider based on the Cavan/Leitrim border, had a very positive view of the Greenbox, although not a member. The other was a member and felt that a similar organisation or group was necessary in order to maintain momentum. This respondent linked the future of ecotourism to the establishment of the Marble Arch Caves and Geopark in the area:

“I think...with the Geopark providing more of a link to this area, I would hope that would push the idea that this is still very much a natural area and that most people living in the area do take care of their environment. I mean I know a couple of years ago the whole Greenbox was kind of very much a buzz word and... something kind of slipped then, you know maybe they didn’t get funding or that, and that’s what I mean when I say there are so many different groups and they are there for a while and then next thing they are gone again... you know it would be more kind of consistent if they just kind of kept them there all the time” (BI#12).

This respondent felt there might be a place for the Geopark in continuing the role of the Greenbox because the park has a deep environmental focus and attracts visitors to the

area. This provider also mentioned the proliferation of groups, a feature that is considered a problem with rural development and tourism. A country house owner (*Blue Book* member) had a similar view: “We will continue to promote it but we need help ... like an organisation like the Greenbox. If the national tourism authorities ... would set up some sort of organisation to promote tourism in Ireland, under some Irish banner of some sort with qualifications, simple, that is they way forward” (BI #19). What this provider is essentially calling for is an organisation to promote ecotourism in the island of Ireland in a unified way.

A former Greenbox member and a non-member both mentioned the need for funding and incentives. A Spa owner (former member) mentioned the need for the support of national organisations to sustain ecotourism and also to promote ecotourism in the northwest region (BI#26). One former member and owner of a flagship ecotourism project mentioned that he felt it was very hard to predict the future of ecotourism, especially given the current economic climate (BI #37). In terms of a business’s role in the future of ecotourism, all interviewees stated that they would continue what they were doing and hopefully exist post-recession. Should they succeed, a small number stated that they may then look at expanding their ecotourism products.

## CONCLUSION

The Greenbox ecotourism initiative was identified as a potentially viable project to stimulate cross-border collaboration in 2003, and was developed on the existing natural resource base and prevailing low impact activities in the area. The availability of significant funding allowed the project to gain substantial momentum in a short time. The project offers an example of a government led, funded project that, although short lived, created *inter alia*, an increased understanding of ecotourism and certification. The results are discussed with reference to definitions, understandings of the project and the future of ecotourism.

Considerable interest in the concept of ecotourism was reflected in the interviews with the ecotourism providers. Providers’ appreciation of ecotourism related to how they chose to define the concept. Definitions were generally based either on grey (technical) criteria or green (natural environment), criteria reflecting the divide that other studies have uncovered (Buckley, 2002). Those who held the EU Flower tended to define ecotourism in a more technical manner than those who were not certified. This reflects the grey criteria of the EU Flower and providers’ understanding of the technical aspects of ecotourism. Only two providers followed the TIES definition, as adopted by the Greenbox, reflecting the need for more than one definition for ecotourism, based on specific types of activities promoted.

Dissatisfaction with certification was highlighted (Buckley, 2001). The need for labels with more than one level of attainment was identified (Buckley, 2008). In 2011 a new network, called *The Greenbook*, was established by former members of the Greenbox. Members of *The Greenbook* are required to be eco-certified but a number of different labels are accepted. Some have multiple levels of attainment, illustrating learning by the providers relating to successful methods of eco certification. The EU Flower led to some

specialist tourists visiting the area and providers mentioned that becoming EU Flower certified reduced the running costs of their business. The understanding of the Greenbox project varied and reflected how providers engaged with the services provided.

Some providers felt that ecotourism had a future in the northwest but others were unsure, unless a lead organisation was established to develop the product further. Threats that were considered most frequently were fracking and the current economic recession. This research has wider implications, as provider understandings of ecotourism in a developed world context have not been researched extensively. The Greenbox offered a unique context to explore these understandings due to its completed lifecycle and these findings can inform further research. The results illustrate the need for research to examine: 1) how the support of a lead organisation can affect the definition of ecotourism; 2) the benefits of technical certification in ecotourism; 3) how ecotourism in the Greenbox will find expression in the future, without external assistance in the form of funding or support.

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