

Submission to the Joint Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media regarding the topic of developing Rural Tourism in Ireland by the Restaurants Association of Ireland

The UNWTO United Nations World Tourism Organisation understands Rural Tourism as "a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's experience is related to a wide range of products generally linked to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle / culture, angling and sightseeing.

The Teagasc Report June 2016 stated, Rural tourism is nothing new. Interest in countryside recreation grew in the nineteenth century as a reaction to the stress and squalor of the expanding industrial cities. Rural tourism in Ireland was initiated in the 1960s with the foundation of 'The Irish Farmhouse Association' a national organisation for B&Bs on farms. The last 40 years have seen a growth in rural tourism as urban populations are increasingly seeking leisure and relaxation in the countryside. Rural areas around the world are offering opportunities ranging from traditional countryside activities, walking, mountaineering, cycling, horse riding, angling, bird watching and foraging, to the increasingly popular watersports of kayaking and canoeing. Rural areas are endowed with the required natural resources and quiet picturesque settings necessary to enable tourists to experience tranquillity and a slower pace of life, as an alternative to the perceived pressures and constraints of urban life. While rural tourism is not the only answer to overcoming the complex and deep-rooted problems of rural areas, it will provide at least one option amongst others, for rural survival. Starting your own rural tourism enterprise is undoubtedly a challenge and should never be entered into lightly or without due consideration. With a feasible idea, effective planning and strong determination on your behalf, you can and will succeed.

In order to meet these objectives it has been recommended by experts that;

- **Consideration should be given to the expansion/ alteration of the Results-Based Environment-Agri Pilot Project (REAP)** to encourage landowners to provide access to the countryside for the purpose of facilitating tourism activities in rural areas.

At a minimum it is recommended that:

- Farmers should not be at a disadvantage under these schemes for facilitating recreational activities on their lands and any revised scheme should seek to encourage farmers to proactively participate and facilitate access for tourism and recreation, and that some form of compensation could be provided for this.
- The LEADER Programme should continue to develop and support tourism activities and services. To date, Fáilte Ireland has been restricted in providing matched funding for projects with LEADER companies. A change in this approach would be welcomed to allow key projects to be aligned and existing scarce resources to be leveraged for maximum impact.
- Rural tourism should also seek to maximise potential benefits from food tourism. Food has a particularly important role in this modern economy, particularly in the development of tourism services. Food tourism is about the range of 'food experiences' available for visitors which forms a vital part of the value network linking local food producers, communities and cultural and tourism entrepreneurs. Growth opportunities in this area can be maximised by expanding the number and variety of authentic, high quality food experiences that are easily accessed by the visitor, for

example but not limited to Farms open to visitors; Producers with visitor facilities; Demonstrations of traditional skills/authentic techniques such as smoking, cheese making etc.; and Museums/exhibitions that link the agriculture and food heritage of a region.

- All possible funding streams should consider support packages to stimulate small business start-ups, develop business clusters and grow networks of local guides and operators. This may include financial and mentoring supports as well as bespoke training.

- The importance of supporting the communities to create and build digital strategies will need to be addressed. In realising the full potential of coastal tourism, it is necessary to identify and develop ambitious projects of scale. The 'Wild Atlantic Way' is an innovative project and designed to highlight Ireland's unique geographical positioning along the Atlantic Ocean, and to use this ocean theme as a vehicle to allow tourists understand how the sea shaped our coastal communities, our lifestyle and our traditions. The project has been in development since early 2012 and involves the creation of a themed and integrated driving route along the Atlantic coast of Ireland from Donegal to West Cork. The route is designed to comprise a central spine with a series of loops and spurs off it which encourages tourists to explore all 218 that the west coast has to offer. It will showcase the best scenery and attractions for visitors with improved on-road infrastructure such as improved viewing points or 'Discovery Points' with better interpretation. The central objective of the project is to develop a driving route that is of sufficient scale and singularity to stand out internationally so that in time, the 'Wild Atlantic Way' will achieve a recognition and prominence similar

to a small group of other internationally known driving routes, such as the Great Ocean Road in Australia or the Garden Route in South Africa. The planned outcomes are greater international visitor numbers to the west of Ireland, longer dwell time in towns and villages along the coast and increased visitor spend. The final 2,500km route was recently decided following a comprehensive public consultation process. The route includes 159 strategically placed "Discovery Points" which are designed to allow tourists to stop and learn about the location, understand the points of geographic, historical, or cultural interest, and hopefully decide to stay a little longer in the area and explore what it has to offer. The response to the project so far has been encouraging. Developing routes is an important part of ensuring Ireland is able to provide the leisure tourist with a memorable experience. Work continues on the development of this initiative, and in this regard agencies have claimed that they will continue to work closely with each of the Local Authorities along the West Coast, as well as with the Leader Companies, Údarasna Gaeltachta and the Western Development Commission. A number of recent projects east of the Shannon have also been developed in recent years with the objective of ensuring that tourism plays a vital role in the rural economy. In particular, the rejuvenation of the Boyne Valley Drive is an example of such initiatives. In their planning, these projects have utilised the characteristics of successful rural tourism destinations in that they are destination focussed, contain urban links, are centred around trade networking and clustering, and include elements of entrepreneurship and the utilisation of local champions. Another recommendation from an academic point of view states that rural tourism needs to be recognised by tourism agencies as a central component of tourism in Ireland. Many methods of support are in place already for businesses (e.g. funding through Fáilte Ireland, LEADER, Commission for European Bankers, inclusion in

promotion by Fáilte Ireland, training through various agencies) but a policy for rural tourism is lacking and weakens the visibility of the sector for would-be tourists (O'Connor and Dunne, 2009). More generally, rural tourism needs to be recognised as a form of 'countryside capital' (Garrod et al., 2006). Tourism agencies, other relevant public bodies (local authorities, National Parks and Wildlife Service) and tourism providers need to work together to maintain the quality of tourism infrastructure and products in the countryside.

Local tourism providers and the public more generally also have roles to play: • Planning regulations need to be applied strictly to protect the natural and the built environment and complied with;

- Standards of accommodation need to be maintained at a high level, as does food quality;

- A high quality of service and a welcoming attitude towards tourists are essential, if they are to return and recommend a premises or area to others. Providing rural tourism services needs to be recognised as a profession with particular standards, whether operating on a full time or a part time basis. Fragmentation remains a problem in Irish rural tourism. Methods of overcoming fragmentation are desirable (in addition to a policy framework for rural tourism) (Cawley and Gillmor, 2008b):

- Greater integration between 'honeypot' towns and their hinterlands (the proposed loop touring routes off the Wild Atlantic Way may help in this regard along the west coast) (see Saxena et al., 2007 for discussion of integrated rural tourism as a concept);

- The Regional Nature Park in France, which incorporates the range of stakeholders in a particular area in tourism-related development, is an interesting model for integrating pertinent stakeholders (Cawley et al., 2007);
- Continued investment in tourism and hospitality related training and education. There is a well-established record among the Institutes of Technology and ETB Further Education courses in this regard which can be expanded.
- The creation of a National Steering Group for the Development of Rural Tourism should be creating with overarching responsibility for national rural tourism policy. We believe this should have Government Departments, State Agencies responsible for Tourism and Agriculture, Farming Representatives and Hospitality Trade Bodies.
- The creation of a dedicated centre of excellence and research for Rural Tourism in Ireland. This should be a partnership approach between Teagasc, Failte Ireland and the Education Sector
- The Creation of a Rural Tourism Brand of Ireland for the purpose of marketing Ireland as a Global Leader in Rural Tourism.
- The Creation of a Year of Rural Tourism - Similar to the “Gathering” in 2013 , A Year of Rural Tourism which would encompass festivals, food and rural tourism would showcase Ireland internationally as a destination for world-class experience in terms of rural tourism.

Ends – November 2022