

Protected area governance conflicts in Ireland – mending poor relations and new modes of governance

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Protected area governance concerns the interactions among structures, processes and traditions that determine how power is exercised, how decisions are taken and how citizens or stakeholders have their say (Graham et al., 2003). Over the last few decades, protected area governance has moved away from being a predominantly state-based ‘top-down’ model to a multi-level system under which powers and responsibilities are diffused among a diversity of national and local government actors, civil society organisations and local communities management (Lockwood, 2010). Although the 1990s saw the emergence and increasing emphasis on the role of partnerships and collaboration as important elements in resolving environmental problems and achieving sustainable tourism development, many of Ireland’s protected areas became embroiled in belligerent planning and governance conflicts (Healy & McDonagh, 2009).

Drawing on a case study of the Burren region in the West of Ireland this paper firstly identifies socio-cultural, historical and political factors which contribute to, complement and accelerate the contentious and conflictual nature of Irish protected area governance. Secondly, it presents the key factors which enabled BurrenLIFE (an EU Life-Nature Funded project) become one of the first successful projects to mend poor relations in a land-use conflict. Finally, drawing on the good governance practices of BurrenLIFE this paper proposes a new governance model which could be developed for future and existing attempts at sustainable tourism in the Burren and elsewhere.

Methodology

A multi-method research approach that included in-depth key actor interviews (n=57), short informal interviews (n=117) and visitor survey’s (n=114) was adopted. This reflected a desire to capture the voices of local people affected by international tourism and protected areas, along with the multiple layered realities and ‘messy texts’ of ‘lay and expert’ knowledges and experiences in protected area governance. This enabled an extensive investigation of the connections between Irish politics and planning at local and national levels; the relationship between diverse knowledges within communities and the associated power structures and civil society’s involvement in responsibility, authority and decision-making in protected areas.

Ireland’s complex protected area governance system

The paper argues that Ireland’s disjointed style of governance and complex socio-cultural, historical and political factors nurtures unsustainable development, tourism, and land use, as well as protected area conflicts. The presence of a mixture of all four of Graham et al.’s (2003) governance types (see table 1); a weak protected area system; its colonial legacy and a strong attachment to land; high private pro-

perty ownership rates and an ensuing antipathy to external regulation – all contribute to the complicated and conflictual nature of tourism governance in the region. Centralized government and policy-making structures prevent more inclusive forms of governance while the local nature of clientelistic politics in Ireland is identified as conducive to corrupt and unsustainable planning decisions (Healy et al., forthcoming). Discussions of protected area planning tend to disregard, neglect, or underestimate the social relations of power and politics that form Ireland’s approach to protected area tourism development.

Mending relationships and good governance in the Burren

Despite the indications that the Burren region is not presently engaged in a collaborative approach towards tourism planning, this research provides evidence that positive action is occurring. BurrenLIFE is one of the first projects to have been successful in mending poor relationships between farmers, local communities and governing bodies in the region. It exemplifies a number of key factors which enable it to function successfully and to mend poor relations in a land-use conflict, such as active participation from grass-roots to the highest level; local ownership of projects; treating all stakeholders as equal; a strong project leader who gained trust from all sides; and continuity of funding.

A Burren agency – a new co-management model of governance

This research stresses the need to introduce a linked network of management in the Burren in the form of a new umbrella central governing agency which would govern all activities in the region. A Burren agency could formulate a Burren specific management model using successful elements incorporated by the BurrenLIFE project. The complete decentralization of environmental decision making may privilege parochial concerns over strategic goals and thus requires ‘expert’ input alongside lay knowledge. Therefore future protected area partnerships should move towards models of governance which incorporate a co-management model with legitimate participation, with power given to grass-roots dialogue, which facilitates a balance between local and central government in resource management. Moreover, these new modes of governance must explicitly recognise and engage with Ireland’s deep cultural, social, economic and historical complexities. In order for collaborative process and structures to work, the varying financial statuses, political propensities, cultural specificities and histories of place, region and country need to be integrated. Protected area governance and design of collaborative structures requires a ‘specificity’ which must be appropriate to the social, legal and political systems at both national and local levels.

Table 1. Examples of the multiplicity of governance types in the Burren

		Protected areas	Visitor centres	Archaeological sites
A. Government management	National	Burren National Park, e.g. Slieve Carron Nature Reserve SAC	Dramore Woods Nature Reserve	Cahercummaun Lemenagh Castle Poulnabrone
	Local	Cliffs of Moher i.e. SPA	Cliffs of Moher	Poulnabrone
B. Multi-stakeholder management		SAC	Kilfenora Burren Centre	
C. Private management	Individuals	SAC SPA NHA	Caherconnell Doolin cave Aillwee cave	Caherconnell Parknabinna Wedge Tomb Poulawack cairn
	Non-profit		Michael Cusack Centre	
D. Traditional community management		Commonage areas		

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