

Tourism for Tomorrow Awards

Destination Finalist 2014



Burren & Cliffs of Moher Geopark

The Burren is far from barren although it translates from *Boireann*, which means "great rock" in Irish. However, this might also refer to the communities that live here as it is not only the dramatic limestone karst landscape or the iconic Cliffs of Moher that bring visitors here every year, it is the people. The key partner and metaphorical rock within the Geopark is the Burren Ecotourism Network (B.E.N.) whose members are central to sustainable tourism development. The Geopark's policy has always been to build a strong and independent network of like-minded business and this ecotourism partnership has created a 560 square kms destination which hosts over 850,000 visitors a year.

Most of the visitors to this region have, historically, been day visitors, coming to see the Cliffs of Moher, the most visited natural attraction in Ireland. The Geopark's close working partnership with B.E.N has changed this. With 45 tourism enterprises having completed extensive ecotourism certification training, the Geopark is now being recognised as a destination in its own right, not just a place to pass through. Consequently, this is now a tourism community that is not only wholly committed to sustainable tourism but with a strong sense of place based on a common ethos and identity. The first B.E.N. members also acted as a pilot group for the development of ecotourism standards in Ireland, which led directly to the establishment of Ecotourism Ireland.

The Geopark's policy is also to promote a sustainable form of tourism that reinforces conservation. Environment is always on top of the agenda, demonstrating how conservation and sustainable practice can become a destination's Unique Selling Point. Consequently, all relevant national and public agencies engage with local tourism enterprises, farming associations and conservationists. In addition, the Geopark has partnered with Leave No Trace Ireland, the first of its kind in Ireland, whereby training is being provided to every network member. The objective of this is to ensure a common, core understanding of how to behave in the landscape, which in turn is communicated to visitors.

The Geopark's solidity as a destination is also exemplified by its benchmarking and monitoring procedures. It has adopted the recently launched European Tourism Indicator System for the Sustainable Management of Destinations (ETIS) to monitor and measure performance and is one of 100 destinations in Europe that are currently piloting this system. Further to this, Failte Ireland, the national tourism development authority, has expressed interest in using the Geopark's work on the ETIS as a pilot for assessing for larger-scale, national projects.

One other Burren beacon that others may follow, is its commitment to creating linkage between local food production and tourism. Many of the Burren Ecotourism Network members are food producers and, thus, they have created a Food Trail and Festival, the launch of the former receiving impressive international media coverage. Just like the rare flowers that push their way through this unyielding limestone landscape every year, this great rock is erupting with strong, sustainable roots which are reaching out into a blossoming community, and ripe for the picking by visitors.