

Research Highlights Demand For Ecotourism In The Burren

Burren Connect Project to host ecotourism workshop on 20 May 2008

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The Burren Connect Project will host a workshop next month to explore the possibility of developing ecotourism activities in the world famous Burren region.

The workshop for Burren-based business owners follows the publication of market research results that indicate a strong demand for such activities among Burren visitors and tourism providers.

The objective of the visitor survey carried out by the Burren Connect Project in the summer of 2007 was to assess the visitor experience of the Burren, to allow information to be targeted more effectively, and to develop sustainable services and activities based on real visitor demand.

538 visitors, all of whom were availing of accommodation in the area, participated in the survey. 63 accommodation providers and 10 visitor centre managers were also surveyed.

Commenting on the market research for the Burren Connect Project, Ms. Carol Gleeson, Project Manager, stated, 'The survey questions teased out information on how visitors hear about the Burren, how they get here, what they do here, what they would like to do, and most importantly, if their visit met their expectations and if they would return. Visitor's knowledge of the fragile nature of the Burren environment was examined, as well as awareness of the impact of certain practices such as picking flowers or removing stones.'

Ms Gleeson added that the findings of the survey pointed towards a number of opportunities, particularly in the area of ecotourism style activities.

The top 5 rated activities amongst visitors were visits to visitor and interpretative centres, visits to archaeological monuments, participation in local cultural events, guided tours and walking routes. Many visitors expressed a desire to engage in more activities than they actually undertook on their holiday.

'This demand for activities and the length of visitor stay suggest there is considerable scope to increase the overall time spent by visitors in the area. As less than 1 in 3 stay entirely in the Burren, and only 14% stay more than 4 nights, it would be fair to conclude that there is significant unsatisfied demand for the identified activities. This suggests that there is strong potential to retain visitors longer through increased accessibility and availability of such activities', explained Ms Gleeson.

64% of visitors surveyed knew that the Burren is protected under legislation. When asked to rate the impact (high, medium, low or none) of removing stones, picking flowers or building mini-dolmens, on the environment, 36% of respondents rated all three activities as having high impact.

Ms. Gleeson said, 'These statistics show that just over one third of visitors surveyed have the necessary knowledge to act in a way that is environmentally sustainable in a basic sense. This, despite the fact that 64% are aware of legislative protection, suggests that further visitor education is

a priority.'

Feedback from the accommodation providers and visitor centre managers surveys revealed that 97% of accommodation providers and 80% of Visitor Centre Managers believe the Burren should be developed and promoted as an eco-tourism destination and should be branded accordingly.

An overwhelming majority of those surveyed said this approach would have a potentially positive economic impact on the area. 60% of accommodation providers affirmed they would be interested in achieving internationally recognised accreditation as an eco-tourism provider.

A summary report of the market research findings will shortly be distributed to the survey participants and will be available at the nine Burren Information Points; The Burren Centre, Kilfenora; The Burren Smokehouse Lisdoonvarna; Ballyvaughan Visitor Centre; Michael Cusack Centre Carron; Burren Perfumery Carron; Caherconnell Fort Visitor Centre; Corofin Genealogical Centre; Doolin Cave Visitor Centre; Café Beo, Kinvara. The report will also feature as a downloadable PDF on the Burren Connect Project website, which is currently being developed.

Mr. Niall O'Dwyer, Chairperson of the Doolin Tourism Development group and Proprietor of the Doolin Activity Lodge, said the results of the market research came as no surprise to him.

He indicated that businesses across the Burren region must continue to look at new ways of attracting long-stay, as well as short stay visitors.

'The Burren Connect Project recently brought some tourism-related business owners from North Clare to visit Ireland's first Ecotourism destination at the Greenbox in the North West. During this trip we learned that there are many clear advantages of developing a conceptual and spatial 'Green Box' containing environmentally sustainable products, accommodation and attractions within a context of clean natural resources', added Mr. O'Dwyer.

Meanwhile, Fáilte Ireland is exploring the possibility of rolling out the Greenbox ecotourism strategy to other parts of the country, including the Burren, and is funding the workshop, which will be held from 9.30am to 5pm in Vaughans, Kilfenora on May 20th.

The one-day event is free of charge and will include presentations from tourism agencies and the Greenbox, as well as workshop sessions with business people who have successfully attained Greenbox ecotourism certification and EU Flower accreditation.

Speaking ahead of the event, Mr. Paddy Mathews, Environment Unit, Fáilte Ireland, said, 'With the recent increase in the awareness among our visitors of environmental issues, ecotourism presents significant growth potential for Ireland. Fáilte Ireland is delighted to be involved with the Burren Connect Project, which it considers a model for sustainable tourism in a protected area.'

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