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Cluster: SEMRU

Theme: Sustainable and Inclusive Societies

Further Reading:

Carr, L. (2016). Stakeholder perspectives on a tourism-dependent economy. SEMRU Working Paper Series, [16-WP-SEMRU-02](#).

DTTS (2015). People, place and policy: growing tourism to 2025. Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, 108pp.

Fáilte Ireland (2014). Strategic environmental assessment scoping report for the Wild Atlantic Way signature tourism experience, 33pp.

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Preserving identity along the Wild Atlantic Way

Billed in 2014 as the world's longest planned coastal touring route, at 2,500km, the Wild Atlantic Way (WAW) is a €10m investment that is aimed at growing Ireland's €3.5bn tourism economy. The goal of the WAW is to create an "overarching tourism brand for the west coast" that will lead to €5bn in revenues and ten million visitors by 2025. The WAW comes at an important time. Rural communities along the route from Inishowen to Kinsale are lagging behind urban centres economically. Their young are being drawn to cities by the lure of good wages in the growing tech, pharmaceutical, and insurance industries. As a result, though Ireland is experiencing a small population boom, it is only cities that are growing, at nearly 11%, while rural areas hover below 5%. Rural Ireland is greying out, economies are withering, infrastructure is decaying, and towns and villages are pockmarked with shuttered storefronts. Generating new revenue streams would bring needed economic relief.

Research Findings

This pilot study interviewed 18 self-identified WAW tourism sector stakeholders. They are coordinating their own business efforts to better promote WAW destinations that might otherwise be overshadowed by the 15 "iconic must-see sights" Fáilte Ireland calls 'Signature Discovery Points'. Respondents identified four key WAW themes: accessibility, investment, uniqueness and sustainability. Accessibility and investment – sufficient roads, water, power, and high-speed internet – are central needs for tourism. Stakeholders near easily accessed Signature Discovery Points hope that increased visitation will economically spill over to their community. Where infrastructure is insufficient, there is a fear of lost economic opportunities, weakening future investment confidence and growth.

Uniqueness and sustainability are highly related. Stakeholders expressed concern on how increasing visitor numbers might impact both the environment and the community. Fáilte Ireland has set a 33% growth goal in visitor numbers by 2025, from 7.5 to 10 million. Signature Discovery Points like the Cliffs of Moher are popular destinations, and their own visitation rates may outpace expected growth, which may further stress these environmentally sensitive destinations. Stakeholders worry that embracing the WAW may also dilute their own unique character and offerings.

Policy Implications

The WAW will likely grow into a major tourism force for Ireland's untamed west. For many along the route, the WAW "brand" will challenge how best to promote their unique experiences and fare. Sensitive environments and community identities cannot be threatened by increased tourist traffic and expectations. For the WAW to become a sustainable, singular experience of one thousand stories, access and investments must be secured, and identity must be celebrated. Local and national coordination is required, and research on development and policy impacts must be a priority. Otherwise the WAW risks transforming western Ireland into a homogenised entity where the landscapes, coastlines, villages, and peoples blur into one another, each working to sell their version of "cliffs, sheep, and Guinness."