



Blue Growth Pathway for Marine and Coastal Tourism Trail Development

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Executive Summary

As part of the EU's Blue Growth strategy, marine and coastal tourism is viewed as one of five focus maritime areas with the potential to foster "a smart, sustainable and inclusive Europe". However, while marine and coastal tourism are vital economic activities for a wide range of coastal regions across the EU Atlantic Arc, the sector faces increasing sustainability challenges due to increasing demand and the accompanying social consequences for local communities and environmental consequences for local coastal and marine resources.

Adopting transition management as a broad analytical framework through which to understand existing marine management regimes and to stimulate thinking about how more sustainable regimes may be realized in the future, this study reports on research conducted on the Wild Atlantic Way (WAW), a 2500 km coastal touring route along the west coast of Ireland. Following a brief review of the marine and coastal tourism management regime in Ireland and the niche and landscape pressures that the sector faces, this study outlines the multi-method approach adopted for this study which was carried out between 2018- 2020. The MOSES¹ project team in NUI Galway in Ireland developed an extensive tourist survey and conducted in-depth collaborative research with a local community situated on the WAW to identify the pressures, preferences and development trends relevant to coastal tourism and sustainable pathways for the growth of the tourism trail sector.

The study suggests that to support sustainable coastal tourism close collaboration at the community level is required. Locals at tourist destinations not only drive the tourism product itself, but live with the consequences of tourist activities in the area, and, therefore, have an increased motivation to develop and promote sustainable pathways. The study presents a community-generated collaborative framework that can overcome barriers and maximise opportunities in sustainable coastal tourism trail development. It concludes by highlighting key recommendations and policy advice that other European regions may wish to consider if this sector is to lead to sustainable Blue Growth.

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Introduction

There has been increased recognition of the importance of marine natural resources as national assets across the EU coastal Member States over the last decade. This is particularly true for tourism and recreation in marine and coastal areas. Marine and coastal tourism can be defined as tourism for which the proximity of the sea is a condition. It can be water-based (e.g. boating, swimming, surfing, etc.) or land-based (beach-based recreation, sunbathing, coastal drives or cycles, etc.), as well as the supplies and service industries associated with these activities.

With marine assets consisting of over 3.2 million km² of European seas and a coastline stretching over 25,000 km, the EU Atlantic Arc marine and coastal tourism sector has the potential to be a key driver of growth in what are often rural areas with limited other opportunities for economic development. Figures from the European Commission Directorate General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries² suggest that across the 5 Atlantic Arc Member States, Ireland, the United Kingdom Portugal, France and Spain, marine and coastal tourism accounts for 1.5 million jobs and contributes approximately €50 billion toward the regions GDP.

As part of EU's Blue Growth strategy, the sector is one of five focus areas with the potential to foster "a smart, sustainable and inclusive Europe". But whilst marine and coastal tourism are vital economic activities for a wide range of coastal regions across the EU Atlantic Arc, the sector faces increasing sustainability challenges due to increasing demand and the accompanying social consequences for local communities and environmental consequences for local coastal and marine resources.

There is, therefore, a need to establish a comprehensive understanding of the impacts of marine and coastal tourism on local communities and the natural environment, and to accurately estimate the potential impact of new policy measures aimed at developing the sector. A sustainable blue economy is a transformative opportunity to tackle some of the most pressing development challenges and as the largest industry in the European ocean economy, coastal and marine tourism has a key role to play. There is a need to ensure that marine and coastal tourism is focused around the sustainable use of the coastal and marine natural capital that underpins it, perhaps more so than any other sector in the ocean economy. This will require strategic planning that considers sector dependencies and impacts and facilitates and accelerates a sustainable transition that supports national and regional development objectives.

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Marine and Coastal Tourism and the Atlantic Action Plan

In 2013, the EU launched the Atlantic Action Plan (AAP) to boost the maritime economy of its five Atlantic States; Portugal, Spain, France, the United Kingdom, and Ireland. This Action Plan sets out priorities for research and investment to drive the development of the blue economy in the Atlantic Area. Priority 4 of the AAP recognized the role that marine and coastal tourism could play in creating a socially inclusive and sustainable model of regional development. It emphasized the need for the diversification of maritime and coastal tourism products and the development of niche markets and this required investing in four key areas:

- Marine sport, marinas and nautical leisure activities;
- Port services, including those for cruise passengers;
- Identifying and promoting cultural and natural attractions of the Atlantic seaboard such as artisanal fishing, local cuisine and maritime heritage; and
- Protecting and restoring tourist attractions, including coastal and underwater cultural attractions and maritime heritage sites, with archaeological, ecological or historical value

Following this, the EU Commission launched a European strategy for more growth and jobs in coastal and maritime tourism³ that outlined how many of the challenges facing the marine and tourism sector highlighted in the AAP could be addressed and proposed a strategy to enhance the sustainability and competitiveness of the sector.

The recently revised Atlantic Action Plan (Action Plan 2) builds on its predecessor but also aims to contribute to the recovery of the blue economy post the Covid-19 crisis by focusing on key sectors that “combine sustainable transformation with a high job creation potential in Atlantic coastal communities”. Sustainable coastal tourism is front and centre in that regard. Under pillar 4 of the Action Plan, it is noted how marine and coastal habitats should be preserved and valorised, with the view to developing new forms of marine and coastal tourism. In particular, it suggested that the guiding principles of a circular economy, zero pollution, energy efficiency and biodiversity preservation should be used to develop more sustainable tourism practices that benefit local communities and environments. The EU Communication ‘Tourism and Transport in 2020 and Beyond’ also highlights the importance of protecting and restoring Europe’s marine natural capital, in line with the use of a strategic approach to ensuring a sustainable blue economy.

Developing Marine and Coastal Tourism Trails

The AAP and the focus on promoting tourism products that build on the cultural and natural attractions of the Atlantic coastline has resulted in an increased interest in the development of sustainable marine and coastal tourism trails. A sustainable marine tourism trail seeks to provide people with an exciting, immersive, and educational holiday experience that is also of benefit to the local community and does not damage the local environment or society. Examples include the Wales Coast Path, a 1,400 km stretch of Welsh coastline, the 2500 km WAW on the west coast of Ireland and shorter routes aimed at walkers such as the 110km Rota Vicentina trail in south-west Portugal or the 200 km Galicia Lighthouse Way in Northern Spain. Lessons learned from these developments provide a good opportunity to deliver guidelines for coastal and marine trail initiatives that attract eco-conscious visitors, which involve short supply lines for local products, and which foster environmentally-friendly business models and practices.

A full-page photograph of a person surfing on a wave. The surfer is wearing a black wetsuit and is positioned on the right side of the frame, riding a white surfboard. The wave is breaking, creating white foam and spray. The water is a deep blue color. The text 'Diversification of maritime and coastal tourism products and the development of niche markets' is overlaid on the left side of the image in a large, white, sans-serif font.

Diversification of maritime and coastal tourism products and the development of niche markets

Sustainable marine tourism trail seeks to provide people with an exciting, immersive, and educational holiday experience that is also of benefit to the local community



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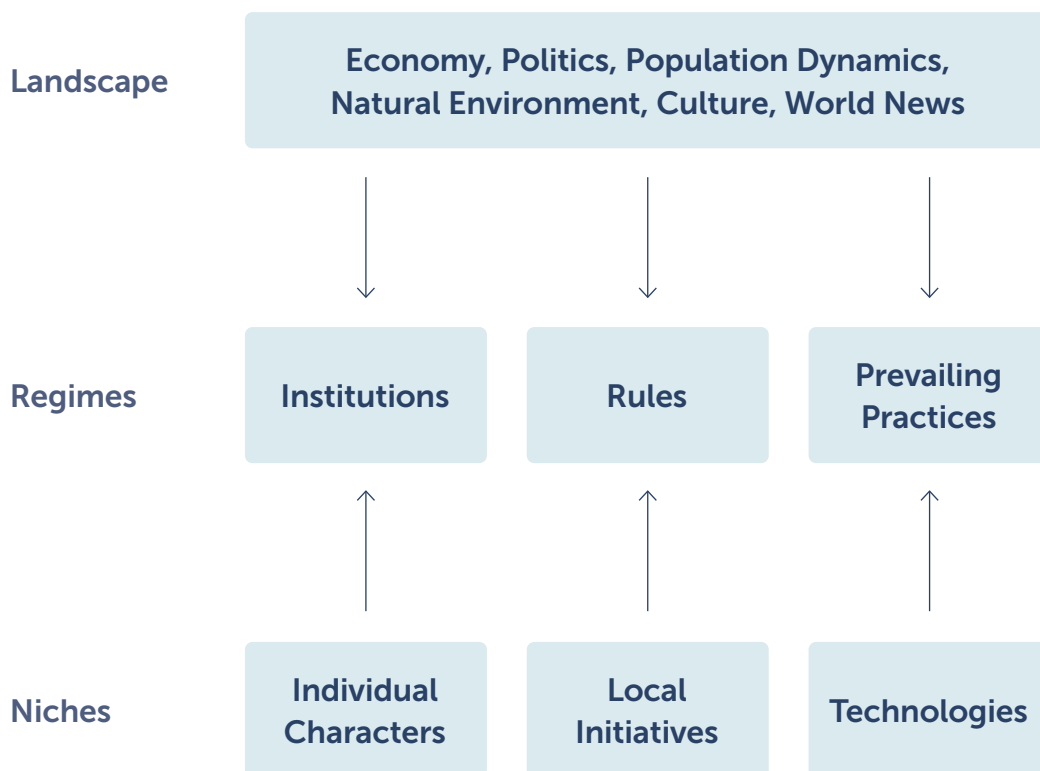
Transition Management

Transition management is a governance approach that aims to facilitate and accelerate sustainable transitions. Transition management focuses on coordinating a wide range of actors with the aim of achieving long-term sustainability. It seeks to coordinate these actors through the creation of a shared understanding of a problem and the development of a long-term vision and sustainable pathways through which the problem can be addressed. Sustainable transitions require actors to develop an understanding of the interconnections between the current management regime and the change pressures exerted on it (See figure below).

The management regime is the amalgamation of the dominant practices, rules, institutions, and norms that structure activity within a particular policy area. Change pressures can be characterized as landscape pressures and niche practices. Landscape pressures operate at the macro level and include issues such as economic, political, environmental, and demographic dynamics. These dynamics put pressure on the existing regime to change but cannot be directly controlled by the regime. For example, population growth will place pressure on food and energy regimes to scale up production. Niche pressures are micro-level innovations that exert pressure for regime change from below. Niches can be the actions of individual actors, the development of alternative technologies and local management practices that do not conform to established practices and put pressure on the regime to adapt to accommodate them. For example, the development of autonomous vessels will put pressure on port and shipping regimes to accommodate novel navigation systems. Landscape pressures and niches are, therefore, vital seeds for change and are crucial for path-breaking innovations.

The Multi-Level Concept in Transition Studies

Source: Adapted from Geels, 2002⁴



Transition management focuses on the development of sustainable pathways that can overcome barriers and maximize opportunities and can steer innovations to become established within reformed and more sustainable regimes. MOSES has adopted transition management as a broad analytical framework through which to understand existing marine management regimes and to stimulate thinking about how more sustainable regimes may be realized in the future.

Amalgamation of the dominant practices, rules, institutions, and norms that structure activity within a particular policy area

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Marine and Coastal Tourism Management Regime in Ireland

The National Tourism Development Authority, Fáilte Ireland, provides the primary support and management for the tourism industry in Ireland. With a mission to sustain Ireland as a high-quality and competitive tourism destination, collaborations with state agencies, local- and national- level representative bodies, and tourism businesses seek to implement positive strategies for tourism businesses. In 2012, Fáilte Ireland led Irish efforts to repackage and heavily promote the west coast of Ireland as a tourism destination to overseas markets by introducing the development of the WAW. As the world’s longest coastal route, the WAW follows the Atlantic coastline on the edge of Europe for 2,500 km from Malin Head in County Donegal to Kinsale in the southwest of County Cork⁵. The established route is an amalgamation of smaller roads and trails that have been used for over 150 years⁶. The WAW’s branding seeks to highlight the wild, ruggedness of the west coast by reconnecting the culture, heritage, and history of places with the dramatic landscapes found there⁷. The WAW has contributed to an increase in overseas tourists i.e. in 2018, Failte Ireland recorded a 6.5% increase in overall tourists to 9.6 million and a 15% increase of US tourists to 1.7 million, representing growth for eight continuous years⁸.

Adopting a transition management framework, the research identified a number of key change pressures on marine and coastal trail development in Ireland. These are outlined in the table below.

Key change pressures on marine and coastal trail development in Ireland

Drivers of Change
Environmental degradation (erosion, litter, pollution, etc.)
Overburdened infrastructure
Politics of participation
Alienation of locals
Lengthening of tourism season
Reduction of day-trip tour operations
Regulations on tourist admission numbers
Commodification of culture and traditions

The following is one example of the innovations occurring in the sector that may alleviate some of these pressures in the future:

Fáilte Ireland is currently developing Visitor Experience Development Plans, centred on unique selling points in geographic areas. In the long-term, these plans aim to entice visitors to stay in a geographic region of the WAW for a longer period of time. Instead of attempting to complete long stretches of the route in one go, these plans would break the route into manageable regions and enable visitors to have an immersive and unique experience. A representative of Fáilte Ireland interviewed during the course of the MOSES study describes this process as “about bringing [that] cultural experience to life for the visitor, and getting the opportunity to immerse the visitor in those smaller towns and villages so they’re getting to see the little hidden gems along the route”⁹.

Fáilte Ireland is currently developing Visitor Experience Development Plans, centred on unique selling points in geographic areas



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MOSES Wild Atlantic Way Case Study

Utilising both qualitative and quantitative research approaches, the MOSES project team in Ireland developed an extensive tourist survey and conducted in-depth collaborative research with a local community situated on the WAW to identify the pressures, preferences, and development trends relevant to coastal tourism and sustainable pathways for the growth of the tourism trail sector.

Wild Atlantic Way Tourist Survey Methodology


To gain insights into the tourist¹⁰ experience of the WAW and concurrently assess the impact of tourists, a survey questionnaire was developed and deployed face-to-face. The survey was designed to determine tourist characteristics, expenditure and activities during their stay on the WAW. Respondents were also questioned on their perceptions of the WAW, including quality of facilities and perceived levels of tourism pressure. The sample consisted of 603 tourists who were surveyed for approximately 10 minutes each during the period 15th–31st July, 2019 (close to the peak summer season in Ireland). The surveys were undertaken at six locations along the WAW. Core findings that relate to the AAP and other drivers of change include tourist insights and perceptions of endogenous pressures such as the numbers of tourists, level of overcrowding and quality of the transport infrastructure along the WAW (further results available from: mosesproject.eu). The results show that tourists are tending to experience endogenous pressures more commonly in the southern counties of the WAW and this correlates with the numbers of tourists reported in these counties. The results in terms of numbers mirror those previously reported for the WAW counties (Fáilte Ireland, 2018¹¹) with tourists, particularly overseas tourists concentrated in the southern section of the WAW route.

Exploring Community Perspectives on the WAW

The community of Rathmullan, situated along the WAW in Co. Donegal, was selected for participation in the MOSES living lab¹² case study. As part of a collaborative research approach, the following methods of data collection were employed over a two-year period from 2018-2020 to gain a better understanding of the impacts of tourism and the WAW on aspects of the community:

- Regular community-organised and -led meetings to address local concerns and discuss future developments in their region.
- Semi-structured interviews were undertaken by MOSES researchers with key community stakeholders and industry individuals.
- Participatory Mapping workshop was hosted to learn about regional community-held values.

In addition, a range of evaluative methods were adopted including participant observation, assessment of community tourism behaviours and market opportunities.



The survey was designed to determine tourist characteristics, expenditure and activities during their stay

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Pathway for Sustainable Development of Marine and Coastal Tourism Trails

This research proposes community-generated development guidelines that support sustainable coastal tourism as a sustainable pathway for marine and coastal trail development. The development of guidelines that support sustainable coastal tourism requires close collaboration at the community level. Locals at tourist destinations not only drive the tourism product itself, but live with the consequences of tourist activities in the area, and therefore have an increased motivation to develop and promote sustainable pathways. Integral to the development of these sustainable pathways is the capturing of local community knowledge in the planning stages. Community knowledge and attitudes translates into preferences that lead to the development of pathways with built-in community buy-in and support.

Adopting a community-generated collaborative framework (as outlined in the figure below), can overcome barriers, maximise opportunities in sustainable coastal tourism and assist in establishing innovations within more sustainable regimes. The phases of this framework are:

1. Community/locals see a need within their community.
2. Outside research and facilitated collaboration.
3. Generate a pathway.
4. Outcome: Informed decisions for long-term.

Community generated collaboration framework



Specifically, in the case of MOSES research on the WAW, results derived from employing a community-generated collaborative framework included identifying a need and working collaboratively to address the following:

- Provide improved infrastructure (telecommunications, shared facilities, etc.).
- Identify and respond to environmental damages in line with national-level Frameworks and Directives.
- Identify and develop the unique experiences and draws that entice visitors to stay longer ('hidden gems').

For other European regions interested in developing their marine and coastal trail and, indeed marine and coastal tourism sectors in a sustainable manner, some messages and recommendations which emerged from the collaborative research and may translate to other regions include:

- Importance of infrastructure e.g. improved telecommunications, shared facilities, etc.
- Potential to reduce some pressures by developing policies aimed at extending the tourist season.
- Identify and reduce environmental pressures and damages early.
- MOSES survey work suggests that tourists taking part in marine related activities spend more and stay longer than the average tourist. Regional authorities and tourism agencies should provide supports for the development of niche marine tourism product offerings in areas outside the main destination points of the trail. These niche product offerings should attract a potential lower volume of visitors, but with higher expenditure patterns.
- Reduce emphasis on day-trips (where tourist money is often diverted from locals).
- Keep jobs local where possible.
- Foster community engagement by supporting cultural and traditional experiences as visitor experiences.
- Encourage ICT uptake in the area of sustainable tourism trail usage; for example, an App providing real-time data on the current tourist numbers at the key destination points along the WAW could spread tourists out along the route and reduce overcrowding.
- As Member States develop their networks of Marine Protected Areas over the coming years, connecting them with existing and new tourism trail products will increase their overall economic importance and may also serve as a tool to finance the management of these marine areas.
- Encouraging tourist operators along the route to shorten their supply chains by using locally sourced inputs, and to consider their waste management strategies and use of alternative materials. Where possible, they should continue the move towards a circular economy and a reduction in their environmental footprint which, can, in turn, be used to promote the sustainability of the marine tourism trail amongst the growing number of environmentally conscious travellers.

In conclusion, a key piece of policy advice that countries need to integrate into all strategies and plans if this sector is to lead to sustainable Blue Growth is that continued community collaboration is essential from the outset of development. Regional policy-makers are well-placed to undertake this work and benefit from the exchange of experience with the local communities facing these challenges.

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- ¹ MOSES is a 3 year EU Interreg Atlantic Area funded project, involving eight partners across five member states. The objective of this project is to examine the 'blue' growth path for the sustainable development of some of the major ocean economy industries operating in the Atlantic space, as envisaged in the Atlantic Action Plan.
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- ⁸ Fáilte Ireland (2019) Key Tourism Facts 2018. Retrieved 26 March, 2020, from <https://www.failteireland.ie/Research-Insights/Tourism-Facts-and-Figures.aspx>
- ⁹ IND1 Client Service Manager – Fáilte Ireland interviewed on 5th November 2020
- ¹⁰ Only tourists who self-declared as being on holiday were included in the survey.
- ¹¹ Fáilte Ireland. 2018. Tourism Facts 2017. [Available online:https://www.failteireland.ie/FailteIreland/media/WebsiteStructure/Documents/3_Research_Insights/5_International_Tourism_Trends/Tourism-Facts-2017_2.pdf?ext=.pdf]
- ¹² 'Living Lab' approach, first utilised in work from Prof William Mitchell of MIT, represents a user-centric, participatory research methodology in a real-life experimentation environment where innovations are co-created by users and producers (Ruijsink and Smith, 2016).

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