Towards a Mourne National Park? Emergent prospects and pitfalls from articulating needs in a local context


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Towards a Mourne National Park?
Emergent prospects and pitfalls from articulating needs in a local context

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Abstract
This paper examines the prospects for sustainable rural tourism within a rural development paradigm. Specifically, an adaptive management approach is proposed as a means of understanding and accommodating the different goals and interests that exist within multi-functional rural areas. This model allows priorities to change in line with particular situations while remaining sensitive to economic, environmental, social and cultural impacts. The proposed Mourne National Park in Northern Ireland, also designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), forms the backdrop for this study. Through a critique of a consultation process that was undertaken with the community the question is posed: can a sustainable rural tourism approach achieve meaningful community engagement and thereby reflect the needs of the community?
Central to the analysis are the power differentials between the various partners participating in this model of governance. The conclusions consider implications for rural communities, revealing how trusting and meaningful relationships are central to facilitating collaboration, cooperation and adaptation.

Keywords: rural development, tourism, sustainability, governance, Northern Ireland.
Changing rural areas

As rural areas pursue an agenda of multi-functionality in the wake of ongoing agricultural transition, tourism has been cited as a desirable contributor to sustainable rural development. Tourism has been identified as one of the fastest growing global industries. Consequently destination areas are facing increasing pressures with increased tourist numbers having a negative impact on the environment. This leads to all kinds of political and social demands as local communities grapple with acceptable levels and types of tourism activities.

Ireland is in a position of meeting the needs of a growing proportion of tourists in pursuit of exotic or different destinations. While tourists have been travelling to that country in reasonable numbers for many years, rural Ireland still has the potential to offer something different because of its distinct culture, history, ethnic and geographic characteristics. The sustainable development concept may be applied to tourism in order to set out a framework from which ‘acceptable’ levels of tourism may be determined.

Situated within Northern Ireland, the proposed Mourne National Park offers a lens through which to consider the implementation of a sustainable tourism agenda within a region that has experienced the emergence of a mixture of governing arrangements. National parks typically refer to a protected landscape and can range from the North American approach of public ownership, wilderness protection and nature conservation to the models predominating in Europe of areas encompassing mixed ownership and human habitation. For example, in France much of the land is owned by local communes and typically that land is more densely populated. Consequently as a rule national parks fundamentally aim to conserve and preserve natural landscapes. But, particularly within the European context, they also promote opportunities for sustainable social, economic and cultural development. This prevailing paradigm recognises the fact that many of these valued landscapes are a result of a complex relationship between people and nature. Sustainable tourism is a pivotal aspect of a larger suite of activities that form the national park package and it forms the focus of analysis within this paper.

By using a case study of the Mourne National Park, this paper examines the prospects for sustainable rural tourism within a rural development paradigm. It critiques a consultation process that was undertaken with the community. It poses the question: can a sustainable rural tourism approach achieve meaningful community engagement
and thereby reflect the needs of the community? Central to the analysis are the power differentials between the various partners participating in this model of governance. The conclusions consider implications for rural communities.

**Contemporary rural areas**

Rural areas have changed dramatically over the past fifty years. New opportunities have emerged as power bases have shifted. The role of agriculture has diminished with fewer than 10% of the rural workforce in OECD countries employed in agriculture (OECD 2006). Negative externalities arising from intensive farming have led to concerns in relation to food safety, public health, environmental degradation and food security. Astute consumers increasingly demand cheaper and higher quality food. People believe there should be a greater good emerging from agriculture than simply food production, they want to gain from the landscape aesthetically and they also want to be able to use rural areas as an amenity. In this way multi-functional agriculture produces both private and public benefits. Further, farmers are recognised as stewards of the countryside and its assets; they no longer have ultimate authority over the land.

In sum, rural areas have become places where a host of interest groups including farmers, environmentalists, new rural dwellers and tourists claim their rights to, and use of, different rural spaces (Butler 1998). Consequently agriculture is no longer able to exist by its own standards. Whereas once the farming community was at liberty to farm land as it saw fit, today traditional power bases have been eroded. Farmers’ practices are influenced by wider social discourse where the subject of climate change, the environment and sustainable development more generally are prominent. National boundaries no longer denote regulatory limits, with influences from Europe and beyond evident through legislation, land designations and global environmental standards.

**Rural development**

Given the changes outlined above, it is hardly surprising that there is evidence of the ascent of multi-functionality, stewardship, public goods, governance and devolution within rural policy rhetoric (OECD 2001a; 2001b; 2006). These themes are embedded within European rural policy. Rural development is fundamentally about bringing positive change to groups of people within rural communities (Buller and Wright 1990). From 1988 rural development began to move away from a prescriptive top-down, sectoral approach to incorporate a stronger territorial, spatial dimension that acknowledges the need to integrate social, economic and environmental issues (CEC 1988). In other words rural policy has altered and new approaches to rural
development attempt to take into account diversity within rural areas in terms of assets and needs. The associated and ongoing reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) resulted in the creation of new institutional apparatus, including the forging of new relationships between rural actors and the subsequent predominance of partnerships (Ward and McNicholas 1998). This approach retains currency through Europe’s Agenda 2000 reform (CEC 1998) and is manifest within the second pillar of the CAP with the establishment of the Rural Development Regulation within which the LEADER approach has been mainstreamed (CEC 2005). Current rural policy reveals a shift from purely agricultural matters to encompass a territorial and integrated approach that takes account of economic, social and environmental needs of particular rural areas (CEC 2005; Ward and Lowe 2004; Shortall 2004; Shortall and Shucksmith 2001; CEC 1998).

As a result of these pressures and transformations, the institutional infrastructure for rural development has undergone many changes. Many of the structures are superimposed on one another to provide a somewhat chaotic governance framework. Two major themes have emerged at a global level. Firstly, endogenous development is favoured. It is premised on the notion that development approaches starting from the local resource base, and also involving local participation in the design and implementation of development action, will be more successful (Ray, 1999). Secondly we have witnessed the prevalence of multi-scalar governance, whereby there is an increase in the volume of partnerships denoting a new relationship between the State and its citizens (Edwards et al. 2001; Marsden and Murdoch 1998; Swyngedouw 2005). This paradigm is evident across the globe and relies on an integrated, territorial, decentralised approach that uses public-private-voluntary sector partnerships to develop policy and to implement local strategies (OECD, 2006). Governance is about the rules of collective decision-making in settings where there is a plurality of actors or organizations and where no formal control system can dictate the terms of the relationship between these actors and organizations (Chhotray and Stoker 2008). It marks the erosion of traditional boundaries, relying on new partners including the community, public and private sector and is based on devolved power (Harriss and de Renzio 1997; Murdoch and Abram 1998; Rhodes 1997; Stoker 1998; Pierre 2000;

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1 The LEADER initiative was introduced by the Commission in 1991 as a major community initiative aimed specifically at rural development. It represented not only a commitment to rural (as opposed to agricultural) development but a very new policy style. LEADER included the unique combination of small, local groups; innovative development projects and flexible funding (Ray 1998). The policy rhetoric was one of empowerment, participation, community, capacity building, partnership, innovation and finally knowledge/ experience transfer as the initiative was considered a rural laboratory (Sivenas 2006).
Essentially, interest groups converge and co-operate through a partnership approach to achieve a shared purpose reflective of a broader policy objective, while typically maximising local involvement and local resources.

But this process has attracted questions. These relate to: economic versus social objectives; legitimacy of partnerships; capacity building and pre-development; weak consultation processes; quality of participation; incoherence between layers of governance; lack of strategic direction and unrealistic time pressures (Shortall and Shucksmith 2001; Scott 2004; Connelly et al. 2006; McAreavey 2009). It is unclear to what extent multi-scalar, endogenous development will have the capacity to meet the objectives and comply with the diverse values of relevant stakeholders. The remainder of this paper will explore the potential for the implementation of a sustainable tourism approach within the rural governance paradigm. It will examine the extent to which effective community engagement may be achieved, thereby overcoming some of the earlier criticisms of previous governance approaches. The analysis begins with an overview of sustainable rural tourism.

**Sustainable tourism**

It is not surprising that tourism is one of the world’s largest and fastest growing industries (Wallace and Russell 2004; Saarinen 2006) and this is likely to be the case for the foreseeable future. In 2005 European states recorded in excess of 440 million visitor arrivals accounting for 10 per cent of European GDP and 20 million jobs (Tourism Sustainability Group 2007). Consequently the tourism sector must respond to the pressures placed on it directly, from increased visitor numbers, and less directly, from negative impacts on the environment and on destination communities, as a ‘business-as-usual approach will not provide a more sustainable tourism industry’ (Gössling et al. 2008, p.123).

‘Development’ and the notion of ‘carrying capacity’ consumed tourism studies during the 1960s through to the early 1980s. The mass tourism that epitomised this era was accompanied by visible negative impacts such as the degradation of the Spanish coast. In response to this and as post-Fordist economies enjoyed more flexible forms of production and consumption, the idea of sustainable tourism was moved from the margins to assume centre stage in tourism debates. Ecology, conservation and economic development played a role in this process (Bramwell and Lane 1993) all of which resonate with the ubiquitous Brundtland Report, otherwise known as the World
Commission on Environment and Development (WCED 1987), with its emphasis on development, inter-and intra-generational equity and environmental responsibility.

Sustainable rural tourism is not unproblematic, having a plethora of meanings depending on the context. Indeed the literature concedes that it is because ‘of the oxymoronic nature of the term ‘sustainable tourism’ and its amenability to appropriation by supporters of various ideologies … (that) … it can be used to represent and support just about any model of development’ (Weaver 2004, p.518). Nonetheless there is some consensus that it relates to tourism that is ‘economically viable, but does not destroy the resources on which the future of tourism will depend, notably the physical environment, and the social fabric of the host community’ (Swarbrooke 1999, p.13). It is more than simply ‘tourism’ and mirrors the rural development paradigm. Swarbrooke’s normative representation focuses on the inter-relationship between the human and physical environment with its competing aspects and interests, priorities and negotiations.

Sustainable tourism, as a socially constructed and idealised set of aspirations, is thus dynamic in the sense of constantly being constructed and reconstructed by different stakeholders. It is a political process that depends on value systems and ethical judgments which are related to knowledge and power (Hall 1997; Hunter 1997; National Research Council (NRC) 1999; Saarinen 2006; Bramwell and Lane 2008). The process of identifying a sustainable tourism initiative is a complex and difficult process (Heneghan 2002) requiring ‘compatibility between the needs and resources of the local community, its residents and the tourists’ (McAreavey et al. 2009, p231). What we see at its core are issues of economic efficiency, equity and environmental protection and indeed it could be argued that there is a special relationship between tourism and the concept of sustainability as it is very rooted in the environment and society. Certainly the Tourism Sustainability Group (TSG) (2007) suggests that because this relationship is manifest in quality environments, cultural distinctiveness and such like, ‘tourism can be a destroyer of these special qualities which are so central to sustainable development … (or) … can be a driving force for their conservation and promotion’ (p.2). Consequently tourism and its integration into the rural product can be very much part of: developing employment opportunities; increasing local prosperity; raising awareness of the importance of environment and its conservation and maintenance and generally ensuring a greater spread in terms of who can benefit (economically and socially) from a suitably designed and managed
tourism sector. It has the potential to embrace many of the issues central to the national park idea.

It is of little surprise that sustainable tourism has often been depicted as a key mechanism in fulfilling expectations of rural development (Sharpley 2000; Garrod et al. 2006; Saxena and Ilbery 2008). This has certainly been the case in the European context, with many new forms of rural tourism emerging across its landscape. Just as by its very definition rural development can become a conflictual process, bringing betterment for some (Shortall 1994), conflict is evident between the different interest groups as well as within those groups with a tourism affiliation (Butler 1998; Van Rensburg et al. 2002). Tension often emerges between those that emphasise a development approach and those who highlight the ecological perspective (McKercher 1993; Caffyn 2000). Sustainability itself may become a commodified product by the tourist sector (Hughes 1996). Engaging with each of these groups to achieve common ground is therefore likely to be an arduous business.

An adaptive approach

Sustainable development emphasises the inter-relationship between the human and physical environment and the competing aspects and priorities, thus presenting a flexibility and adaptability according to various situations (Kernel 2005). In this way options may be explored through the identification of priorities and the selection of favoured choices. Recognition is given to the fact that one person’s balance is another’s imbalance (Hunter 2002) in much the same way as for local rural development groups. Drawing from the International Guidelines for Sustainable Tourism the notion of adaptive management seems a useful concept in addressing sustainable tourism given the complexity of the issues and subsequent tension that is likely to arise (Reed 1999). The key to adaptive management is that it embraces uncertainty in that where a policy is successful, the approach is validated but when there are problems or a policy is seen to fail, then the adaptive approach ‘is designed so that learning occurs, adjustments can be made, and future initiatives can be based on the new understanding’ (Lee 1993 cited in Reed 1999, p.335).

In the paradigm of adaptive management the whole notion of collaboration between different interest groups and the identification of shared desires is central, given there are myriad opportunities for rural areas to benefit from their natural resources. This is especially true where rural areas compete for visitors largely because they are drawing

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from the same resource and due to changing demands on rural areas – the shift towards multi-functionality including the repositioning of agriculture in relation to tourism and recreational activities. Consequently adopting what has been called an ‘adaptive paradigm’ (Hunter 1997 p.864) facilitates application to very different situations and so supports the articulation of different goals in terms of the use of natural resources as ultimately determined by the circumstances and needs of the destination. Priorities will change in line with particular situations, but development will be sensitive to economic, environmental, social and cultural impacts. This adaptive approach pays attention to the fact that different groups can have different values and needs as, for example, ecological conservation objectives may be incompatible with the desires of local communities (Stocking and Perkin 1992) or the various levels of public participation possible may be insufficient (Pretty and Pimbert 1995). Understood in this way, the sustainable tourism paradigm transcends more traditional notions of tourism that are ‘overly tourism-centric and parochial’, grasping only fragments of the total, namely visible processes and impacts relating to the industry (Hunter 1997, Gössling 2000). Instead it embraces an integrated approach, focusing on matters that relate to space, place and territory and issues contained therein. Thus not only is the welfare of the population relevant, but among others, so too are environmental and cultural issues. Although the adaptive paradigm is fairly malleable (Weaver 2004), it provides a framework to consider dynamics including discourse, power, knowledge, development, growth and equity that arise as social actors collaborate (Hall 1997 and 2003; Hunter 1997; Sharpley 2000; Saarinen 2006; Wallace and Russell 2004). In this way it echoes the governance approach that forms the backbone to the new rural paradigm (OECD 2006).

The Case Study

Since the signing of the historic Northern Ireland Good Friday Agreement in 1998, its society has experienced considerable change. One of these changes has been the so-called ‘peace dividend’ which has resulted in the growth of tourism. In 2007 tourism continued to grow with visitor and domestic revenue exceeding £535 million and expansion of the main markets of Europe, USA and Australia/New Zealand continuing through 2007 but declining thereafter as a result of the impact of the global economic recession (NITB – Tourism Facts 2007, 2008 & 2009). Although numbers are expected to fall as a result of the global economic crisis, tourism in NI supports almost 30,000 full-time equivalent jobs (NITB – Tourism Facts 2007) and is now on a par with

the agricultural sector which was traditionally seen as the mainstay of the rural economy. The Tourist Board aims to increase visitor numbers from 3.2 to 4.5 million and virtually doubling existing revenue from tourism to £1billion by 2020 (DETI 2010). A focal point for visitors since the Victorian era, the Mourne Area is shown in Figure 1 and its location in Ireland in Appendix 1. It remains a popular attraction in NI today and is one of five signature projects selected by the NI Tourist Board (NITB). With estimated annual visitor numbers to the High Mourne Area exceeding 200,000 (interview with Mourne Heritage Trustee), it is surpassed in popularity only by the Giant’s Causeway and Causeway Coast destination in Antrim.

**Figure 1: The Mourne Mountains**


The proposed Mourne National Park, is designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and covers around 570km², see Figure 2. National Park designation was historically tied up with complex politics; originally in an attempt to strengthen unionist ties by mirroring legislation in Britain in the wake of the Second World War. Thus as far back as the 1940s five areas, including the Mournes, were recommended for National Park designation by an Amenity Committee, operating under appointment by the NI Minister of Home Affairs (Buchanan 1982). Local resistance, apparent since
these earlier proposals, has been a major reason why designation has not yet come to fruition.

**Figure 2: Designations of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty in Northern Ireland**

Source: © Crown copyright and database rights.

The special qualities of the Mourne area, including the historical and cultural customs and the rich land use traditions, were noted by Evans (1967). Its landscape comprises a spectacular coastline, twelve significant peaks, a high granite wall, walking trails, state forests and interesting topography. Its archaeological landscape, such as that depicted in Figure 3, reflects an area rich with heritage and tradition and one where ‘unifying geological, natural and cultural factors ... have shaped the living landscape we see today’ (Alison Farmer Associates and Julie Martin Associates 2005, p.28). For instance the dry stone walls are a distinctive feature and the Mourne Wall was constructed in the first couple of decades of the twentieth century with the dual objectives of creating employment and of enclosing the water catchment in the area.
Small scale quarrying provides stones for ongoing wall maintenance of the main Wall and for boundary walls within small-holdings.

**Figure 3: The distinctive Mourne landscape**

![The distinctive Mourne landscape](http://www.istockphoto.com/)


The Mourne Area has a fragile and fragmented economy and relies on agriculture, tourism, self-employment and commuting (Mack et al. 2006). Specific activities include farming, forestry, fishing, mineral extraction, water supply, tourism and recreation. Tourism related activities provide up to 15% of employment (Colin Buchanan and Partners Limited 2006); meanwhile some 53 per cent of the land is actively farmed and is in small-holdings (average farm size is 15 hectares) with approximately 1500 landowners (Haydon 2007). Much of the uplands and High Mournes are in large holdings with ownership residing with Mourne Trustees, Water Service, Forest Service and the National Trust.

The Mourne Heritage Trust has been actively involved in management since 1997. The Trust aims to strike a balance between those farming the land and those who wish to access the land for recreational purposes, while at the same time maintaining its environment (Mourne Heritage Trust4). The aims of the proposed national park resonate with the Trust’s goals, having many common features including: sustainable

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use of resources; enhancement and preservation of the cultural heritage; and the promotion of economic and social development. Indeed, the Trust’s position statement of 2005 recognised this complementarity and indicated its support for park designation. Part of the Trust’s rationale for supporting national park status is to allow it to establish a proactive, long-term management plan. Currently it operates on a piecemeal funding system, with local government monies being awarded on an annual basis. Overall, although the area covers approximately the same area and has a similar population as the New Forest in England, the Trust’s annual income of £320,000 is under 10% of the New Forest managing body. Given these limited resources, the Trust has major concerns relating to its ability to effectively manage the Mourne natural resource, and to the ongoing depletion of that resource due to fairly widespread public access. Essentially it is convinced that the area is currently deteriorating at a rate that exceeds the Trust’s capacity to manage that resource (Interview with Mourne Heritage Trustee).

**Achieving community consultation – articulating community needs**

The shifting power base among rural development actors was noted earlier. Power in social life is considered ‘in terms of agents’ abilities to bring about significant effects, specifically by furthering their own interests and/or affecting the interests of others, whether positively or negatively’ (Lukes 2005:65). Within any one group there may be multiple and conflicting interests including environmental, cultural, social and economic priorities. The following analysis of a consultation process considers how socially situated actors negotiate their position to further their interests (Isaac 1987).

**Legitimacy of partnerships and processes**

In the past the legitimacy with which rural development partnerships operated raised questions in relation to both power and representation. The establishment of consultation structures within the Mourne area very clearly demonstrates the importance of process and of the actual and perceived legitimacy of that process. In this case defects appeared throughout. In 2002 a report commissioned by the NI Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) identified the Mourne area as being the most suited for national park status. Following this study, the then Minister of the Environment, Dermot Nesbitt, announced that he would be working towards creating a national park in Mourne. Meanwhile a Department of Environment 2004 report states that ‘Shared Horizons signals the Department of the Environment’s intentions to...take forward proposals for the designation of a national park in the Mournes’ (2004, p.3). In conjunction with this political backing, the Mourne National Park Working Party
(MNPWP) was established in 2004 following public consultation. Its membership was comprised of representatives primarily from the statutory and voluntary sectors including the local council, the National Trust, Mourne Trustees and the Mourne Heritage Trust. There was a small representation of the private sector through two farming bodies and a business network. Representation was therefore achieved through formal structures. The remit of the Working Party was to consult on proposals regarding boundaries of the park and on a management structure before making recommendations to government. It ceased operating in 2007 following the closure of the consultation process. Despite the stated aspirations of the Ministers, the MNPWP was not charged with consulting on whether or not the public wished to see a national park. Its role was about ‘opening up debate and providing information about a potential park’ (MNPWP 2007:11). Not surprisingly there was a perception that the Working Party was a ‘smoke screen’ for a ‘done deal’ (Minutes 28.10.04: item 3f). So even though the government attempted to hand a degree of power over to the locality, asymmetric power relations were evident with the belief that decisions were made outside of the control of the local body. In other words the consultation process did not ask the fundamental question: do you want this area designated as a national park? This was simply outside the remit of the Working Party.

The power differentials among interested groups were significant towards the end of the consultation process, with Mourne Trust nominees resigning from the Working Party due to ‘a lack of knowledge, understanding and inadequacy in reporting the views pressed home on the Committee during the public and sector consultations’ (Nominees of the Mourne Trustees: n.d.p.3). Essentially they were led to believe they could submit a minority report alongside the main report to the minister that would ‘reflect more adequately and in as faithful a manner as possible the views of the public’ (ibid). When the time came they were refused permission to do so by the MNPWP Chair and were instead advised to submit a position paper. This option was not considered tenable by the Trustees as they believed that it would run counter to the consultation process by influencing the minister’s position before the publication of the main report.

Equally, the way in which the final report was presented was considered problematic by the Mourne Trustees, as illustrated by the inclusion of a slide during a public presentation to indicate no intention to stop mineral extraction at present. Mourne

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5 The Mourne Trustee Groups came into existence following the breakup of the Landed Estates from 1880 onwards. The combined Trustees groups are the legal owners of about 25,000 acres of the High Mournes (http://www.mournetrustees.org/html/about_us.html, last accessed 19.03.10).
Trustee Nominees point out that this was interpreted by an ill-informed public as a possible intention to close this down at some future point. Similarly concerns around landowners’ liability were prominent among the farming community. The consultation indicated a belief among landowners that they were at that time liable for any injury experienced by anyone entering their land. It revealed a strong fear of litigation among this group of stakeholders. There were obvious tensions between landowners and other interest groups.

Basic process issues appeared to be flawed; the manner in which the consultation was operationalised had evident shortcomings. Fundamentally, although the MNPWP had been established by the then EHS to consult with the public on management issues, the Environment Minister also commissioned consultants to undertake additional research on boundary options (Alison Farmer Associates and Julie Martin Associates 2005); on the impact of designation (Judith A. Annette Countryside Services 2006); and on socio-economic implications (Mack et al. 2006). Not surprisingly there was a lot of bewilderment and suspicion about these ongoing consultations and research and perhaps more importantly, there was confusion regarding the ramifications arising from the resulting plethora of reports.

The capacity of individuals within the community was constrained; they were not entirely free to act according to their inherent values and beliefs. In this way power was mobilised, individuals were unaware of their real interests and the idea that ‘the community understands its own problems through frameworks that are in fact inadequate to address its own goals’ was applicable (Ron, 2008:4). Perceptions of forces that were stronger than that of the newly created ‘sustainable tourism’ structures served to undermine the process. By superimposing the Working Group onto other policy apparatus, government failed to appreciate the importance of an integrated approach. But more than this, the community remained in a weak position to exercise change; the consultation was bounded by the terms set out by the powerful partner, in this case the government. Even those within the consultation apparatus were not entirely free to express opinion in a way that they considered appropriate.

**Negotiating interests: social, cultural, economic and environmental**

Even though it is perhaps only in more recent decades that tourism and the particular challenges that this sector poses for rural areas has been linked with the notion of sustainability, tourism is continually engaged with and interpreted in different ways, at different levels and by different groups. But within the tourism sector, power is evident
as a capacity, a ‘potentiality that may never be actualised’ (Lukes 2005:69) as the government continues to set a higher agenda. Tourism objectives are articulated by central government in figures, for instance in 2008 the Tourism Minister in NI described plans to increase visitor numbers and visitor spend, this emphasis on visitor numbers and revenue continues in the current draft strategy (DETI 2010). Meanwhile the DoE highlight the fact that ‘suggested aims for Northern Ireland’s national parks draw on recognition of several well-developed sustainable tourism and rural socio-economic development initiatives in areas of special landscape significance in Northern Ireland’ (DoE 2004:14). In this way environmental and ecological aspects are set aside from socio-economic development. There is also evidence of commodification of the ‘green’ label with the view held by a tourist provider that ‘We increasingly sell Ireland as a ‘green’ destination, so a designation like national park might help’ (Colin Buchanan and Partners Ltd 2006:29). By focusing on the economic gains of rural tourism, strategies are developed that attract tourists to rural areas (for example what marketing tools to use; what range of activities need to be provided) rather than address their likely impact on arrival.

This parochial approach to tourism and a failure to conceive tourism as part of a more integrated sustainable paradigm is problematic as it overlooks potential tension arising from competing interests. Tension between achieving the objectives of sustainable tourism was evident in the recommendations made by the Working Party. Support for ‘the retention and appropriate development of existing and new industries and a diverse economy’ (p14) is specified in the first recommendation. Meanwhile recommendation three draws attention to environmental protection while supporting existing farming and other businesses and also diversifying the economy. The theme of further economic development is continued in numerous recommendations, including thirteen as it draws attention to the inadequacy of the current infrastructure to meet the needs of existing visitors. As well as considering the capacity of facilities, it specifically calls for improved transport infrastructure. Mourne Heritage Trust recognises that farming alone is insufficient to sustain the livelihoods of the local population and so it is keen to support an economically responsible and sustainable programme of economic activity. Meanwhile the position of the Mourne Trustees is clear as they ‘regard the protection and preservation of the environment as the top priority in any management system and do not agree with the view frequently expressed by some members of the Committee during the open consultations that the promotion of tourism should be the main driver for the establishment of a national park in the Mournes’ (Nominees of the Mourne Trustees (n.d.) p.5).
The concept of development was contentious and the Working Party was clear that the consultation had provided a divided response on planning issues: ‘Some wanted to see a proposal that would stop inappropriate developments being built in the area, while a significant number were concerned that there would be increased planning restrictions’ (p.29). The interests of the farming community on this issue remain clear (see Figure 4) and ‘At the open meeting held in Newry in early December farmers gave a resounding ‘no’ to the proposal for a national park in the Mournes although at the moment they did not know what they were saying ‘no’ to’ (Meeting 6:16.12.04).

**Figure 4: Illustration from the Independent Report of the Mourne Trustees to the Mourne National Park Working Party**

![Illustration](source: Nominees of the Mourne Trustees (n.d.). Reproduced with permission.)

Parochial perspectives were evident with Nominees of the Mourne Trustees stating that the Report emerging from the consultation ‘gives undue weight to the submissions made not only by what could be fairly described as vested interest groups ... and largely ignores the views of well informed local people who articulated their concerns, views and opinions firmly in the course of the open consultations’ (Nominees of the Mourne Trustees, n.d.).

Uncertainty and fear of what national park designation might mean for local farming families resulted in a mentality of opposition, with agricultural buildings being erected as a precaution against anticipated future restrictions (Interview with local landowner). While there is a sense that regulation is necessary, many also believed that this should be simplified. Figure 5 depicts the frustration felt within the farming community with regard to the ostensible overload of designations that exist to protect the local environment including Area of Special Scientific Interest and Countryside Management Scheme.
At the same time the official sponsors assert that the ‘designation should reflect the national importance of the Mourne landscape. It must also have the support of the people who live and work in the Mourne area, as well as those who visit the area for recreation and in doing so, support the local economy’ (EHS 2004: leaflet). In this way the whole notion of the national park achieving sustainable tourism seems promising, possibly even naive as there is little indication of how exactly competing interests are to be reconciled. What we see emerging are a number of very different contestations with no overall agreement on how a sustainable tourism paradigm, that is the environmental, social, economic and cultural interests, is implemented. On the one hand how can environmental features remain protected while also allowing economic diversification and development?

The Working Party endeavoured to develop a consultation process that would accommodate many different interests. By avoiding catch-all public meetings and developing a programme of clinics, it hoped to ensure that the process would not get hijacked by an articulate group at the expense of other interest groups that are less able to voice their concerns (interview with Mourne Heritage Trustee). Even so, shortcomings were evident, and these were often noted by members of the Working Party, such as the lack of resources that meant the Mobile Information Unit did not
travel outside the area (Minutes 19.10.06 and 18.04.07). Furthermore, there was a perception among some of the Working Party that their attempts to consult were overshadowed by other national park consultation activity, with evidence of a ‘flying squad’ of consultees attending connected public meetings and their viewpoints being given unequal weight (interview with Mourne Heritage Trustee).

Meanwhile the government stated that it does ‘not consider that the current provisions for occupiers’ liability are a barrier to access...There is no known reported case of adult trespassers successfully suing a landowner because of an injury caused due to natural features arising in the countryside’ (DoE DFP Information Leaflet ND, pp. 1 and 7). Only months after making this statement, the government announced that it was allocating half a million pounds for access management in the Mournes, to include helping landowners deal with their access problems (press release NI Executive, online accessed 24.04.08).

The nuances of the national park package and the fact that tourism is but one aspect of this, appeared to be overlooked by government, the body leading the consultation process. It neglected to consider the nuances of competing agendas and how these might be negotiated. This is critical as national park designation is concerned with nature conservation and landscape protection alongside promotion to, and enjoyment by, the public (Buchanan 1982). Public and private goods are produced and tourism is but one facet of the national park package.

Policy and governance coherence

The national park debate in Northern Ireland has long been ensconced in local and regional politics. Even though national parks were mooted back in the post-war period, the mechanisms of regional governance required some tinkering to support their establishment in the twenty-first century. While the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (NI) Order 1985 permits the designation of National Parks by the DoE, the legislation falls short of providing a framework that supports their management. Not only was the basic legal framework missing, but legislative mismatch emerged as a result of wider policy decisions and legislative changes emerging following the Good Friday Agreement. The Review of Public Administration (RPA) commenced in 2002 in an attempt to develop administrative arrangements to meet the needs of a devolved government. The delays in the implementation of the RPA were viewed by members of the Working Party to have held back the development of a legislative framework for establishing a National Park in NI and so they felt that ‘the gap is widening between the
consultative and legislative processes’ (minutes 19.10.06: item5). At the time of writing a paper on the subject of national parks is being presented to the NI Executive and it is expected that it will take nearly two years to get through the process of public consultation and become legislation. After that point the Heritage Trust aims to promote the Mourne Area as a pilot National Park (interview with Mourne Heritage Trustee).

As this analysis reveals the Mourne National Park debate goes beyond blinkered conceptions of tourism such as increased footfall through visitor numbers. Deliberations touch on social, economic, cultural and environmental matters so that matters pertaining to structures, management, designation and planning were all at the heart of public debate. Perhaps not surprisingly, the concept of development was particularly contentious and it is notable that the direction from central government was ambiguous. In keeping with AONB designation, the Mourne AONB was established in 1966 "largely to allow detailed scrutiny of planning applications" (DoENI, 1989). This function has long since been separated from AONB designation, with Countryside Policy Areas as part of the development plan process managing planning issues. Despite this the Northern Ireland Landscape Character Assessment⁶ identifies damage to the Mourne landscape following dispersed housing settlements, poorly sited dwelling and intrusive industrial and ribbon development. Further, the consultation on the AONB Management Plan revealed concern around ‘Inappropriate and often unsympathetic development, inconsistent planning design’ (Mourne Heritage Trust 2010, p. 9). The plan supports the development of additional [affordable] housing along with consistent approaches to planning. Nonetheless planning legislation in the countryside demonstrates an unconfident and incoherent approach from regional government. Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 14 presumed against development in the countryside and came under much criticism from a number of groups including the agricultural community (although it was supported by others such as Friends of the Earth⁷). It was superseded in 2008 by PPS 21 and the Environment Minister stated that it ‘offers a number of development opportunities which did not exist in draft PPS14 which will benefit non-farming rural dwellers as well as farmers’⁸. There was similar tension between viewpoints rippling through to the Working Party: ‘Some wanted to see a proposal that would stop inappropriate developments being built in the area, while a

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⁶ http://www.ni-environment.gov.uk/landscape/country_landscape.html, last accessed 15 July 2009
⁷ http://www.foe.co.uk/northern_ireland/press_releases/comment_pps14_judgement.html, last accessed 15 July 2009
significant number were concerned that there would be increased planning restrictions' (MNPWP, p.29).

Achieving sustainable tourism through governance will only be attainable if the policy infrastructure is compatible. This requires intervention from beyond the locale, from regional and indeed European governments. Otherwise local activities will clash with policies that, rather than nurturing their development, weaken their very existence.

**Conclusions**

There are persistent difficulties regarding the power afforded to local actors/partnerships within rural governance (Derkzen et al. 2008; McAreavey 2009). The national park debate crystallises many of these issues. The case study has revealed how policy must be cognizant of the political nature of achieving consensus within sustainable tourism. What is patently evident is that there are multiple stakeholders and a wide array of interest groups that can all make legitimate claims on an area; conflict is inevitable and unavoidable as particular groups strive to achieve dominance. Understanding this and realising the interrelationship between tourism, the environment and local communities is of crucial importance. Adaptation, collaboration, consultation with stakeholders, however complex these activities may be - are critical to any long term perspective of what could be termed a successful sustainable rural tourism approach.

Transparency must prevail, otherwise many actors operate within a position where they remain unclear of the ‘rules of the game’ and a powerful body, typically government, assumes a position of strength, having the capacity to override decisions made at the local level. Real interests may be obscured if individuals do not understand how to structure or frame particular social issues, challenges and problems. So while an individual may be able to express preferred options, all the while real interests may be undermined if that person is unaware of or unable to select a course of action not encompassed within the proffered choices. This has resonance with Arnstein’s (1969) discussion about how information is presented: is it understood, does it make sense, do the ‘listeners’ have the skills to understand and question the matters that are discussed? Local structures must not impose an overly bureaucratic process. It should not be forgotten that while government may be powerful in one respect, local communities may exert power in other ways such as undermining consultation processes. As Derkzen et al. (2008) remind us, such asymmetrical power relations are less of a problem than we might think. Perhaps what is more critical is that partners –
funding bodies, accountable agents and animators - establish trusting and meaningful working relations that allow power relations to ebb and flow and ultimately ensure partnerships are more than a 'smoke screen' for ownership.

If we accept that sustainable tourism encompasses something that is more far reaching than tourism as visitor numbers but that different groups value different aspects of the concept, we must also accept that there will be conflict between these various groups. How to negotiate between them and having a political framework in place to aid this process will inevitably determine the extent to which any agreement reached will be upheld. Consequently, as Crouch (2006, p.355) suggests, while it is familiar to 'point to the increasing significance of tourism in the rural economy, and tourism's agencies as producer, generator and power for change', it is also fair to suggest that despite its growing importance there is still a dearth of specific rural tourism policies or appropriate political frameworks in place. European guidance on rural development identifies the need for consistency with other EU policies such as economic cohesion and the environment⁹. But it falls short in offering a perspective that provides guidance in cases where competing interests prevail. The governance of national parks in England and Wales offers a possible solution. The Sandford Principle, which is enshrined in statutory policy in England and Scotland (Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs 1995) gives priority to conservation objectives when land use conflicts arise. Without a means whereby conflict can be negotiated and even where ultimate priorities are known (such as protection of the environment) implementing initiatives with competing interests could jeopardize development opportunities. A question for the rural tourism actors must be posed: is sustainable tourism first and foremost about diversification of the economy, or can conservation and environmental interest's override economic objectives? This harks back to debate during earlier rural development programmes regarding economic versus community development objectives (see for example Shortall 1994).

Adaptation is a tricky business. The case study revealed the entrenched position of some interest groups as they expressed their preferences. Ron (2008) reminds us that real interests differ from preferences and wants and so it is the case that all partners have a responsibility to ensure that selected courses of action are in their real interests. This may cut across short term gains and require individuals and organisations to take what could be perceived as risks. The influence of policy must not be overlooked: it has the potential to create conditions that support any necessary risk taking and to provide

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direction on strategic priorities for cases where conflict will inevitably arise. Recognising the power of the state is essential to this debate: the state not only initiates regional co-operation and therefore local governance, but as Bocher reminds us ‘regional cooperation still needs an incentive from outside’ (2008 p.385). It is nonetheless imperative that this incentive is conducive to, and coherent with, any activity that is promoted within territorial programmes, be they for sustainable tourism or rural development per se. Outright contradictory policies, or weak policy direction, within the layers of governance are not helpful. In fact, whether it is at global, national or local level, the development of sustainable rural tourism, however defined, suggests at minimum the need for synergy of purpose within and between communities, vested interests, individuals, state bodies and other stakeholders. The achievement of harmonious policies and practice is not a straightforward task.

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Appendix 1: Location of the Mournes