

# **Climate Change: Policy and Planning to Practice**

**Training to change mindsets –  
the practical bottom up approach in Ireland 2005-2011**

**Quality certification as a tool of regional development**

**Taking the fear out of ecotourism/green tourism for policy-makers**

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## **Introduction**

The Greenbox Project in North West Ireland was a typical Cross-Border European funded project (Both Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland). This region had suffered from the worst effects of War in Ireland and resulted in high unemployment/emigration up to mid-

1990s and poor investment and low tourism numbers and a tired tourism infrastructure. The standard model of partnership was a simple process getting agencies to sit on joint boards and in most cases the projects didn't seek to change policies or do things any different. The norm is the pilot project winds up after the funding phase, long-term sustainability or main-streaming projects is not planned



## **The Region**

This region, on the northwest coast of Ireland, because of its poor land and property values in late 1980s and 1990s, became an attracting factor for artists, crafts people, filmmakers and organic farmers. This new influx of creative people also gave a unique support to many environmental projects etc

## **Tourism Policy in Ireland**

Presently the Irish tourism industry faces many challenges. Throughout the 1990s Ireland outperformed most of the competition in attracting increasing numbers of overseas visitors, peaking in 2000 with almost 7 million overseas visitors. While the overall growth in aggregate visits to Ireland has been impressive, a number of significant trends are evident in the profile of the demand and the behaviour pattern of overseas visitors to Ireland. One of the most obvious changes is the increasing concentration of visits to Dublin, while tourism to many of the traditional tourism areas has not grown or in some cases, in particular the northwest, has declined.

The spatial or regional distribution of overseas tourism within Ireland continues to change and can be explained by a change in the composition of the visitors, principally amongst those coming from Britain; visitors coming for shorter trips with fewer visitors bringing their cars; and a decrease in the average number of regions visited on the trip. In

addition the increasing cost of visiting Ireland and competition from new lower cost destinations in Central and Eastern Europe combined with availability of low air fares is placing huge competitive pressures on the Irish market.

Ireland has been marketed with a Green Image since the late 1960s but without any real understanding of sustainability – or later, of climate change. There were no policies in place. Greenbox challenged this and in some cases it took leadership by heads of organizations to gain some credibility.

### **Economics of Ireland Mid-1990s**

Ireland was in full economic growth of the Celtic Tiger and the national government policies in most parts ignored tourism. Environment planning was fast tracked to enable further construction. High-tech American companies and property inflation were the norm of the day. Political leaders were skeptical of talk of climate change. Not until late 1996 were the first Green Party politicians elected and made Ministers of Departments of Environment, Agriculture, Renewable Energy and Resources.

The large construction industry in Ireland also resulted in the development of a number of hotels. Ireland now has 60,000 beds with almost 20,000 in excess of demand. Many were the trophy possession of large developers and builders.

### **The Greenbox**

The Greenbox is a tourism development and marketing initiative, established in 2004 by the Western Development Tourism Program in conjunction with the Organic Centre, Rossinver Co. Leitrim. Ecotourism is tourism that is ecologically sustainable in terms of honoring the environment, impacting on it as little as possible. Responsible ecotourism includes programs/initiatives that minimize the negative aspects of conventional tourism on the environment and enhance the cultural integrity of local people.

The Greenbox strategic plan sought to deliver an Ecotourism destination – a defined region containing environmentally sustainable products, accommodation and attractions within a context of pristine natural resources. This was in response to the need to create a dynamic and unique large-scale tourism attractor for the northwest capable of combating stagnant tourism numbers and increasing the scale of the industry in the region. Examples of some ecotourism products include walking, cycling, canoeing, artistic and cultural activities, health and personal well being activities, etc. The Greenbox is Ireland's first ecotourism destination, covering the counties of Leitrim, West Cavan, Fermanagh, North Sligo, South Donegal and northwest Monaghan.

### **Greenbox Activities 2004-2009**

The company engaged in a number of interrelated activities to achieve its objectives. In 2008, all core funding ceased and project was reduced from seven staff to one and remains in existence only on commercial activities.

This Capital Development Project provided capital funding and training for tourism product providers to develop and enhance their ecotourism products. The Greenbox

initially secured funding of €1,367,925.00 under INTERREG IIIA Measure 1, Priority 4. The project commenced in April 2005 and ended in August 2008. Funding was provided on the basis that two flagship capital projects would be established (one north and one south) and the establishment of 42 smaller projects, employing eco-friendly practices. The businesses that were focused on included accommodation, food, activities and community initiatives.

Project applications were invited from private individuals, limited companies, community groups, and co-operatives that provide a product or wish to provide a product that would meet the needs of both domestic and international eco-tourists. Projects were only awarded grant aid if they either met the ecotourism standard as set by the Greenbox or had the potential to become certified in the future. Projects also had to be located within the Greenbox geographic area.

### **Training and Capacity-building**

**Certificate in Ecotourism, the EU Flower and the Greenbox Eco-label:** The majority of Capital Development Project promoters who received funding have gained an understanding of ecotourism, increased their tourism skills, and are now working with like-minded promoters implementing a broad range of environmentally sound standards. At least 20 of the Capital Development Project promoters have followed through on Greenbox Eco-label training. The Certificate has received FETAC approval and has also received international accreditation by Sustainable Travel International. Eleven of the Capital Development Program promoters have received the EU Flower standard (making a total of 24 EU Flowers in the region, the largest cluster in Europe. Ten received Capital Development Program funding.

**A catalyst for regional tourism development:** Greenbox has created a different and innovative product, that is based on the natural and cultural resources of the area and by its nature therefore is low impact and sustainable. The product is also one offering a competitive advantage to an underdeveloped area by promoting the very aspect which has historically prevented its development – isolation, harsh landscape (in terms of agriculture production), and poor infrastructure in terms of road network, rail and air access. Ironically it is because of the lack of investment in the project region in the past, that it is now relatively unspoiled and can offer one of the best eco destinations.

**Internationally recognized:** The success of the project is evidenced by the fact that 24 of the 50 top eco-destinations in the Eco Escape Ireland (2008) book are located in the Greenbox, many of which received Capital Development Program support. The success of Greenbox has been recognized in a number of recent awards including:

- Responsible Tourism Award, December 2006, World Travel Market – highly commended
- People Category, May 2007, Northern Ireland Tourist Board – commended

- Tourism for Tomorrow, Destination Category, June 2007, World Travel Market – finalist (one of three)
- Green Apple Award, December 2007 – gold
- CEO Mary Mulvey Highly Commended, Shine Awards 2010

**Training to change mindsets:** The success of the Greenbox model also included “hands-on” proactive building of relationships and linkages by the executive with key representatives in the public and private sector at international, national and regional levels. Facilitation of all the main players to work together was the essence of Greenbox right from the beginning. This work led in the main by the Greenbox CEO over the past six years has moved the initiative from one that once had little or no support, to one where confidence has been built and main stream agencies are seeing as exciting, innovative and new.

Funding support from mainstream agencies, still however, remains an issue. Greenbox was very aware of the need to help educate policy makers and in 2006 and 2008 hosted two national conferences with a wide range of international speakers. The networking of all these policy-makers both from north and south of Ireland made a significant difference in bringing about policy changes. The publication “Ecotourism Handbook for Ireland” in 2008 provided an important educational tool at all levels of Irish tourism and is being revised in 2011 by the national Tourist Board Fáilte Ireland.

### **Quality Certification as a Tool of Regional Development**

Using a high-quality Certification Eco-Label for Accommodation with independent audit gave the project further credibility and publicity. The Greenbox Ecotourism Label was piloted more than two years based on TIES guidelines and was also independently audited. The label is the foundation for Ecotourism Ireland that will be formally launched in 2012.

### **Conclusion**

The challenge of seeking support for ecotourism and sustainability remains. Ireland is now being governed by the IMF having lost its economic sovereignty in 2010, The unsustainability of the hotel building boom has not helped Irish tourism but has brought out a new competitive pricing model of cheap hotels being run by the same banks that caused the financial crashes.

There has been a 15% increase in visitors to Ireland in 2011 and a renewed interest in Tourism by the new Government that has increased its priority in an effort for national renewal. There still continues to be a fear of green tourism/ecotourism but people in rural areas are now considering possibilities for a more sustainable and environmentally responsible tourism.

The lessons of Greenbox are that barriers to Green tourism exist and therefore flexibility in approaches is required. Training is essential including basic business skills for new

entries in the field. The value of study trips, learning networks and sharing best practice has been invaluable. But more is required to respond to the challenges of climate change. The Mary Robinson Foundation model of ‘Climate Justice’ is worthy of examination in this regard.

## NOTES

CELTIC TIGER is a term used to describe the economy of Ireland during a period of rapid economic growth between 1995 and 2007. The expansion underwent a dramatic reversal from 2008, with GDP contracting by 14% and unemployment levels rising to 14% by 2010. Moody's proceeded to downgrade Ireland's government bond ratings to junk in mid-2011

CLIMATE JUSTICE is generally used as a term for viewing climate change as an ethical issue and considering how its causes and effects relate to concepts of justice, particularly social justice and environmental justice. For example examining issues such as equality, human rights and historical responsibility in relation to climate change. Many see recognition of the fact that those least responsible for climate change are currently experiencing (and will continue to experience) its greatest impacts as being central to climate justice. The term is also used with reference to legal systems, where justice is achieved through application and development of law in the area of climate change.

## REGIONAL MAP

Greenbox  
Ecobreak Providers

