Sustainable Rural Tourism: Lessons for Rural Development

Ruth McAreavey* and John McDonagh

Abstract

Rural areas are recognised for their complex, multifunctional capacities with a range of different interest groups claiming their rights to, and use of, different rural spaces. The current rural development paradigm that is evident across the globe is epitomised by the European LEADER approach. Using evidence from the proposed National Park in Northern Ireland, we ask the question: what is the potential for sustainable rural tourism to contribute to rural development? In our analysis we consider the scope for adaptive tourism to overcome some of the ongoing challenges that have been identified in the LEADER approach. Four themes are revealed from this analysis: institutional (in)capacity, legitimacy of local groups, navigating between stakeholder interests and sustainable tourism in practice. These issues, discussed in turn, have clear implications for the new rural development programme.

Introduction

The scale and accelerating pace of rural change has been a remarkable feature of recent decades. The countryside is now being challenged as never before by issues of agricultural restructuring, declining service provision, depopulation and counter-urbanisation, communication and infrastructural deficits and the degradation of the natural environment (McDonagh 2007). The agricultural sector has undergone extensive restructuring with farm numbers and the contribution of agriculture to the gross domestic product (GDP) falling year on year (see Hubbard and Ward 2008). Varley *et al.* (2009), cognisant of how the 'global, EU and national regulations impact significantly on the environmental, social and economic choices being made by rural actors, particularly in relation to land use' (p. 8) argue that rural areas are functioning less and less as production-orientated spaces as consumption-type demands on the countryside increase all the time. The current rural policy paradigm, evident across the globe, relies on an integrated, decentralised approach that uses public–private–voluntary sector partnerships to develop policy and to implement local strategies (OECD 2006). It attempts to reposition the rural, so that it is attuned to the demands and needs of different places; with a focus on investment rather than subsidisation

and an emphasis on the public good underpinning new economic activities in rural areas from biodiversity, landscape management, tourist spaces and new rural enterprises.

The multifunctional countryside that is conceived as 'producing not only food but also sustaining rural landscapes, protecting biodiversity, generating employment and contributing to the viability of rural areas' (Potter and Burney 2002, p. 35) is particularly prominent in terms of the demand for, and supply of, leisure and recreation, arenas in which rural tourism is increasingly considered. The obvious shortcomings of the conception that rural areas can be addressed in some homogeneous way have been recognised and instead rural areas are considered in terms of the diversity of needs, and more importantly, the opportunities they present. Subsequently, as argued by the European Commission (Commission of the European Communities 2005, p. 32) 'increased diversification, innovation and value added of products and services, both within and beyond the agricultural sector, are indispensable in order to promote integrated and sustainable rural development'. In this multifunctional arena production and consumption run side by side and the countryside is considered a public good, providing ecological, aesthetic, amenity and recreational spaces that heretofore were largely ignored. While the drive towards a multifunctional countryside is gaining pace and sustainable rural tourism is seen as a key component of rural development (Sharpley 2000; Garrod *et al.* 2006; Saxena and Ilbery 2008), how this is played out in the context of the governance of sustainable rural tourism remains unclear.

Sustainable rural tourism is not unproblematic, having a plethora of meanings depending on the context. Indeed the literature concedes that it is because

> of the oxymoronic nature of the term 'sustainable tourism' and its amenability to appropriation by supporters of various ideologies ... [that] ... it can be used to represent and support just about any model of development. (Weaver 2004, p. 518)

Nonetheless there is some consensus that it relates to tourism that is 'economically viable, but does not destroy the resources on which the future of tourism will depend, notably the physical environment, and the social fabric of the host community' (Swarbrooke 1999, p. 13). This normative representation focuses on the interrelationship between the human and physical environment with competing social, economic, cultural and environmental interests, priorities and negotiations. Consequently conflict is evident between different interest groups as well as within those groups with a tourism affiliation (Butler 1998; Van Rensburg *et al.* 2006).

It is against this backdrop that we wish to examine the new European rural development programme. Specifically we ask the question: what potential has sustainable rural tourism to contribute to rural development? In addressing this question, we consider the scope for utilising adaptive management to overcome some of the challenges previously identified in the LEADER approach. The article begins with an overview of sustainable rural tourism and of the new European rural development programme. Then, using case studies, we consider the potential for rural development groups to adopt a sustainable tourism paradigm. Final remarks and observations conclude the analysis.

Sustainable rural tourism

Tourism is one of the world's largest and fastest growing industries (Wallace and Russell 2004; Saarinen 2006) and this is likely to be the case for the foreseeable future. In 2005 European states recorded in excess of 440 million visitor arrivals, accounting for 10 per cent of European GDP and 20 million jobs (Tourism Sustainability Group [TSG] 2007). Consequently the tourism sector must respond to the pressures placed on it directly, from increased visitor numbers, and indirectly, from negative impacts on the environment and on destination communities, as a 'business-as usual approach will not provide a more sustainable tourism industry' (Gössling *et al.* 2008, p. 123).

The notions of development and carrying capacity consumed tourism studies during the 1960s through to the early 1980s. The mass tourism that epitomised this era was accompanied by visible negative impacts such as the degradation of the Spanish coast. In response to this, and as post-Fordist economies enjoyed more flexible forms of production and consumption, the idea of sustainable tourism was moved from the margins to assume centre stage in tourism debates. Ecology, conservation and economic development played a role in this process (Bramwell and Lane 1993). These issues resonate with the seminal Brundtland Report, otherwise known as the World Commission on Environment and Development which emphasises development and environmental responsibility (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). Further, this influential publication stresses the significance of inter-generational and intra-generational equity, bringing social equity and cultural diversity to the core of debates relating to sustainable development, matters that are reflected in the European Union's sustainable development strategy.

Sustainable tourism, as a socially constructed and idealised set of aspirations, is dynamic in the sense that it is constantly being constructed and reconstructed by different stakeholders. It is a political process that depends on value systems and ethical judgments that are related to knowledge and power (Hall 1997; Hunter 1997; National Research Council (NRC) 1999; Saarinen 2006; Bramwell and Lane 2008). What we see at its core are issues of economic efficiency and equity; environmental protection and cultural awareness. Indeed the TSG (2007) suggests that 'tourism can be a destroyer of these special qualities which are so central to sustainable development ... [or] ... can be a driving force for their conservation and promotion' (p. 2). Consequently tourism and its integration into the rural product can be very much part of developing employment opportunities, increasing local prosperity, conservation and maintenance of the environment, celebrating cultural assets and generally ensuring a greater spread in terms of who can benefit (economically, socially and culturally).

However not all commentators are convinced that the benefits outweigh the costs. Reeder and Brown (2005) argue that in many cases concerns emerge not only about the quality of the jobs created but also how tourism development affects rural well-being. While advantages can be seen, for example, in businesses growing and landowners and farmers profiting from being able to supplement their incomes, there are other outcomes. Tension can emerge between different interest groups representing the different facets of sustainable tourism, in particular between those that emphasise

a development approach and those who highlight the ecological perspective (McKercher 1993; Caffyn 2000). Sustainability itself may become a commodified product by the tourist sector (Hughes 1996).

Even though the European Union claim that within tourism activities 'economic, social and environmental objectives can reinforce each other and should therefore advance together' (TSG 2007, p. 2), in reality the pursuit of sustainable tourism is littered with obstacles. On the one hand social and ecological systems intertwine, and on the other artificial demarcations are created, with specialists contributing segmented knowledge such as funding information or business advice. And therefore, as Varley *et al.* (2009) argue, sustainability is 'likely to be attended by considerable struggle, as one conception of sustainability comes to vie with another or others and as competition over incompatible ends and the distribution of scarce resources generates tensions and conflicts' (p. 7). Tourism groups do not always operate in a co-operative fashion, nor do those groups necessarily claim collective ownership for their activities.

An adaptive approach

Sustainable tourism emphasises the fluid relationship between the human and physical environment. An adaptive paradigm allows options to be explored through the identification of priorities and the selection of favoured choices (Kernel 2005). Drawing from the International Guidelines for Sustainable Tourism (Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity 2004), it is based on a particular model that was popularised during the 1970s when it was used to explore the uncertainties of large and complex ecosystems (Holling 1978[2005]). It is increasingly employed by policymakers and is evidenced within various partnerships such as those established through the European Union (EU)'s Water Framework Directive (Moberg and Galaz 2005). The adaptive approach pays attention to the fact that different groups can have different values and needs as, for example, ecological conservation objectives may be incompatible with the desires of local communities (Stocking and Perkin 1992). Thus, rather than prescribing an unconditional course of action, adaptive tourism recognises the need for flexibility in order to prioritise competing interests, depending on the specific circumstances. Adaptive management provides an arena of uncertainty, complexity and potential for conflict (Reed 1999).

It embraces uncertainty in that where a policy is successful, the approach is validated but when there are problems or a policy is seen to fail, then the adaptive approach 'is designed so that learning occurs, adjustments can be made, and future initiatives can be based on the new understanding' (Lee 1993 cited in Reed 1999, p. 335). Actors work collaboratively by sharing power and responsibility to create a learning environment that nurtures the generation of new knowledge (Folke *et al.* 2005). Its complexity therefore cannot be underestimated as it requires a recognition of the importance and intricacies of social dynamics. It also demands deep-seated change such as accepting new ways of working, institutional flexibility, acknowledging unorthodox practices, creating and nurturing political openness and change, and involvement from new stakeholders (Holling 1978[2005]; Folke *et al.* 2003; Moberg

and Galaz 2005). Meanwhile, conflict may emerge through a failure to identify common ground or the neglect of critical social relations.

European rural development

Sustainability is found at the heart of rural policy with the ideal of achieving sustainable rural development a key dimension of EU, national, regional and local policy in recent years (McDonagh *et al.* 2009). These objectives are promoted through the European Agriculture Rural Development Fund in which the LEADER methodology has been mainstreamed (Commission of the European Communities (CEC) 2004). The fund aims to improve the competitiveness of agriculture and forestry while achieving environmentally sustainable land management and also diversifying rural economic activity (Council Regulation (EU) no. 1698/2005 CEC 2005). Specifically, Pillar Two[1] of the CAP is aimed at helping rural communities to develop and diversify and accordingly Member states have discretion in setting out their plans for expenditure (CEC 2005). The instruments include traditional agricultural activities as well as broader rural development measures such as the development of villages, protection and conservation of rural heritage, land improvement, diversification of agricultural activities and the establishment of farm relief services. Both farmers and non-farmers can access the available funding. Importantly, member states are required to spread their plans, and hence rural development funding, between three thematic axes: improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector, improving the environment and the countryside, and improving the quality of life in rural areas and encouraging diversification of the rural economy.

The LEADER initiative has attracted much debate and it is not our intention to replicate the existing comprehensive critiques (see for instance, Ray 1998, 1999; Shortall and Shucksmith 2001; Scott 2004; Bryden 2006; Convery *et al.* 2010). A number of features are, however, salient to our analysis. The specificity of rural tourism resonates with the European rural development model. Local action groups (LAGs) are active at the very local level, having the flexibility to agree objectives, all within the framework of the programme. LAGs embrace the LEADER methodology that focuses on 'partnership capacity, implementation of local strategies, co-operation, networking and acquisition of skills' (CEC, 2005 p. 6, para. 50). Through these mechanisms, territories cultivate their own development repertoire, which pays attention to the unique features of an area and so takes account of all aspects of the locale such as food, craft, language and dialect, landscape and music (Ray 1999, p. 525).

Just as the lack of consensus on sustainable development means that the concept remains contested and ambiguous at best, tensions have existed in the past between competing economic and social objectives and on the meaning of rural development. There remains no blueprint for rural development. Consequently, as the themes of agricultural restructuring, economic diversification, cultural diversity and environmental management pervade the current European programme, the process requires co-operation among the interest groups that are working towards the common goal of achieving rural development. They must identify and articulate different preferences

and priorities according to national or regional circumstances. The overall process is rarely straightforward and tensions have already been identified within the existing programme as actors manage a 'balancing act' between seeking active involvement while providing leadership (Convery *et al.* 2010, p. 16). This suggests to us that the adaptive management paradigm is a fitting mechanism for negotiating these diverse interests.

European guidance on rural development emphasises the need for consistency with other EU policies such as economic cohesion and the environment (European Commission 2008). Integration is a key feature of the rural development regulation (RDR) as it seeks to accommodate 'multi-sectoral needs for endogenous rural development' (Council Regulation (EU) no. 1698/2005, no. 47). With this backdrop in mind, it is likely that many emerging projects will have, among others, tourist objectives. In connection to this, potential difficulties have already been noted by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) as they suggest that 'the key challenge is to ensure that the proposals for [farm] diversification integrate with the broad direction of the tourism strategy' (Mary Lynch Associates 2009, p. 11), before going on to indicate how tourist board staff will liaise directly with LAGs. Similarly, Convery *et al.* (2010) state the importance of adaptive management in the RDR as a mechanism to ensure integration, highlighting the emergence of power and local politics as LAGs articulate and advance diverse priorities. However, it is not yet fully evident how different interests will be negotiated in this contentious economic, social, environmental and cultural arena. The potential contribution of tourism to rural development in this new and emerging institutional framework and the extent to which the sustainable tourism paradigm is understood and executed in rural development is also unclear. The remainder of the study highlights the critical issues that emerge as sustainable tourism is played out within a local area. Four themes emerge from this analysis: institutional (in)capacity, legitimacy of local groups, navigating between stakeholder interests and sustainable tourism in practice. All have clear implications for the new rural development programme. Before presenting these issues, an overview of the Mourne area is provided.

The proposed Mourne National Park

Situated in Northern Ireland, this case study offers a lens through which to consider institutional arrangements for sustainable tourism in a region that has been the recipient of an array of governing bodies. Consequently mapped in a single locality are numerous partnerships and strategic alliances. Since the signing of the historic Northern Ireland Good Friday Agreement in 1998, the region has experienced considerable social transformation. One consequence of the changes has been the so-called peace dividend, which has resulted in substantial growth in tourism. In 2006 tourism continued to grow, with visitor and domestic revenue exceeding £0.5 billion (NITB 2006), an upward trend that continued until the global recession affected the local economy. From 2008 the sector experienced an overall decline in visitor numbers, with the south-east and north-west regions suffering the most, the former being the location of the Mourne area (Tourism Barometers 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010 NITB) (see Figure 1). It was not until 2009, however, that revenue fell
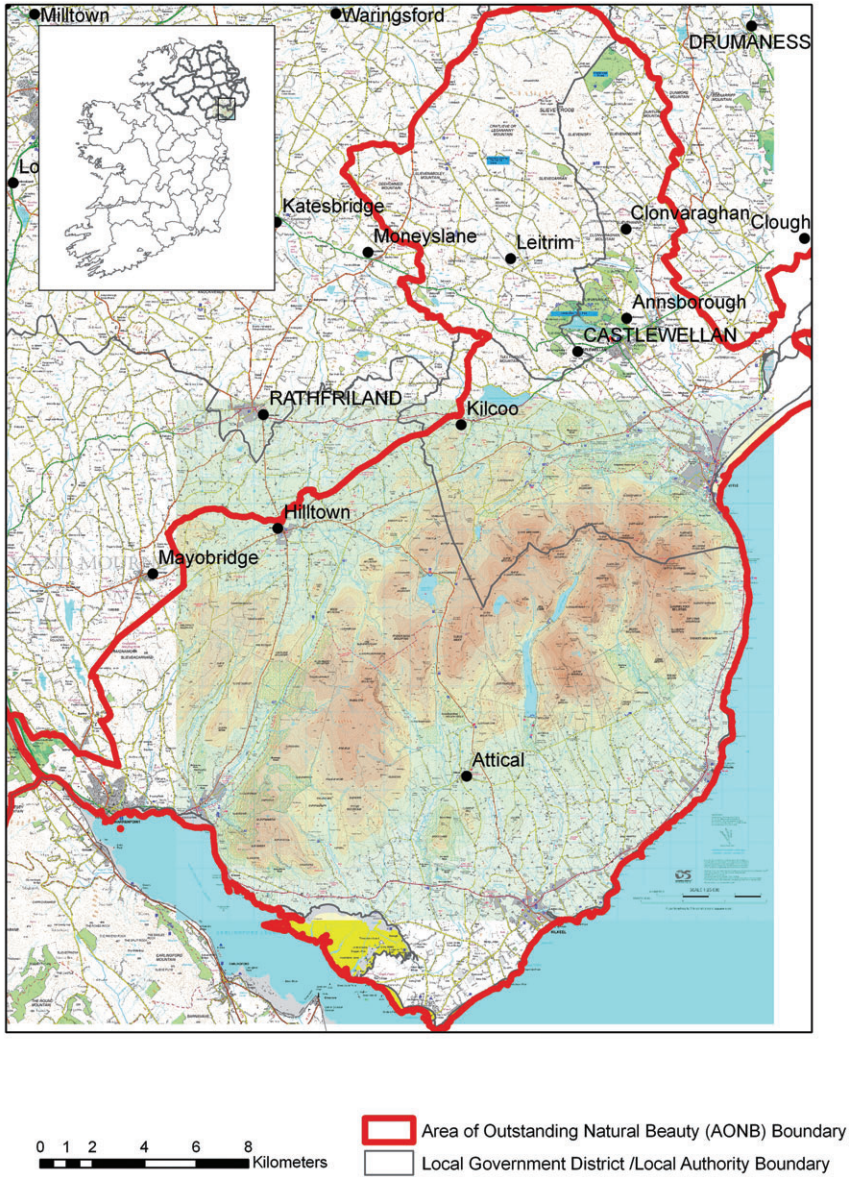
Figure 1: *Map showing location of Mourne area in Ireland*
Source: © *Crown copyright and database rights under Northern Ireland Mapping Agreement 2010.*

from £540 to £529 million (Tourism Barometers 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010 NITB). Even so, supporting almost 30,000 full-time equivalent jobs, it is now on a par with the agricultural sector, traditionally seen as the mainstay of the rural economy.

Part of the tourism strategy that followed political reconciliation was the development of five signature projects aiming to raise the international profile of Northern Ireland (NITB 2003). The Tourist Board assumes a strategic role as all signature projects rely on the active engagement of relevant stakeholders: specific funding is not automatically guaranteed. Diverse projects were selected, ranging from Titanic Belfast to the development of Christian Heritage. But it is with the Giant's Causeway and Causeway Coast (see Figure 2) that the Mourne area shares most similarities. Both are designated areas of outstanding natural beauty and both destinations attract large numbers of tourists, although both have been particularly affected by the recent recession. The estimated annual visitor numbers to the High Mourne area exceeds 200,000[2] (interview with Mourne Heritage Trustee), surpassed in popularity only by the Giant's Causeway and Causeway Coast destination in Antrim.

In addition to its designation as a signature project, in 2002 a report commissioned by the Environment and Heritage Service identified the Mourne area as being the most suited for national park status. Following this study, the former minister of
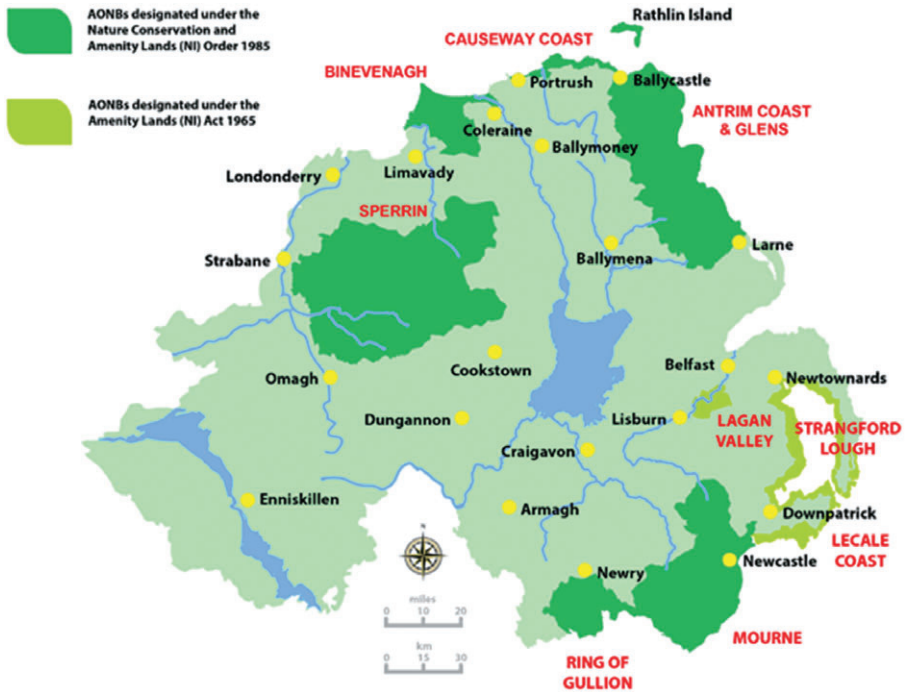

Figure 2: *Map of Northern Ireland showing areas of outstanding natural beauty*
Source: © Crown copyright and database rights under Northern Ireland Mapping Agreement 2010.

the environment, Dermot Nesbitt, announced that he would be working towards creating a national park in Mourne. Meanwhile a Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland (DoE) report states 'Shared Horizons signals the Department of the Environment's intentions to ... take forward proposals for the designation of a national park in the Mournes' (DoE 2004, p. 3).

The proposed Mourne National Park covers around 570 km² and has been a focal point for visitors ever since the Victorian era. Evans (1967) noted its special qualities, highlighting the area's many historical and cultural customs along with the rich land use traditions. Its landscape comprises a spectacular coastline, 12 significant peaks, a high granite wall, walking trails, state forests and interesting topography. Its archaeological landscape reflects an area rich with heritage and tradition and one where 'unifying geological, natural and cultural factors ... have shaped the living landscape we see today' (Alison Farmer Associates and Julie Martin Associates 2005, p. 28).

The Mourne area has a fragile and fragmented economy, relying on tourism-related activities for up to 15 per cent of employment (Colin Buchanan and Partners Limited 2006). Some 53 per cent of the land is actively farmed and is in small holdings (average farm size is 15 ha) with approximately 1,500 landowners (Haydon 2007). Much of the uplands and High Mournes are in large holdings with ownership residing in Mourne Trustees, Water Service, Forest Service and the National Trust. In short, the area's economic buoyancy relies on agriculture, tourism, self-employment and commuting (Mack *et al.* 2006).

The Mourne National Park Working Party (MNPWP) was established in 2004 following public consultation. Its remit was to consult on proposals for the boundaries of the mooted park and on a management structure, and finally to make recommendations to government. It was thus a partnership of stakeholders with multiple interests who were attempting to work towards a common goal of sustainable rural tourism while remaining cognisant of local social, economic, environmental and cultural assets.

Institutional (in)capacity for sustainable tourism in Northern Ireland

In the European rural development programme, each member state was responsible for creating 'the conditions for a broad and effective involvement of all appropriate bodies, in accordance with national rules and practice' through creating appropriate partnership structures to ensure integration between environmental protection and economic development (Council Regulation (EU) no. 1698/2005, Art. 6 no. 1). Article 33 of the Rural Development Regulation provides a list of 13 activities indicating what funding will be spent on which measures during the period 2007–2013. In Northern Ireland the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) set out the relevant framework for establishing the corresponding LAGs. The approved LAG, in partnership with a council (that is, the local government) cluster[3] in the area, addresses the measures outlined in Axis Three of the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2007–2013 (NIRDP 2007). In line with the European Regulation, Axis Three seeks to improve the quality of life in rural areas and to encourage diversification of economic activity (NIRDP 2007).

In circumstances such as these where objectives and actions are carefully defined from the centre, innovation may be curtailed, reflecting tension between top-down and bottom-up development (Bryden 2006). This reflects a tendency to address processes of development in silos whereby government creates a policy agenda, community activists animate and development agencies administer funding programmes. Fragmentation and entrenched positions follow as interest groups do not wish to be seen to concede their position. Adaptive management encourages actors to confer at an earlier stage so that they may, through a process of knowledge generation, identify the problems and agree the challenges from the outset, thereby avoiding the pursuit of blatant self-interest.

There was evidence of inadequate institutional capacity in relation to the national park designation. Among the legislative amendments was a Review of Public Administration (RPA) undertaken in 2002 in an attempt to develop administrative arrangements to meet the needs of a devolved government. The delays in the implementation of the RPA were viewed by members of the working party to have held back the development of a legislative framework for establishing a national park in Northern Ireland and so they believed that 'the gap is widening between the consultative and legislative processes' (Minutes 19 October 2006, item 5). Consequently, even though the Mourne Area was mooted as having the characteristics that would merit national park status, the legislation was inappropriate – it did not support the designation and implementation of a national park. Only in the recent past has the subject of national parks been presented to the Northern Ireland Executive and it is expected that it will take nearly two years to get through the process of public consultation and become possible from a legislative perspective. After that point the Heritage Trust aims to promote the Mourne area as a pilot national park (interview with Mourne Heritage Trustee).

Bryden *et al.* (2006) note how sectoral policies and the centralised administration of them may lead to policy contradictions between the different scales of governance. The MNPWP–led consultation showed that landowners believed they were at that time liable for any injury experienced by anyone entering their land and that this group of stakeholders greatly feared litigation. Meanwhile the government did

> not consider that the current provisions for occupiers' liability are a barrier to access ... There is no known reported case of adult trespassers successfully suing a landowner because of an injury caused due to natural features arising in the countryside. (DoE and Department of Finance and Personnel Information Leaflet ND pp. 1 and 7)

Nonetheless only months after making this statement the government announced that it was allocating half a million pounds for access management in the Mourne area to include helping landowners deal with their access problems (Northern Ireland Executive 2007).

Legitimacy of local groups

Membership for both groups is ultimately time-bound (to either the European Programme or to the national park consultation process), determined in a top-down

manner and validated by earlier consultation processes. Membership of the LAGs was defined not only by DARD in terms of the requirements set out under anti-discriminatory legislation enshrined in Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1988), but was also based on previous consultations and evaluations relating to LEADER. DARD stipulated that all LAGs in the new Rural Development Programme (2007–2013) must consist of 21 individuals who have equal representation in their partnerships. The LAGs were to be new groups: they could not be the same bodies as those that existed under LEADER +, although individuals previously involved with a LAG were able to apply to join a new group.

The constitution of the LAGs is not entirely dissimilar to that of the MNPWP where the DoE, under instruction from the minister and following public consultation, selected prospective members. Each group comprises a multiplicity of stakeholders who are likely to have different values and diverse agendas: one-third of the 26 MNPWP members were drawn from central and local government bodies with just under half of the membership comprising community actors. In this latter group, farmers' interests were heavily represented as they took up nearly a quarter of the membership overall. Meanwhile, half of the LAG members comprise economic and social partners and civil society, while elected councillors make up the remainder of the group.

Similarities between LAGs and the MNPWP do not end at membership. Operating in partnership, the success of each relies on establishing and agreeing common objectives through collaboration and co-operation; the overarching concern of all is the sustainable development of a particular territory. Although the council cluster is financially and administratively responsible for the programme funds and for the operation of the local LAG, the contract for the implementation and delivery of the programme at a local level is between DARD and one of the councils in the cluster (NIRDP 2007). The LAGs are responsible for supporting the implementation of a funding initiative through facilitation, public consultations and by making recommendations to the funding body. They do not have financial authority. Meanwhile the working party had a remit to conduct a public consultation and to submit proposals to government; it did not develop projects directly. Thus while all of the bodies hold powerful supporting and, indeed, leadership roles, none was directly responsible for funds, a situation which raises questions of power – who has it and how much are they willing to share influence? Ostensibly the institutional apparatus for rural development has been set up to facilitate bottom-up development but if LAGs are not directly responsible for allocating finances, then exactly how much power can they wield? It is claimed that only limited local governance exists where such asymmetrical power relations prevail between central and local government and that without major reform of central government regional centralism remains (Knox 2009). In many respects rather than comprising a genuinely interrelated group, development bodies such as regeneration groups are more like a collection of stakeholders brought together for the purpose of achieving a specific objective, be it programme delivery or public consultation. They are also used to enhance legitimacy as, for example, the NIRDP structure is aligned to an emerging administrative framework (the new local government bodies, due to be implemented in 2015) while the MNPWP was created following public consultation.

Navigating between stakeholder interests

In the past the legitimacy with which rural development partnerships operated raised questions in relation to power, representation and vested interests. As the preceding discussion shows, the premise on which the Mourne area consultation took place was flawed. The working party was not charged with consulting on whether or not the public wished to see a national park created there. But due to widespread misinterpretation of the process, the popular belief was that the working party would in fact be consulting on whether or not to proceed with establishing national park status for the area. Given these misaligned expectations, it was unsurprising that the commonly held view was that the Working Party was a smokescreen for a 'done deal' (Minutes 28 October 2004, item 3f). So even though the government attempted to hand over a degree of power to the locality, asymmetric power relations were evident with the opinion that important decisions were made outside the control of the local group. In this way the legitimacy of the working party was undermined.

Additional difficulties were associated with this consultation process. The Mobile Information Unit travelled to 34 locations in the area during September 2006 during the consultation period when 12,000 out of the total 42,000 leaflets were distributed. Highly distinctive in appearance as it travelled round the Mourne area, it was loaned to the MNPWP by the local council (Inform Communications NI Ltd 2007). This was complemented by a range of other measures including a high profile media strategy with local radio, newspapers and television and a series of public meetings that included themed events for specific stakeholder interests such as farming, business, youth and the environment (Inform Communications NI Limited 2007). Consequently many of the issues were raised at a Northern Ireland-wide level by a number of newspapers and through a regional television programme.

The working party thus endeavoured to develop a consultation process that would accommodate many different interests. By avoiding catch-all public meetings and developing a programme of clinics, it hoped to ensure that the process would not get hijacked by an articulate group at the expense of other interest groups that might have been less able to voice their concerns (interview with Mourne Heritage Trustee). Even so, there was a perception among some members of the working party that their attempts to consult were overshadowed by other national park consultation activity, with evidence of a 'flying squad' of consultees attending connected public meetings. Further, the opinion among the working party was that their viewpoints were afforded more credence than warranted by any single interest group (interview with Mourne Heritage Trustee).

Due to lack of resources the Mobile Information Unit did not travel outside the area of outstanding natural beauty and this caused concern for some members of the working party (Minutes, 19 October 2006; 18 April 2007). No doubt further clashes would have emerged between residents in the area who were reliant on development (either in of agriculture or in tourism-related activities) and leisure seekers objecting to development because they wanted to retain the landscape in its existing form. Such conflict was witnessed in the pro-Mullaghmore and anti-Mullaghmore development in County Clare in the 1990s, where the dispute progressed to being 'increasingly interpreted as an "insider–outsider", "rural–urban" conflict' (Healy and McDonagh

2009, p. 385) and the disagreement was depicted as the 'state's failure to foster and participate in local consultation' (Healy and McDonagh 2009, p. 387).

Given the remit of the LAGs it is unlikely that they will be in a position to undertake consultation beyond the immediate locale. Any consultation that does occur is likely to be limited by resource and skill capacity at the local level. One possibility for expanding LAG expertise lies in the wider rural development network that connects actors across the programme. However much of the network's debate tends to be at the operational level concerning the administration of funds, eligibility criteria and generally exchanging good practice. It is unlikely to be a forum for deep-seated change relating to consultation practices.

Sustainable tourism in practice

It is perhaps only in more recent decades that tourism, and the particular challenges that this sector poses for rural areas, has been linked with the notion of sustainability. By focusing on the economic gains of rural tourism, strategies are being developed to attract tourists to rural areas (including, for example, what marketing tools to use and what range of activities need to be provided) rather than addressing their likely impact on the area overall following their arrival, thereby separating ecological and environmental concerns from economic issues. For instance, the Tourism Board in Northern Ireland continues to advance ambitious plans for growth through an ongoing programme of public consultation on a new strategy and associated action plan for the period to 2020. It aims to increase 'earnings from tourism from £536 million to £1 billion by 2020' (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment 2010:2).[4] Simultaneously, the DoE highlights the fact that 'suggested aims for Northern Ireland's national parks draw on recognition of several well-developed sustainable tourism and rural socio-economic development initiatives in areas of special landscape significance in Northern Ireland' (DoE 2004, p. 14). In this way interrelationships in sustainable tourism are not apparent: the concept is repeatedly conceived as disjointed.

A further paradox in this debate is the seeming desire to replace one vulnerable activity (agriculture) with another (tourism). The traditional occupation of agriculture has been pilloried in past decades due to perceptions that its impact is unsustainable and environmentally damaging. Increasingly emphasis is being placed on the economic potential of tourism in rural areas, almost ignoring the fact that 'tourism should be regarded as an extractive industrial activity' (Garrod and Fyall 1998, p. 199) with wide-ranging impacts on environmental, social, human, heritage and cultural resources. As NITB points out, the Mourne area is 'not just about scenery', but also about developing a mix of leisure activities including bike trails, food events and adventure trails as well as providing cultural information such as themed exhibitions and interpretation (NITB n.d.).

There appears to be a general agreement among stakeholders that the economic base of rural areas needs to be broadened. Expressed most recently as a key issue in the draft tourism strategy (DETINI 2010), the working party recommended support for 'the retention and appropriate development of existing and new industries and a diverse economy' (Mourne National Park Working Party 2007). However, potential

contradictions emerge with many of the remaining recommendations reflecting tension between objectives of sustainable tourism among stakeholders. Number three, for example draws attention to environmental protection while supporting existing farming activity and other businesses and diversifying the economy. The theme of further economic development is continued in numerous recommendations, including no. 13, which draws attention to the fact that the current infrastructure is not adequate to meet the needs of existing visitors. As well as considering the capacity of existing facilities, it specifically calls for improved transport infrastructure. Achieving all of these objectives concurrently is challenging, particularly guaranteeing on the one hand that environmental features remain protected while on the other allowing economic diversification and development to take place.

In practice ensuring that individual members in a partnership act together under the umbrella of achieving comprehensive sustainable development is challenging. Individuals often grapple with balancing self-interest and community concerns. In the Mourne consultation process there was evidence that various groups assumed viewpoints reflecting their particular domain, such as being either for or against further development and restriction. Significantly there was overwhelming resistance of many in the farming sector to the idea of a national park and entrenched positions seemed to prevail:

> At the open meeting held in Newry in early December farmers gave a resounding 'no' to the proposal for a national park in the Mournes although at the moment they did not know what they were saying 'no' to. (Minutes 6, 16 December 2004)

Locally within the new rural development programme in Northern Ireland the question of vested interests surfaced at the outset. At a public consultation meeting to attract new members to the Northern Ireland LAGs, a farmer made his position clear:

> Well, I would like you to guarantee me, as a farmer, that this money is not all going to be spent on rural development. We [the farmers] face tough times at the moment and we don't want this money being spent on projects, it needs to be invested into proper farming activity. (27 February 2008, farmer attendee of a public consultation)

> By way of response its official sponsors assert that the

> designation should reflect the national importance of the Mourne landscape. It must also have the support of the people who live and work in the Mourne area, as well as those who visit the area for recreation and in doing so, support the local economy. (Environment and Heritage Service [Northern Ireland] 2004)

In this way the whole notion of achieving sustainable tourism through the national park seems promising but what we see emerging are a number of very different contestations with no overall agreement on how the specific sustainable tourism paradigm should take place in the Mourne area. In other words, the degree to which environmental, social, economic and cultural aspects are to be addressed remains nebulous, fragmented and potentially contradictory.

Conclusions

The existing and potential value of tourism as a rural change agent is familiar (Crouch 2006) but, despite its growing importance, there is still a dearth of specific rural

tourism policies or appropriate political frameworks in place. As a result it appears that many of the old difficulties and problems inherent in earlier rural initiatives still pervade current programmes and policies. For instance, there are questions regarding the power afforded to local actors and partnerships within the new rural development programme. The preceding analysis revealed there was a legislative mismatch due to the ongoing review of public administration in connection with the proposed national park. Achieving economic diversification through a LEADER methodology will be attainable only if the policy infrastructure is compatible. This requires intervention from beyond the programme, from regional and European governments. Otherwise the programme will be in constant tension with policies that weaken its very existence.

The state not only initiates regional co-operation and therefore local governance, but as Bocher reminds us 'regional cooperation still needs an incentive from outside' (Bocher 2008, p. 385). It is imperative that this incentive is conducive to any activity that is promoted in territorial programmes, be they for sustainable tourism or rural development *per se*. In fact, whether it is at a global, national or local level, the development of sustainable rural tourism, however defined, suggests as a minimum the need for synergy of purpose within and between communities, vested interests, individuals, state bodies and other stakeholders.

If we accept that different groups value different aspects of sustainable tourism, we must also accept that there will be conflict between these various groups. What needs to be realised is that while a structured group approach may be the way to develop and promote rural tourism, creating inter-community co-operation and collaboration will be a complex and difficult process (Heneghan 2002). To avoid entrenched posturing among stakeholders, conditions need to be created whereby they can work in a truly collaborative manner. Adaptive management is attuned to the importance of social dynamics while also embracing social memory and the different forms of knowledge that actors bring to a particular process (Folke *et al.* 2005). Moreover, it is likely to require major cultural shifts in the organisations involved if they are to adopt new ways of working to generate new knowledge.

This case study shows that conflict is inevitable within the current European rural development framework as particular groups strive to achieve dominance. The process of identifying a sustainable tourist initiative is no easy task. It requires 'compatibility between the needs and resources of the local community, its residents and the tourists' (McAreavey *et al.* 2009, p. 231). Multiple stakeholders and a wide array of interest groups can all make legitimate claims on the concept of sustainability and on the development of a rural area. European guidance falls short in offering direction in cases where competing interests prevail (European Commission 2008). The governance of national parks in England and Wales offers a somewhat limited type of solution. The Sandford Principle (Sandford Committee 1974) gives priority to conservation objectives when land use conflicts arise. But without a means whereby conflict can be negotiated and where ultimate priorities remain unknown or at the very least fragmented, implementing initiatives with competing interests could jeopardize opportunities for positive change. Understanding this and realising the inter-relationship between tourism, the environment and local communities is of crucial

importance. Collaboration and consultation with stakeholders, however complex, are a critical starting point to any long-term perspective of what could be termed a successful sustainable rural tourism approach, but more deep-seated changes are necessary.

Perhaps the question for the new rural development actors is less about prioritising economic, conservation, environmental, social or even cultural interests and more about finding new ways of framing the challenges facing rural communities. Otherwise there is a danger that debate will not progress beyond earlier rural development programmes and rural tourism will continually be interpreted as a multi-sectoral rather than as a genuinely interrelated venture. As institutional arrangements stand, fragmentation will prevail. The tensions that rippled through the working party will emerge within LAGs, such as the conflict between economic development and landscape aesthetics whereby 'Some wanted to see a proposal that would stop inappropriate developments being built in the area, while a significant number were concerned that there would be increased planning restrictions' (MNPWP p. 29). Consequently, individuals will continue to protect their own narrow self-interest rather than participating in a process that genuinely attempts to generate knowledge, share learning and ultimately achieve lasting change. Central to such reframing in order to redefine the terms of engagement are issues of trust, micro-politics and power (McAreavey 2006, 2009).

The influence of policy must not be overlooked: it has the potential to provide direction on strategic priorities for cases where conflict will inevitably arise. Policy coherency will also ensure compatibility across different interventions. At an institutional level certain alterations are required to cope with adaptive approaches. Rhetoric must correspond to institutional capacity otherwise the transmission of correct signals is empty and potentially counterproductive and therefore pointless. This analysis suggests that a number of fundamental modifications could provide a starting point. Possible changes might involve organisational adjustments among participating agencies to reshape the way in which sustainable rural tourism is understood and practiced. Government must make a radical shift away from regional centralism (which, in the context of Northern Ireland, would necessitate a review of its civil service). Such a move would offer a glimmer of hope for the new rural development programme and a real possibility for its liberation from some of the old challenges. Ultimately, if central government does not sign up to finding new ways of working and if, in fact; it is intent on using these type of policy interventions by ticking boxes, delivering project outputs and measurable outcomes, then it is highly unlikely that within the time frame afforded to such programmes we will witness anything other than the tried and tested project solutions. Once again, opportunities for lasting change in rural communities will be overlooked.

Notes

* Corresponding author.
[1] Pillar One of the CAP is concerned with agricultural market support and direct payments, namely the Single Payment Scheme (CEC, 2005).

2 Ascertaining figures is difficult as, unlike the other signature projects, there is no single point at which all visitors to the area congregate such as a visitors centre or a central car park. These figures were collected by volunteers for the Heritage Trust.

3 These were aligned to clusters rather than single councils in anticipation of the implementation of new administrative boundaries that were due to be implemented originally in 2011,and now in 2015 as a result of a review of public administration in Northern Ireland.

4 There is currently little indication of where these expected tourists will visit, but with enduring emphasis on the significance of the signature projects, it could be reasonably deduced that they will remain a central part of the strategy.

References

Alison Farmer Associates and Julie Martin Associates (2005) *Mourne national park boundary recommendations* (Belfast: Environment and Heritage Service)

Bocher, M. (2008) Regional governance and rural development in Germany: the implementation of LEADER+. *Sociologia Ruralis* 48 (4) pp. 372–388

Bramwell, B. and B. Lane (1993) Sustainable tourism: an evolving global approach. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 1 (1) pp. 1–p5

Bramwell, B. and B. Lane (2008) Priorities in sustainable tourism research. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 16 (1) pp. 1–4

Bryden, J. (2006) Special focus: from LEADER I to LEADER+ and beyond to the LEADER Axis. *LEADER+ Magazine* 6 pp. 8–14

Bryden, J., K. Refsgaard and T. Johnson (2006) *Multifunctional agriculture and the new rural development policy paradigm in Europe* (Prague: European Association of Agricultural Economists Seminar 22–23 September)

Butler, R. (1998) Rural recreation and tourism. Pp. 211–232 in B. Ilbery ed., *The geography of rural change* (Harlow: Longman)

Caffyn, A. (2000) Developing sustainable tourism in the Trossachs, Scotland. Pp. 83–100 in G. Richards ed., *Tourism and sustainable community development* (London: Routledge)

Colin Buchanan and Partners Ltd (2006) *Tourism in Mourne: current and potential economic impact* (Belfast: Colin Buchanan and Partners Ltd)

Commission of the European Communities (CEC) (2004) *Proposal for council regulation on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) COM (2004)490 final* (Brussels: European Commission)

CEC (2005) Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) OJ L277 (Brussels: EC) pp. 1–40.

Convery, I., I. Soane, T. Dutson and H. Shaw (2010) Mainstreaming LEADER delivery in the RDR in Cumbria: an interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Sociologia Ruralis* Published online: 8 July 2010 4:57PM DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9523.2010.00519.x

Crouch, D. (2006) Tourism, consumption and rurality. Pp. 255–264 in P. Cloke, T. Marsden and P.H. Mooney eds, *Handbook of rural studies* (London: Sage)

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETINI) (2010) *Northern Ireland tourism strategy* (Belfast: DETINI)

Department of the Environment (DoE) (2004) National parks and other protected landscape areas: a discussion of options for establishing national parks and managing other outstanding landscapes in Northern Ireland (Belfast: DoE)

Environment and Heritage Service (Northern Ireland) (2004) *A Mourne national park* (Belfast: EHS Corporate Communications)

European Commission (2008) *Rural development policy 2007–2013* (Brussels: European Commission)

Evans, E.E. (1967) *Mourne country: landscape and life in south down* 2nd edn (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press)

Folke, C., J. Colding and F. Berkes (2003) Synthesis: building resilience and adaptive capacity in social-ecological systems. Pp. 352–387 in F. Berkes, J. Colding and C. Folke eds, *Navigating social-ecological systems: building resilience for complexity and change* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press)

Folke, C., T. Hahn, P. Olsson and J. Norberg (2005) Adaptive governance of social-ecological systems. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 30 pp. 441–473

Garrod, B. and A. Fyall (1998) Beyond the rhetoric of sustainable tourism? *Tourism Management* 19 (3) pp. 199–212

Garrod, B., R. Wornell and R. Youell (2006) Re-conceptualising rural resources as countryside capital: the case of rural tourism. *Journal of Rural Studies* 22 (1) pp. 117–128

Gössling, S., C.M. Hall, B. Lane and D. Weaver (2008) The Helsingborg statement on sustainable tourism. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 16 (1) pp. 122–124

Hall, C.M. (1997) The politics of heritage tourism: place, power and the representation of values in the urban context. Pp. 91–102 in P. Murphy ed., *Quality management in urban tourism* (New York: John Wiley and Sons)

Haydon, L. (2007) Right of passage. *The Guardian*. Available online at http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2007/aug/15/conservation.guardiansocietysupplement?gusrc=rss&feed=environment Accessed 16 July 2009

Healy, N. and J. McDonagh (2009) Commodification and conflict: what can the Irish approach to protected area management tell us? *Society and Natural Resources* 22 (4) pp. 381–391

Heneghan, M. (2002) Structures and processes in rural tourism. Signpost to rural change. Paper presented at the Rural Development Conference: Signposts to rural change, Tullamore Court, Teagasc, Dublin, 12 February

Holling, C.S. (1978) *Adaptive environmental assessment and management* (London: Wiley) Reprinted by Blackburn Press in 2005

Hubbard, C. and N. Ward (2008) Deliverable D8.2, development of socio-economic and agricultural structures in selected rural regions in Ireland after EU accession. European Framework 6 Project: Structural Change on Agriculture and Rural Livelihoods. Available online at http://scarled.eu/index.php?id=deliverables, Accessed 2 November 2010

Hughes, G. (1996) Tourism and the environment: a sustainable partnership. *Scottish Geographical Magazine* 112 (2) pp. 107–113

Hunter, C. (1997) Sustainable tourism as an adaptive paradigm. *Annals of Tourism Research* 24 (4) pp. 850–867

Inform Communications NI Limited (2007) *Report to the Mourne National Park Working Party on the outcome of their public consultation 'Your opportunity to have your say'* (Belfast: Inform Communications)

Kernel, P. (2005) Creating and implementing a model for sustainable development in tourist enterprises. *Journal of Cleaner Production* 13 pp. 151–164

Knox, C. (2009) The politics of local government reform in Northern Ireland. *Local Government Studies* 35 (4) pp. 435–455

McAreavey, R. (2006) Getting close to the action: the micro-politics of rural development. *Sociologia Ruralis* 46 (2) pp. 85–103

McAreavey, R. (2009) *Rural development theory and practice: a critical analysis of rural development theory and practice* (London and New York: Routledge)

McAreavey, R., J. McDonagh and M. Heneghan (2009) Conflict to consensus: contested notions of sustainable rural tourism on the island of Ireland. Pp. 219–234 in J. McDonagh, T. Varley and S. Shortall eds, *A living countryside – the politics of sustainable development in rural Ireland* (Aldershot: Ashgate)

McDonagh, J. (2007) Rural development. Pp. 88–99 in B. Bartley and R. Kitchin eds, *Understanding contemporary Ireland* (London: Pluto Press)

McDonagh, J., T. Varley and S. Shortall eds (2009) *A living countryside? The politics of sustainable development in rural Ireland* (Aldershot: Ashgate)

Mack, N., Y. Loughry and K. McDonald (2006) *A socio-economic profile of the proposed mournes national park* (Cookstown: RDC Policy and Innovation Research Unit)

McKercher, B. (1993) Some fundamental truths about tourism: understanding tourism's social and environmental impacts. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 1 (1) pp. 6–16

Mary Lynch Associates (2009) *Northern Ireland tourism working paper* Version 2 (London: Mary Lynch Associates)

Moberg, F. and V. Galaz (2005) Resilience: going from conventional to adaptive freshwater management for human and ecosystem compatibility. Swedish Water House Policy Brief No. 3. SIWI (Stockholm: Stockholm International Water Institute)

Mourne National Park Working Party (2007) *Report to the minister* (Belfast: Environment and Heritage Service)

National Research Council (NRC) (1999) Our common journey: a transition to sustainability.

Northern Ireland Executive (2007) Foster pledges half a million pounds for Mourne's Access Management. Press release. (Belfast: NI Executive) Available online at http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/news/news-doe/news-doe-september-2007/news-doe-280907-foster-pledges-half.htm Accessed 2 November 2010

Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2007–2013 (2007) *Northern Ireland rural development programme 2007–2013* (Belfast: Department of Agriculture and Rural Development)

Northern Ireland Tourist Board NITB (2003) *Tourism in Northern Ireland: a strategic framework for action 2004–2007* (Belfast: NITB)

NITB (2006) *Tourism facts 2006* (Belfast: NITB)

NITB (n.d.) Signature project directory Available online at http://www.nitb.com/CategoryPage.aspx?path=aedbda88-d741-4bec-b324-36204c735653,9fedbeed-b4be-4637-a8d8-f3b31fdbb53e Accessed 5 November 2010

NITB Tourism Barometer (various dates) Available online at http://www.nitb.com/CategoryPage.aspx?path=2e3c2831-b6cb-4bcd-a276-e0283e5bd203,76feeab2-495b-4951-8e1a-f26d64d3fca4,b12cb1ef-7667-4c03-9e89-6e45ff52c444 Accessed 2 November 2010

OECD (2006) *The new rural paradigm. Policies and governance* (Paris: OECD)

Potter, C. and J. Burney (2002) Agricultural multifunctionality in the WTO – legitimate non-trade concern or disguised protection? *Journal of Rural Studies* 18 (1) pp. 35–47

Ray, C. (1998) Territory, structures and interpretation. Two case studies of the European Union's LEADER I programme. *Journal of Rural Studies* 14 (1) pp. 79–87

Ray, C. (1999) Endogenous development in an era of reflexive modernity. *Journal of Rural Studies* 15 (3) pp. 257–267

Reed, M.G. (1999) Collaborative tourism planning as adaptive experiments in emergent tourism settings. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 7 (3–4) pp. 331–355

Reeder, R.J. and D.M. Brown (2005) Recreation, tourism and rural well-being. Economic Research Service Report. (Washington: US Department of Agriculture)

Saarinen, J. (2006) Traditions of sustainability in tourism studies. *Annals of Tourism Research* 33 (4) pp. 1121–1140

Sandford, Lord (1974) *Report of the National Park Policy Review Committee* (London: HMSO)

Saxena, G. and B. Ilbery (2008) Integrated rural tourism. A border case study. *Annals of Tourism Research* 35 (1) pp. 233–254

Scott, M. (2004) Building institutional capacity in rural Northern Ireland: the role of partnership governance in the LEADER II programme. *Journal of Rural Studies* 20 (1) pp. 49–59

Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (2004) Guidelines on biodiversity and tourism development. Montreal: Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Available online at http://www.cbd.int/doc/publications/tou-gdl-en.pdf Accessed 2 November 2010

Sharpley, R. (2000) Tourism and sustainable development: exploring the theoretical divide. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 8 (1) pp. 1–19

Shortall, S. and M. Shucksmith (2001) Rural development in practice: issues arising in Scotland and Northern Ireland. *Community Development Journal* 36 (2) pp. 122–133

Stocking, M. and S. Perkin (1992) Conservation-with-development: an application of the concept in the Usambara Mountains, Tanzania. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 17 (3) pp. 337–349

Swarbrooke, J. (1999) *Sustainable tourism management* (Wallingford: CAB International)

Tourism Sustainability Group (TSG) (2007) Action for more sustainable European tourism. Available online at http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/sectors/tourism/files/docs/tsg/tsg_final_report_en.pdf Accessed 2 November 2010

Van Rensburg, T., E. Doherty and C. Murray (2006) Governing recreational activities in Ireland: a partnership approach to sustainable tourism. Working Paper No. 113, Department of Economics, National University of Ireland, Galway.

Varley, T., J. McDonagh and S. Shortall (2009) The politics of rural sustainability. Pp. 1–24 in J. McDonagh, T. Varley and S. Shortall eds, *A living countryside? The politics of sustainable development in rural Ireland* (Aldershot: Ashgate)

Wallace, G. and A. Russell (2004) Eco-cultural tourism as a means for the sustainable development of culturally marginal and environmentally sensitive regions. *Tourist Studies* 4 (3) pp. 235–254

Weaver, D.B. (2004) Tourism and the elusive paradigm of sustainable development. Pp. 510–524 in A.A. Lew, C.M. Hall and A.M. Williams eds, *A companion to tourism* (Oxford: Backwell)

World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) *Our common future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Ruth McAreavey*
School of Planning
Architecture and Civil Engineering
Queen's University Belfast
David Keir Building
Stranmillis Road
Belfast BT9 5AG UK
e-mail: r.mcareavey@qub.ac.uk

John McDonagh
School of Geography & Archaeology, NUI Galway
University Road, Galway
Ireland
e-mail: john.mcdonagh@nuigalway.ie