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Rural Tourism and Cultural Identity in the West of Ireland

Anne Byrne, Ricca Edmondson and Kathleen Fahy

The tourists who drive among the smouldering hills and glittering bog lakes of Connemara are the subject of some contention among official and semi-official participants in the tourist scene. Though extracting money from these visitors is the basic objective of the tourist industry, the questions of how this should be done and what effects it can be expected to have are by no means simply answered. The background to this article is the contrast between a straightforward market-driven approach to tourism — tourism is simply about effective selling — and a more subtle form of ‘soft’ or ‘rural’ tourism. Asking how ‘Connemara’ has been presented to visitors in the past and in the present, we shall see that ‘rural’ tourism seems consonant with the ways Connemara has been perceived in the past and is thought of as presenting less destruction to the area than other forms of exposure to the industry. Moreover, when we ask who are the tourists who visit Connemara and what types of facility they favour, there is some evidence that they feel at home with a sophisticatedly gentle but at the same time competent approach — to the landscape and its contents.

But what evidence is there to suggest that ‘rural tourism’ is what the inhabitants of Connemara can easily provide? The economic consequences of tourism have been presented as a panacea for the problems of people who dwell in remote rural areas. Is it likely, in fact, that tourism will
provide solutions to the economic problems of a marginal region such as Connemara? Is rural tourism especially promising in this respect? It is women in particular who often bear the brunt of the interaction between visitors and hosts, as well as of trying to manage households on low incomes; what are the prospects for the poorest women in Connemara of escape by tourism? Lastly, how can we expect a tourism which concentrates on the 'natural' and the 'authentic' to affect the more vulnerable sections of communities in areas such as this? Are local people really well placed to sell the sort of authenticity to tourists want to buy?

Although we support a cautious development of rural tourism, in this paper we stress the fact that even this form of tourism is not a straightforward path which leaves communities untouched. It is not without social and political as well as economic implications and these need to be weighed openly rather than obscured. Government plans and reports have selected tourism as a major axis of economic development because of its potential for ‘substantial and sustainable job creation’ (see article by Deegan and Dineen in this volume). The Operational Programme for Tourism, for example, is ‘designed to prepare the tourism sector to compete successfully in the internal and certain external markets and to help stimulate economic growth needed to reduce unemployment and to raise per capita income towards average Community levels’.

Within the framework of this optimistic scenario, it is sometimes asserted that a particular type of tourism — ‘soft’ or ‘rural’ tourism — can provide the best of both worlds, bringing economic advance without the deprivations associated with earlier forms of mass tourism. According to Bernard Lane,

> Soft tourism is generally seen as being holistic in its approach, value rather than profit conscious, socially and environmentally considerate and cautious, relying on small and slow developments by local interests. Farm economies are strengthened and retained rather than replaced. Existing buildings are re-used rather than being replaced by new buildings. ‘Low tech’, low rise, car-free concepts are favoured. New kinds of experiences are sought — these visitors spend time on repeat visits to an area, looking for ‘experiences’ rather than ‘sights’, seeking memories, recreation and new insights rather than postcards, souvenirs, and excitement. Sunshine is not important — but heritage, in all its forms, is.

In contrast to the view that rural tourism is necessarily non-intrusive, we examine some of the types of change rural tourism can be expected to bring, especially as they affect the poorer and most powerless sections of the community — many of them women. We argue that if rural tourism is to bring genuine progress, it must be associated with a much more proactive and community-oriented approach than is evident at present.

In this chapter, then, we shall trace the following points:

1. Tourism is promised as a panacea for the socioeconomic problems of places such as Connemara. This is seen as a development issue. In this context, rural tourism is seen as (a) the economically most effective form of tourist development and (b) the form of tourism most effective in preserving cultural identity. We shall pursue each of these themes here.

2. Even though we support many of the objectives of rural tourism, we stress that the issues involved are more complex than many proponents of rural tourism make clear. It is not obvious that economic benefits will automatically ensue from the enterprise for the population as a whole; it is not clear exactly whose cultural identity is being projected or preserved.

3. As far as cultural identity is concerned, we show that the ‘identity’ which is projected is always affected by sociopolitical factors deriving from the observer’s needs as well as from characteristics of the area in question. This is demonstrated by the history of the changing perceptions of visitors to Connemara (see article by Nash in this volume). Most of these images are not centrally concerned with the identity of the groups who are the focus of rural development.

4. In terms of the general strategy of rural development and the socioeconomic structure of the area, there is one section of the population in particular whose predicament is intended to be improved. This section consists of lower income households, where we single out the predicament of women. There is reason to doubt that a market-oriented, individualistic approach to rural tourism will assist marginalised groups in general and women in particular.

5. We have evidence to show that visitors to Connemara are looking for experiences compatible with the idea of rural tourism. However, the provision of these experiences is typically predicated on skills and possessions which those involved in rural tourism cannot be expected to acquire without assistance. That is, participation in rural tourism in fact demands cultural changes of many kinds from the operators concerned.

6. There are also reasons in principle for denying that rural tourism can ever leave cultural identities just as they were. This need not deter us from supporting rural tourism; but it is not as non-intrusive and non-political as it is claimed to be.

7. All these reasons lead us to conclude that the more vulnerable sections of the population will only benefit from a community-oriented, holistic approach to rural tourism. A holistic approach is one which is not oriented exclusively to individuals’ economic gain, but which places value on all aspects of the social development of the local community. In order for holistic development to occur, statutory, voluntary and private interests must embrace such an approach and must recognise that it will inevitably bring with it cultural as well as economic change.

**Connemara as Visited: Romantic ‘Authenticity’**

Very many of the images which have been projected of Connemara in the past have been ‘romantic’. A central theme has been the expectation that
this outlying region of lakes and hills can somehow provide the visitor with insight into a natural and unspoilt form of existence, and can demonstrate a different way of living life. This is just what rural tourism celebrates. Writers such as Murphy and Wahab opine firmly that

The genuine environment always attracts more tourists than the imitation... the creation of ‘artificial’ environments, similar to that which the tourists have at home, does not promote tourism in the long term. Thus a destination area would be well advised to retain those elements which make it distinctive, and to present its cultural heritage in a way that would be both meaningful for themselves and convenient for the visitor.5

Here we shall briefly review some images of Connemara to show that the concept of the ‘natural’ is unlikely to have the same meaning for indigenous inhabitants as for visitors. ‘Connemara’ as perceived from one social vantage point or another is a construct which is assembled out of different components, depending partly on the requirements of the viewer.6 Connemara has been seen as a magical peripheral area, a paradigmatic contrast to urbanised industrial life, or else as the repository of intrinsic Irishness; no version of these conceptions issues simply from features of the area alone, and all are shaped in part by the origins and predicaments of the groups which evolve them. Some persist to the present day, as in the characterisation of West County Galway in particular by O’Dowd and Lawlor as ‘the heart of the nation’, or ‘the heart of a metaphorical kneeling monk who is Ireland’.7 There is not, then, just one easily describable Connemara which can be presented to the visitor as part of a rural tourism package. Moreover, the different Connemaras perceived by visitors have different implications for their effects on the lives of the inhabitants of this geographical area. And, not least, there are some projections of Connemara as a haven for rural tourists which not all operators can convey unassisted.

Although Connemara has repeatedly been experienced as ‘authentic’, there is a long history of accounts which provide a composite and contested set of versions of this authenticity. The cultural and political developments of the Irish Revival, for example, affected views of the region by perceiving it as a physical location for unpolluted Irishness. It was a version of this ideal which made Pádraig Pearse choose his cottage in Ros Muc. Like the American Wild West, Luke Gibbons points out, Aran and the West of Ireland have been seen as a ‘last frontier’, a place of escape from ‘the forces of centralisation’ which at the same time point up true values of Irish life. As for the question of what these true values are, where Synge saw in the West an exalted and sensuous lawlessness, Canon Sheehan preferred to concentrate on the peasant’s moral virtues, ‘comfort without wealth, perfect physical health without passion, love without desire’, in

short, ‘clean bodies, keen minds, pure hearts’.8 The fact that it is possible for Synge and Sheehan to consider themselves observers of the same place but to produce such startlingly variant accounts of its culture warns us not to accept at face value any particular version of what Connemara ‘is’.

Views of Connemara in the nineteenth century had centred on the contrast between the magnificence of the scenery of North Connemara and the smallness of human beings — a contrast encapsulated in the illustrations of W.H. Bartlett.9 These are largely in tune with the later descriptions written in 1875 by the Catholic convert John Yates. He stresses the fact that the scenery is ‘the grandest and yet perhaps the wildest and loneliest in the whole of Ireland’. He writes of the ‘storm grandeur’ of the Twelve Pins with its views of

nature in some of her most rugged aspects — rugged, but toned down at the bases of the eternal hills with charming glimpses of rivers, streams, loughs, and islands crowded with the very brightest of green foliage, but never for a moment missing the sensation of loneliness, of want of life, of the solitary which the hermits and sages of old so loved to dwell in.10

Where the nineteenth-century visitor had praised the grandiose aspects of nature, the early twentieth-century enthusiast treasured its solitude. Praeger finds ‘something infinitely satisfying about those wide treeless, houseless undulations, clothed with heather and Purple Moor Grass, so filled with lakes and so intersected by the arms of the Atlantic that water entangled in a network of land becomes imperceptibly land entangled in a network of water ...’.11

Visitors like this would nowadays be prized by proponents of rural tourism. Bartlett, Yates and Praeger idealise in the scenery of North Connemara all that is opposite to metropolitan life. Whether or not this perception coincides with the views of the inhabitants, travellers such as these would want it possible to leave the region undisturbed.

The nineteenth century also fostered a different type of tourist — one whose activities would also be compatible with the ideals of rural tourism today. The visitors, many of them English, who visited North Connemara for fishing, played a large role in opening up the area to a little more prosperity — but they also exerted considerable cultural influence on the region. To this day the natives of the North of the region are perceived by the inhabitants of South Connemara, whose landscape is less romantic and more inaccessible, as having adopted anglicised cultural expectations. It is still the case that North Connemara interior decors, exhibited for example in public house furnishing, are eloquent of ‘country comfort’ to an extent absent in much of South Connemara. The ‘rural tourism’ of a century ago has made lasting changes in local culture.

Women visitors to Connemara in the late nineteenth century included
Somerville and Ross and Jane Barlow, both Through Connemara in a Governess Cart (1893) and Barlow's sardonically titled Irish Idylls (1893) treat Connemara in a way which—despite the affectionate irony of Somerville and Ross—emphasise its emotional accessibility to those prepared to de glamorise it. In view of the fact that virtually every other presentation of Connemara had in some way emphasised its wild, exotic or even barbaric qualities (both these texts appeared little more than a decade after the Maamtrasna murders), these authors' rejections of romanticisation take on not only originality but, also particularly in Barlow's case, some political significance.

Somerville and Ross write of trying to push through the roads of Tu lly on market day, and being scarcely able to penetrate the crowds (apart from some holiday cottages, much of this area is virtually deserted today); they describe the daily difficulties of getting on with cattle, dogs and donkeys. Barlow shows intense solidarity with the perennial problems of life in a region which, despite its great beauty, is harsh to those who live in it all the year round. She chronicles the unending strategies required from householders, women in particular, attempting to survive with their families in conditions of such poverty that a wooden floor was a thing unheard of. Far from presenting them as strangers to herself or her readers she identifies with her subjects, writing of what 'we' do to get by and how 'we' support each other in quotidian struggles to secure continuing life in the face of almost insurmountable obstacles. Her account of Connemara is politically pointed in that its effect is to demystify accepted attitudes to the area. In doing so, she points to hardships of rural living which are not very amenable for conversion into tourist objects—though many of these deprivations persist to the present day.

Tourism as a 'Development Panacea': Rural Development and Tourism

Rural development comprises a set of strategies intended to improve the well-being of those who not only live in rural areas but also depend on the rural environment to provide them with a livelihood. Attention to rural development has been provoked by the increasing 'flight from the land' throughout rural Europe, where smallholders can no longer eke a sustainable living from traditional farm enterprises and agricultural diversification is limited. While until recently there have been few local initiatives, rural interventions on a national and EC level have been apparent since the publication of the Future of Rural Europe by the EC in 1988. These include projects funded by the third EC anti-poverty programme, one of which is located in North-West Connemara. Such rural development programmes are described as attempts to develop alternatives in rural communities so that people can continue to live in rural areas and sustain a living from the natural resources at their disposal.

Rural development, as most generally understood, involves an attempt to improve the economic, social and cultural wellbeing of those who live in rural areas as well as providing infrastructural support. Tackling poverty is often an essential goal in development strategies, as poverty is conceived to be a result of the unequal distribution of economic, political and social power structures. Why then does economic development alone seem to be a priority in many rural initiatives that are taking place? While the state-funded Combat Poverty Agency recognises that building a strong, local economic base is the best antidote to unemployment in rural areas, the agency also recognises that there is much other ground work to be done before such a strategy can be successful. This work includes building a network of community groups, training community leaders, encouraging local participation in activities, fostering good relations among various partners and forging links between the statutory, business and voluntary sectors. The third EC anti-poverty programme is designed to bring together local communities with all the agencies which have the resources and power to tackle the different aspects of poverty and social exclusion. This pooling of resources and expertise is intended to lead to a much more intensive, co-ordinated and multi-disciplinary assault on poverty.

But who benefits from these programmes? What are the assumptions underpinning the strategies adopted to improve the quality of rural life? Examination of the allocation of funds under the LEADER programme, for instance, indicates that, since recipients were obliged to provide matching funds, only those with significant resources could benefit under the scheme. Often, people with no other common purpose join together simply to raise funds. This is an example of resource-led rather than development-led response. This calls into question the strategy of helping those who are better off in preference to those who are most disadvantaged in the community. Are the poor being included in development, economic or otherwise?

Many tourism initiatives represent only economic development; these do not include socio-cultural development in a wider sense. Despite good aspirations, in concrete cases economic development is a priority. Nonetheless, there is a plethora of interest groups, community groups, private enterprise associations and state agencies committed in principle to the management and development of rural tourism in Ireland. These include such established organisations as the Irish Countrywomen's Association, Fáilte Tuisithe, Irish Farmhouse Holidays, the Irish Farmers' Association and newer organisations such as the National Rural Tourism Co-operative, together with state agencies such as Bord Fáilte, Teagasc, FAS, the Office of Public Works and voluntary associations of locally based tourism groups.
Many of these groups are not in a position to market as well as to develop tourism, to analyse the more subtle consequences of rural tourism, or to establish exactly what is the nature of the tourism product. In very recent times Bord Fáilte has begun to evince an interest in countryside tourism; it provides a range of services to tourists which include information and advice about touring, accommodation, dining and leisure pursuits. More importantly for our work, as far the operator is concerned Bord Fáilte also has a referral system for approved accommodation listed in a handbook. Accommodation which has been 'Bord Fáilte approved' must meet certain standards of space, hygiene, bathroom facilities and room numbers. Bord Fáilte-approved guest houses have a higher publicity profile than non-approved houses. While the referral system may be advantageous to many operators, there is an unknown number of non-approved guest houses and self-catering units operating in every region. Bord Fáilte claims that non-approved facilities predominate in many rural areas, particularly North-West Connemara.

Rural tourism is also being pursued by a number of governmental and voluntary agencies as a strategy to cope with the increasing economic crisis on small farms and the lack of agricultural development opportunities for small holders. Teagasc (the Farm Research and Development Agency), FAS (the Development and Training Agency) and other agencies have begun to respond to the problems associated with developing tourism in marginal regions. In North-West Connemara, FORUM, sponsored by the third EC anti-poverty programme, represents one such development agency which is made up of statutory, voluntary, community and private interests devoted to developing locally based activities to improve the lives of the most disadvantaged in the region. With the support of Teagasc, FORUM ran an eight-week tourism course which attracted a good deal of interest from local participants, a majority of whom were women.

Against this background, the position of rural women has received some consideration in recent times. It is often stated that women living in marginal agricultural communities are affected by a combination of factors which has led to the reduction of their farm role and limited their capacity to create alternatives to improve the quality of their lives. These factors, identified as 'problems', are variously listed as physical isolation from others, continual societal expectations to be the prime caregiver, no opportunity for employment off the farm, lack of income, lack of representation in decision-making bodies at community level and little or no opportunity for further training or adult education. Some writers are enthusiastic about the potential of rural tourism for alleviating these problems, especially for women. Not only do visitors bring additional income to rural areas, but it is claimed by Lane that real friendships are made between visitor and host, breaking down the isolation of rural women and offering new ideas and challenges to the traditional roles of women in rural society. Undoubtedly tourism creates part-time work opportunities for some rural women and is enthusiastically embraced by Lane, who advises that 'economic success brings confidence and an independent identity for many women: this new confidence may bring further developments into other business fields later'.

In North-West Connemara there are a number of tourism groups in operation, some of which have been in existence for a number of years, others more recently established. These groups are composed of local people actively involved in the tourist industry and have a number of diverse objectives which include the improvement and promotion of tourism resources and facilities in local areas and increasing employment. Activities range from producing information brochures, advertising accommodation in both 'approved' and 'unapproved' lodgings, setting up beach and litter patrols, becoming involved in tidy towns competitions, staffing tourist information points and lobbying the county council to improve local roads, water and sewage systems. We may note, however, that many of these activities are directly beneficial to individual entrepreneurs, with only indirect benefits to the community. It is also questionable whether these groups identify with the region as a whole or whether they are more concerned with promoting their own interests within each locality. Quinn and Keane have shown that 'traditional rivalry between parishes' was an impediment to development of a number of agri-tourism pilot projects. While there is a surge in interest in tourism in rural areas, then, it is not yet clear in how much detail long-term consequences for lower-income households or for local cultural identity have been taken into account.

Low-income Households and Tourism

A SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE OF THE AREA

We have indicated a little of the history of different perceptions of Connemara's cultural identity, each of which separates out for emphasis those features which are most salient to the visitor — various searches for quintessential Irishness, the yearning to escape the grind of the industrial world, the provision of comfortable fishing, or the negotiation of everyday life by women. How can Connemara be described in the 1990s? In order to describe the daily life of the indigenous inhabitant, we draw on the findings of a detailed baseline study of the region carried out under the aegis of FORUM, the third EC anti-poverty programme.

North-West Connemara spans a large area of territory, with local populations concentrated around Clifden, the main town, and Renvyle, a coastal area. There are vast tracts of mountain and hinterland which are largely depopulated. According to the 1986 census of the population, there were 7,061 persons (3,418 females and 3,643 males) living in 2,026
households. The population has decreased by half in the period between 1926 and 1986 and there are strong indications that the main cause of population loss is migration. From the census data it can also be seen that the area has far fewer couples with children than the national average, and far more childless couples, or couples with adult children still living as a part of the household. Households of couples with young or school-age children comprise 37 per cent of households — as compared to 50 per cent of households in Ireland as a whole. The census data also shows that there are differences between districts — some areas have the highest proportions of families with young children, while other districts have high proportions of adult children living at home. There is also a higher proportion of elderly people in the area than the national average and in some districts there are four to five times the national average of elderly men living alone. As will become clear below, the presence of children in a household seems to be a major impetus to participation in tourism among lower-income households.

The majority of people are dependent on agriculture as their main form of livelihood, but the largely poor quality of farm land in North-West Connemara only supports the raising of drystock cattle and sheep. Agriculture in North-West Connemara is a marginal and declining activity, many holdings consisting of thirty acres or less. Three-quarters of the land in the region is held in commonage and is not suitable for traditional agricultural development. Most smallholders survive through dependence on sheep and cattle headdress payments, social welfare monies and sporadic income from farm activity. It is estimated by local agricultural advisors working in the region that state transfers account for 70 per cent of farm income. Findings from the baseline study carried out in the area indicate that nearly three-quarters of all farmers are dependent on social welfare payments as their main source of income.

Those who are not full-time farmers are dependent on manual labour and services for employment. There are few white-collar positions available in the region. The unemployment rate is also markedly higher than in Ireland as a whole. In a rural economy such as that in North-West Connemara, however, it is often difficult to classify people as being either 'employed' or 'unemployed'. Most people adopt a wide range of economic strategies designed to make ends meet. These include waged work, small-scale farming and fishing, bed and breakfasts and other small-scale businesses. Income sources thus include wages, social welfare payments, headdress payments, and profits from trade. What is evident from the analysis of occupational structure in the region is the extreme lack of economic diversity, not only in agriculture but in all other enterprises as well. This is typical of many rural areas throughout the Republic of Ireland and is at the core of the challenge of socioeconomic development in such regions.

In an analysis of the 1986 census data, indicators of deprivation were identified for the region as a whole. These included an 'ageing' factor, an 'economic deprivation' factor, and an 'isolation' factor. The ageing factor links an ageing population with small farm size, economic deprivation is linked with high rates of unemployment and adult population loss, while the isolation factor links poor access to cars with areas in which there are large numbers of elderly people living alone. This analysis showed that on every key variable, the study region was in a much worse position than the rest of Ireland. However, it is evident that there are also pockets of prosperity and relative wealth, in which people have taken advantage of the essential commercial enterprises and services required in any area. This is the context in which tourism development is taking place.

To assess the potential for development in this community and to find out the impact of poor living conditions on people's lives, 121 heads of low-income households were interviewed in the summer of 1990. The main findings are further indicators of the extent of disadvantage in the region and highlight the many areas in which development needs to take place. Some of the general findings have been extracted from the baseline study and are summarised in brief below.

**Housing, transport, and infrastructure**

The housing stock of the area contains quite a large volume of sub-standard privately-owned accommodation and lacks many basic amenities that most people have taken for granted in the late twentieth century. Almost half of all households stated that extensive repair work needed to be carried out to their accommodation.

There are many complaints about the transport service in the area with only one-fifth of households using the service on a regular basis. People are forced to rely on the expensive option of owning and running cars on poorly maintained roads. Given the isolation of many people from services, it is significant that almost one third of households do not own a car and are dependent on the public transport system. Poor infrastructure is identified by the population as one of the major impediments to improving the quality of life in the area.

**Education**

In households with primary school children, one in three stated that one or more children have reading, writing or learning difficulties. Most have no access to special attention at school to help them overcome this learning disadvantage.

In addition to learning difficulties, there is a very high rate of early-school leaving, particularly among boys, while in the past twelve years only 12 per cent of students in North-West Connemara have transferred to a third level course.
The lack of relevance of the education system to local employment opportunities is marked and the need to earn an income is cited as one of the main reasons why young people leave school early.

There has been little provision in the area for adult or continuing education which would enable adults to retrain and equip themselves to face new economic circumstances.

Employment and social welfare
A social welfare system based on means tests can thwart people’s attempts to break out of the poverty trap. Many people do not engage in activities or enterprises that could make their lives more economically secure for fear of losing social welfare benefits.

One third of all households have an unemployed main earner and most of these are households with children. Families in these circumstances tend to have more than four children, and many are experiencing severe financial problems.

While the provision of jobs is perceived by local people as a solution to unemployment, large industries are not likely to locate in North-West Connemara due to poor infrastructure and the lack of a skilled, trained industrial workforce.

Many respondents feel that the development of tourism is a key activity which can supplement household income or offer new sources of employment in the area. A few women are contributing substantially to household income by running a bed and breakfast business from the family home. This is an entry point for some local women to the tourism enterprise but needs to be further explored to include more low-income households.

Ways to increase the involvement of low-income households in the tourist industry need to be considered, if tourism and the expansion of leisure facilities are used as devices to support local economic development.

Involvement in local activities
There is a high level of involvement by households — over half — in community activities and events. However, only a very few involve themselves in administration or fundraising activities. Many women have little access to transport and are responsible for caring for others, and are thus impeded from becoming further involved.

There is a lack of leisure and meeting facilities for young people. Most organisations are for older people and for men rather than women.

Poverty
More households are dependent on unemployment payments than on any other source as their main income. Level of payments are low and many families are living a marginal lifestyle. Average weekly income is below the recommended adult minimum of £60.

Most households rely on child benefit payments to supplement other income sources. This money is used to pay bills, buy food and household items.

While almost half of all households are currently in debt, one-fifth have fallen behind with repayments. Most households say that they are worse off now than they were five years ago. One-fifth say that they have had to borrow or seek credit from friends, family and the local shop to provide for day-to-day needs.

Almost a quarter of the people here consider that they are poor. Most of these are dependent on social welfare with large families. However, the remainder also said that they were barely making ends meet. Any crisis or emergency requiring a financial outlay would put many of these families in debt.

Most of the women interviewed are fulfilling traditional roles in the home, doing domestic work, caring for children and elderly dependents. A few are engaged in farming activities, while others have part-time employment in the services sector and tourism industry. It is women who bear most of the daily burden of trying to manage on low incomes; they described specific problems in relation to loneliness, transport difficulties, poor health, inability to generate income, unemployment, lack of support with child care, and lack of participation in the wider community in which they lived. Younger women are inclined to emigrate on leaving school rather than stay in the area. Few wish to lead the same lives as their mothers.

There is scant opportunity for women to generate additional income or to engage in small business activities. The few who have managed to set up small businesses did so from the family home with the help of family members. But overall women have little access to income of their own and a few are forced to rely on weekly assistance from the community welfare officer or local charity organisations.

It seems clearly unreasonable to expect many people in this economic predicament to develop tourist enterprises unaided. It may be therefore that purely market-led tourism, whether it is a ‘rural’ version of tourism or not, excludes from participation those who lack resources, both material and cultural. Nonetheless, in a region in which pluri-activity is the dominant survival strategy, a small number of lower-income households have managed to enter this area, and we shall look at these families next.

LOW-INCOME HOUSEHOLDS IN TOURISM

We now turn to that group of low-income households which are minimally, at least, involved in tourism. In what ways are they characteristic or uncharacteristic of rural low-income households? It would seem unlikely that
low-income households facing economic difficulties and hardship would have the capacity or resources to become directly involved in tourism. Involvement can take place at many levels, from participation through the service sector in the hotel and restaurant industry, to owning and operating an enterprise such as a bed and breakfast business or craftshop. The sample described in the baseline study provides an opportunity to examine the capacity of low-income households to benefit from tourism in rural areas. What is the level of involvement? Are there certain types of households which participate directly in the tourism business? What are the characteristics of such households? How are they different from those who are not involved? What are the characteristics of households where members are employed in the service end of the tourism industry? Do such households have the capacity to develop small business activity and thus become more directly involved in tourism?

Of the 121 households examined in the baseline study, twenty-one are involved in the tourism sector. Of these, members of thirteen households are associated with the hotel industry, working as waitresses, cleaners, kitchen assistants, receptionists and chefs. Eleven married women and two married men represent these households. (The wives of the two men run their own bed and breakfast businesses.) All of these jobs are held on a part-time seasonal basis. While chefs and receptionists are comparatively well paid, the average take-home pay for a cleaner is about £2.30 per hour. One additional household moves out of the family home into temporary accommodation in order to rent their home to tourists for the summer period, while another has chalets to let. The remaining eight households have ventured to set up their own businesses in the form of bed and breakfast enterprises.

It is to this latter group that we shall pay particular attention, and though the numbers are small, they are engaged in a development which is not normally associated with low-income households with scarce resources and little spare capital. In addition, while the service sector does provide part-time opportunities for households to earn much needed additional income during the tourist season, it is also a sector which is associated with poor working conditions, long hours and low rates of pay. It is difficult to assess whether this level of participation in the tourism industry is a precursor to further entrepreneurial development or whether it merely provides opportunities for some members of low-income households to engage in labour-intensive activity for minimal returns. Working as a waitress during the summer months does provide an injection of cash into a household short of capital. Whether it is an effective ingredient required to assist other members to set up their own business, though, is highly debatable. It seems more realistic to assume that additional income earned in this manner is a haphazard benefit of tourism. Working part-time in the service sector is subject to the whim of seasonal variations, and is at best exploitative, especially for women. By examining the characteristics of the eight households whose members have managed to generate their own income and thus alleviate some of the stress of not having enough to maintain themselves, we shall attempt to provide some insights into the arguments highlighted above. As the sub-sample is small, we cannot claim representativeness, but we can indicate trends and patterns which differentiate these particular households from their neighbours.

The eight households are based in the Roundstone, Clifden and Renvyle regions, which are arguably the most visited areas of North-West Connemara. Being on the tourist route is an obvious asset when trying to set up a tourist-related business. The composition of all households in the larger sample is described in Table 11.1 below, and it is notable that only two types of low-income households participated in the bed and breakfast enterprise. These were two households consisting of retired couples with no children or dependants living at home and six households consisting of younger couples with children. The number of children ranged from six to two, with an age range of 3-21 years. Six of the women and men are under 45 years of age, with the remainder over 60 years old.

What other characteristics have these households? Four own their properties outright, while the other four have mortgages to repay. The retired couples are included in the former category, which is more typical of the pattern of ownership in the region. Within the larger sample of 121 households, those with mortgages represent only 17 per cent of the total. Owning one’s own home would also seem to be another important factor contributing to the success of the bed and breakfast enterprise. When we look at those households who are employees of hotels and shops during the tourist season, most live in either rented accommodation or county council housing.

All of the sub-sample are happy with their accommodation and in

Table 11.1 Structure of Household Sample (N=121)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Person living alone</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple living alone</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple with children</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple/children and others</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lone parent/children/other</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other related adults</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

many instances the building has been refurbished or newly furnished in anticipation of the forthcoming tourist season. This differentiates them from the larger sample, in which 31 per cent are not satisfied with the physical state of their homes, many of which are in need of extensive repair. Seven out of eight households own their own car but few are happy with the level of service and provision of public transport.

As regards educational qualifications, people in six households had advanced training prior to setting up their own business. This training included nursing, secretarial work and hotel work, most of which was acquired in England or the US; it was not usually specifically oriented to tourism. Within the overall sample, by contrast, few have had training beyond primary school level. Also, in terms of current occupations, both partners in each of the eight households are generating income. All of the women are in charge of the bed and breakfast operation, while their spouses are part-time salesmen, fishermen, mechanics, shopkeepers or chefs. It is notable that none of the spouses are involved in the hotel industry as cleaners, waiters or kitchen assistants. However, while five of these households also receive social welfare payments, two households receive old age pensions, two receive top-up payments in addition to income received from part-time work and one receives unemployment assistance for three months of the year. While the sub-sample are similar to the sample as a whole in having to engage in a number of activities in order to generate household income, they are exceptional in that in each case one of the heads of household, most typically the male, has a source of regular income from work as an employee or as self-employed. In the sample as a whole, out of 121 households one-third of the main household earners are unemployed, most of them for one year or more. It would seem that a regular source of earned income may be a prerequisite for poor households setting up their own business.

When we ask about the circumstances which motivated the women to turn their homes into guest houses, it appears that the retired couples sought an occupation and interest in retirement, but all others are motivated through financial necessity. Losing a job, no job opportunities, having to repay huge debts, and needing to raise capital to refurbish the family home are all cited as reasons for embarking on this venture.

All of the women are running the bed and breakfast business themselves, with the assistance of their husbands and family. None employs other people, all depend on family members to serve and assist at meal times, to tidy rooms, to do the laundry and to cook evening meals. Five of the households have been in the business for three years or less, while one woman has twelve years' experience. Most are very happy with the additional income earned from the enterprise, which ranges from £500 to £2,000 a month while the season lasts. The typical season extends from June to September, with July and August the busiest months.

We asked the women what skills they feel are important when setting up a business in their own homes. 'Good housekeeping skills', 'the ability to generate warmth and hospitality to guests', 'good hygiene', 'ability to keep on your toes at all times', 'having a sense of humour', and 'being able to cook' are listed as priorities. There is little mention of business-oriented skills such as marketing, developing new markets, balancing income and expenditure; rather, the emphasis is on points of contact between guest and operator. Plans to expand businesses are minimal, one or two women mentioned that they would like to build on extra rooms but cannot afford the cost; others are considering providing evening meals for guests. Most of the women suggested that if local entertainment and leisure facilities were improved, then visitors would remain for longer periods in the region, particularly in bad weather, which would in turn benefit their business. While there is a widespread perception that the development of tourism is the basis for the future survival of the region, many women are concentrating all of their energies on maintaining the businesses and consider the development of the tourist industry to be the responsibility of others. None of the eight households is registered with Bord Fáilte due, they say, to a combination of reasons which include the cost of registration and inspection, a fear that their premises would not meet the required standards, a wariness about having to pay income tax and a general fear of losing welfare and health benefits if they became 'official'.

In order to understand the barriers to development in rural areas, we need to be aware of the economic context in which people attempt to make ends meet. These eight households are in many respects the exceptions rather than the rule for low-income households. On the one hand, they demonstrate that participation in tourism can be achieved even from non-optimal starting points. On the other, they strongly suggest that, for those who do not have even the benefits of this group, participation in a new form of socioeconomic activity requires some type of community-based support. Without this, those whose economic situation is closest to entrepreneurship are likely to benefit from tourism to the exclusion of weaker sections of the society.

**Contemporary Tourists: Views and Expectations**

We have indicated reasons for distrusting a less than holistic approach to rural tourism; what reasons are there for believing that tourists require rural tourism at all? The information we have on tourists' preferences in Connemara suggests that such an approach would indeed be appropriate. In the summer of 1991, data was collected from 350 tourists passing through a number of villages in North Connemara. Over two-thirds of these were under the age of forty. Almost half were middle-class professionals,
and nearly one-fifth were students. Nearly three-quarters had cars with which to view the area; younger people used public transport, cycled or hitch-hiked. Sufficient numbers were staying in the area for a period of days to make it appear worthwhile to develop local amenities. We did notice, however, that those who stayed longest tended to stay with relatives. People who needed to seek accommodation tended to prefer bed and breakfasts if over twenty-five, and to camp or use hostels if younger.

In the main, people said they were satisfied with accommodation facilities, although 21 per cent of the sample, young Europeans in particular, felt that accommodation was expensive. Despite the fact that just over half of the respondents stated that eating facilities in the area were 'good', when asked to suggest improvements in what the area offered, the same facilities came in for considerable criticism. More home-produced goods, light meals, more various meals, including vegetarian fare, would all have been desirable.

The main activities engaged in by tourists were walking, touring, nature pursuits such as bird-watching or botany, and visiting islands and historic sites. Horse-riding, golf, and water sports were less popular — in 1991 July and much of August were wet — but fishing was undertaken by a considerable number. Many respondents said they wanted more access to outdoor sports; about half visited islands and historic sites but these, together with boat trips, were aspects of the area about which visitors knew least. Kylemore Abbey was thought of as 'the' historic site of the area, and knowledge of other sites was extremely limited. Bord Fáilte would like to see the development of similar sites. Most people had heard about North-West Connemara from friends or from guidebooks. Only 6 per cent had consulted a travel agent and only 2 per cent used Bord Fáilte; English visitors especially reported no information about the area from any travel agents. Europeans appeared to be the best users of information services and travel agents. A large number, 42 per cent of the visitors interviewed, stated that they had not seen any Irish tourist brochures for the region.

Many (60 per cent) had been to Connemara before, but of these most were Irish or English. Nearly three-quarters of the Europeans were on their first visit. When asked about their main reason for visiting the area, 90 per cent said it was primarily for the scenery and environment, especially mountains and lakes. At the same time, 25 per cent appreciated 'the people and relaxed atmosphere', walking, listening to traditional music, visiting pubs and dancing, as well as visiting relatives or friends. Visitors commented on this 'unspoiled area which lets us totally unwind' and commended 'the beautiful scenery' as well as 'the atmosphere, music, people in pubs', together with 'the serenity of the place and the laid-back attitude of locals'. These aspects of the area came well to the fore of more traditional, 'heritage'-based aspects, and in general people did not seem to expect extensive tourist facilities. Most interviewees, for example, did not wish for any improvements in the area of recreational facilities, either in the daytime or in the evening. The most dissatisfaction was expressed in relation to children and young people, for whom there was little provision, and there were also complaints about amplified music in pubs, inferior standards of service in hotels, restaurants and pubs, and about garishness apparent in such places as Clifden. Here, items such as loud speakers outside pubs and gaudy tourist shops were singled out for criticism in an especially busy August. These comments appear to signal the tastes of the typical rural tourism customer.

As far as basic amenities were concerned, over 50 per cent of visitors felt that road conditions were bad; potholes were ubiquitous, signposting inadequate, and the roads too narrow to walk along in safety. All these features could be improved within the ambit of rural tourism. Admittedly, 40 per cent complained about the weather. Families with children indicated that some provision for indoor activities would be gratefully received. Weather was, however, the reason — together with work commitments — why 65 per cent of respondents indicated that they would not visit Connemara in the off-season.

We have here an outline which appears highly indicative of possibilities for developing a 'soft' tourism in Connemara — even if not all operators are aware of this possibility at present. The visitors who felt that they would be able to return in the off-season tended to be Irish professionals aged between twenty-six and forty, who stayed in bed and breakfast accommodation or self-catering facilities (some of which, it is worth noting, are owned by local co-operatives). Over 60 per cent of this group claimed to be perfectly content with Connemara as it is; those who were not objected to the weather, the condition of the roads, and the lack of indoor facilities. They stressed repeatedly that any development of tourism in the region must be compatible with its great scenic and environmental importance. When asked for ideas about future development of the region, many visitors simply said, 'No development'.

This does not imply that the tourist industry in Connemara is already perfectly adjusted to rural tourism. It appears, in fact, that there is a gulf between the perspective of the visitor and the interests of some operators. Tourist brochures, moreover, are not widely read, and nor are they particularly informative or sensitive to what 'rural' tourists are likely to want to know. Such Bord Fáilte promotion as occurs does stress the natural beauties of the region and its pleasant atmosphere. 'The first time that you go to Ireland, you go for the beauty of the place. The second time you go for the people.' But while marketing strategies romanticise the landscape and the 'traditional' nature of Irish society, this does not necessarily translate into the day-to-day activities of operators in the region.
Rural Tourism and Rural Authenticity

In the past, tourism and its effects were often conceived in terms of the depredations caused by mass tourism and the cultural homogenisation this was assumed to bring. Tourism in itself was expected to destroy cultural identity. It can be maintained nowadays that the era of mass tourism is past and that tourism tends to be more fragmented and specialised. The visitors to the West of Ireland described above do seem to be looking either for ‘unspoilt’ scenery, or for particular activities, such as golfing or hillwalking, or for particular ways of life, which they would wish to see preserved. This does not mean, though, that rural tourism will not attack cultural identity. It is true that other agents of social homogenisation (television, for example, or fashions in domestic architecture) may be quicker and more potent bearers of change. But there are further threats to local authenticity which may be posed by the influx of large numbers of people unfamiliar with an area. These threats are subtle, and possibly unavoidable, however ‘soft’ the tourism involved. They are connected with the nature of tourists’ perceptions of places and societies, and with what happens when indigenous occupants try to persuade visitors that they are receiving an authentic environment. Tourists seeking ‘otherness’ may change the nature of the place they are visiting, and indigenous inhabitants are changed by participation in tourist-oriented communication (see article by O'Connor in this volume).

The Quest for ‘Liminality’ and Its Effects

Following the views of Turner, it has been suggested that the tourist, particularly the ‘soft’ tourist, is quintessentially in search of ‘liminal’ experiences, experiences which take him or her completely out of everyday existence into another, somehow revelatory, world. This appears to be consistent with many of the images of Connemara projected in the past two centuries, and with some of the implications of ‘rural’ tourism: the traveller is invited to escape the mundane or even corrupt quality of city life and exchange it for the purity of the countryside.

We suggest that the ‘liminal’ experiences associated with rural tourism are those in which the visitor to a different cultural world comes to experience the functioning of human life as exotic in a way which is not disconnected from his or her daily life but in some way casts light on it. Instead of feeling trapped in everyday sameness, the tourist can experience the fact that it is possible for the world to be different. In this new world, the tourist himself or herself feels transformed — though still needing the security of primitive comforts. Hence the emphasis of tourists on familiar arrangements for personal hygiene, causing homes which formerly had no bathroom suddenly to sport half a dozen, in the expectation of bed and breakfast visitors. Matters of hygiene seem to be too intimately bound up with what visitors feel essential in their own personalities for them to relinquish their bathrooms in new social circumstances. For people who know a local culture well, malfunctioning lavatories may not matter so much, as long as they are the only things out of order in an otherwise familiar world. For the visitor seeking liminal change, there is a greater subjective threat from the chaos involved in abandoning intimate habits.

Rural locations are now increasing in popularity among visitors and may be expected to continue to do so as the world becomes more urbanised. But there are several reasons why even those seeking exposure to new cultures will not be able to avoid altering them, however unintentionally. Some of the features which make the culture and atmosphere of one place different from those of another may well not be perceptible to its inhabitants, and therefore cannot be consciously preserved by them. For example, one highly salient, but little-analysed, distinguishing feature of local cultural identity consists in local forms of reasoning. What appears as a reasonable action in terms of one cultural identity (attending weekday Masses, or having six children) may appear hilarious or almost depraved in another. Not only this, but the underpinnings of thought itself, the unspoken assumptions which license speakers to move from one argumentative step to another, differ somewhat between cultures. The social position of a speaker is not an intrinsic part of an argument in industrialised Europe, but status is important in areas such as the West of Ireland. Rural cultures acknowledge the human dimension to communication by counting it relevant to the contents of an argument about education whether, for example, the speaker is a schoolteacher or not, whereas urban cultures prefer purportedly ‘objective’ criteria and count the speaker’s position as strictly irrelevant. Such local features of communication contribute to the characteristic ambiences of localities — even though seldom consciously noticed to do so — and they play a large part in bringing newcomers into the different worlds of experience they are seeking.

We suggest that this blend of familiar and unfamiliar worlds of thought edges travellers into behaving in ways new to them. This adds up to much of the fascination and the frisson which people seeking liminality find in the destinations they prefer. But the traditional aspects of local identities contained in their special ‘thought worlds’ are vulnerable to the weight of the tourist ‘gaze’. In terms of industrial culture, traditional ways of thought appear not to make sense, and hosts may be tempted to adapt to visitors’ expectations about what is intelligible and what is not; the visitors, after all, come from more politically and economically powerful cultures. When indigenous inhabitants of places like the West of Ireland gradually abandon local criteria regulating forms of reasonable thought and feeling, they will have become much more similar to people everywhere else.

The Argumentative Use of Settings in Tourism

There is a further feature of tourism which rural tourism claims to escape but cannot, and which also affects the cultural identity of those visited.
Tourism must use settings, interior and exterior, to persuade visitors of something — here, that some form of authentic living actually has been maintained. Authenticity itself no longer simply occurs but must be 'staged'. In this sense, touristic settings function as arguments in themselves. But in order to take effect as an argument, a feature of a setting has to be widely comprehensible. If the public which is intended to interpret it is composed of both indigenous and foreign members, the argumentative signs used have to straddle very different semiotic vocabularies. Many of the streets of Galway, in the process of being refurbished now, communicate 'authenticity' by using signs of past-ness rather than restorations of artefacts which really existed in the past. Streets are being cobbled as a sign that the past is being deferred to, rather than to restore their original state (quite possibly mud). Since such signs need to be generally legible in order to function as signs, Galway uses the same sorts of symbol of the past as other towns in Western Europe — lamp-posts and wastebins which are recognisably but vaguely old-fashioned, irrespective of what the 'original' lamp-posts and wastebins looked like.

Tourist semiotics, then, not only puts indigenous populations on the defensive in presentations of their cultural identity, it also forces them to use a new language of signs. This adopted language must be highly visual — it must communicate quickly to people who have no time for the extensive interaction needed to learn local cultural vocabularies. In a culture such as that of the West of Ireland, where social semiotics have relied in the past on building up gradual networks of indirectly expressed relations, new signs have to be adopted; and, old signs take on new meanings. Thus it is that the minutiae of cultures must change in the face of tourism.

There are therefore two main ways in which visitors to the West of Ireland tend to perceive its 'identity'. The first way relies on any one of a number of projections onto Connemara from outside; here the majority of versions do not take much realistic account of the lives of less advantaged people in the region. The second way of perceiving identity is, we suggest, responsible for a great deal of what 'soft' tourists are seeking in terms of experience — but it is hard even to make conscious and to describe, let alone to defend and preserve, particularly by people who are less socially powerful than their visitors. This does not mean that we should necessarily reject touristic or other opportunities for low-income groups to gain more prosperity. We are merely arguing that rural tourism cannot simply be seen as that unique touristic form which leaves cultural identity unaffected.

Conclusion

Those who are already directly involved in tourism enterprises benefit from the further development of the tourist industry. There is a great distance between those with few resources, not engaged in tourism development, and those with resources who are involved. Our own conviction is that community developments which actively involve all sections of a society are those most likely to offer genuine cultural and socioeconomic development in Connemara. People from low-income households, in particular women, are unlikely to benefit from a development of tourism based on market demands alone.

We have tried to establish both that all forms of tourism bring with them cultural change, and that the projection of cultural identity is by no means a simple matter of showing what already exists. Such a projection is certain to erode much that is indigenous and precious to an area, and is therefore an option with great costs: we must be sure that it is worthwhile. If the lower-income households intended to be assisted by tourism are excluded both from the economic activity involved and from participation in much of what evolves as the area's 'official' identity, one which links into traditions of perceiving the area which are not based on the lives of lower-income groups, this amounts to a development failure. We can only see the incorporation of such households in rural tourism if it evolves on an integrated community basis. If tourism is touted as a solution to rural development problems, therefore, it is reasonable to analyse both the social and the cultural costs of this solution, and how all sections of the community are being enabled to participate in it.

Notes and References

3 Murphy, P. (1985), Tourism: A Community Approach, Methuen, New York, p. 145. Murphy is quoting from Wahab, S. (1975), Tourism Management, Tourism International Press, London, p. 49. In this paper we are pointing to some difficulties with the concepts of the natural and authentic endorsed by these authors; others are touched on in some of the articles in Hosts and Guests: the Anthropology of Tourism, (ed.) V.L. Smith (1978), Blackwell, Oxford.
4 Compare in particular, for an exposition of the ways in which views of a place can be composed mainly in relation to needs within the perceiver's culture, Said, E. (1978), Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.
7 Bartlett's works were immensely popular in the nineteenth century and are still in evidence in antique shops and in the homes of the educated middle classes in the West of Ireland today. An example is reproduced in Kilroy, P. (1989), The Story of Connemara, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin.
11 Barlow, J. (1893), Irish Idylls, Hodder and Stoughton, London. This work, full of analytical intelligence as well as sympathy, deserves to be better known.
12 Waldron, J. (1992), The Maamtrasna Murders, Edmund Burke, Dublin. The murder of five members of a single family in North Co. Galway in 1882 caused horror throughout the country at the time; the matter was never satisfactorily understood and it is now believed that one of those hanged in Galway for the crime was an innocent man, Myles Joyce. The episode also illustrates the huge sociocultural distance between the Irish-speaking peasants of a harsh, remote region and those who were charged with trying to establish what had occurred and why.
19 Lane, B. (1989), op. cit., p. 4.
20 ibid.
23 ibid.
25 This comment, taken from the 1991 Bord Fáilte campaign in France, is regularly mirrored in other Irish marketing campaigns on the Continent.
27 This has been one of the most influential ideas in Turner, V. (1969), The Ritual Process, Aldine, Chicago. Nonetheless the questions of what liminality is, when it occurs, and what its effects may need much more exploration, to which we have tried to contribute here.
31 Schudson, M. (1979), 'On Tourism and Modern Culture', American Journal of Sociology, 85:1249-58. The articles mentioned in notes 30 and 31 are further exemplars of the debate about tourism and (in)authenticity mentioned in note 3 above.