

Mediating the tourist experience and appropriate levels of interpretation– Exploring reaction to the transformation of Irish nature-based tourism

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Ireland's natural environment is increasingly packaged, commoditised and exploited for tourism purposes. Notably, a critical management issue surrounding the extent, appropriate form, and scale of visitor facilities has caused some of the most acrimonious environmental disputes in its history. Focusing on visitor centre and interpretative developments within the Burren region in the West of Ireland and in particular the €31.5million visitor centre development at the Cliffs of Moher, this paper probes two key areas: firstly it analyses the shift in the social, cultural and physical transformation of nature-based tourism destinations and the production of tourist space; and secondly it investigates how visitors react to this transformation process, exploring what constitutes the most appropriate level of interpretation. Using an innovative multi-method approach to data collection and analysis that combines survey data, interviews and observation, this paper also integrates the reaction of local communities, professional stakeholders and 'lay knowledges' to present a holistic, multi-layered analysis of visitor experience.

Highlighting the transformation process occurring within Ireland's protected areas this paper argues that tourism spaces are now being rationalised, regulated, commoditised and radically reinvented to become 'natural' spaces for leisure. This transformation of Irish tourism landscapes and the construction of tourism products are increasingly informed by globalising discourses of conservation, theming and regulation. In order to frame the shift in the social, cultural, and physical transformation of nature-based tourist destinations and the production of tourist space, aspects of Edensor's (1998) exploration of enclavic and heterogeneous spaces are utilised. The core argument of this paper is that radical reinvention and regulation of nature-based tourist sites as spaces of leisure and control, through the processes of commoditisation, rationalisation and representation, illustrates the conscious attempt to transform Irish destinations from unregulated heterogeneous dominated tourist spaces to more regulated enclavic dominated tourist spaces. The reconfigurations of Irish tourist spaces have resulted in more systematic, centralised forms of regulation and spatial purification, whereby exclusionary policies attempt to remove character, idiosyncrasies, individualism and supposedly unattractive local features, and to replace them with a rationalised, homogenised product.

The benefits and drawbacks of high or low intensity use of on-site media at natural areas and their considerable potential for conflict are also central to the interpretative debate. The fundamental problem of knowing when the entertainment stops and the education starts is a difficult planning conundrum for protected area managers. Exploring the key issues of visitors' preferred experiences in protected areas, and their reactions to various levels of low and high-tech interpretative provision, (from basic interpretative displays to more sophisticated ones represented by virtual reality) this paper revealed 'expert' and political decision-makers' mistaken presumptions about how visitors actually want to experience the landscape.

Irish policy makers and planners seem to over-emphasise the need for state-of-the art facilities, the 'spick and span' philosophy which is frequently far removed from the untouched, 'authentic' natural expectation of Irish tourist destinations. This paper thus highlights the failure in the Irish tourism planning system to identify who the visitors are, what their expectations might be, and how they might react to the kind of experiences provided. Specifically, this research shows that Ireland seems fixated on developing visitor centres and high-tech, high-intensity interpretative facilities despite the fact that evaluative research into visitor centres' effectiveness was never conducted.

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Although a certain amount of interactive displays and interpretative facilities were welcomed by visitors and key actors, many preferred to experience the landscape with less facilitation and with simple, low-intensity interpretation.

Ireland needs to re-think its approach to tourism and to create a shift away from the state's sole focus on 'honeypot' sites and their management for exclusively touristic purposes. Instead of developing producer-orientated, state-of-the-art developments which are politically driven and promoted as signifiers of progress and wealth, we need to allow visitor centre developments to be market-driven whereby all stakeholders — particularly local communities and visitors — are involved in the design and vision of the facility. In order for visitor centre developments to be viable and effective mechanisms for supporting sustainable tourism development, they require a radical transformation in their design, planning, governance, role, and function within communities and regional tourism development.

References

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