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Full proceedings may be found at www.gmfreeireland.org/conference

JOHN BRENNAN • Speech on EcoTourism

Manager, Leitrim Organic Farmers Cooperative
www.leitrimorganic.com



John Brennan is the Manager of the Leitrim Organic Farmers Cooperative, which is a member of the Greenbox EcoTourism project in the North West of Ireland.

See www.greenbox.ie for details.

This is the transcript of a video recording of the first of John's two speeches at the Green Ireland conference, edited for clarity

Much of this talk is a running commentary on the PowerPoint presentation:

Greenbox: Integrated EcoTourism in Ireland

which you can download as a large 5.1MB ppt file from www.gmfreeireland.org/conference/PPT/GreenBox.ppt

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I 'm actually here in a number of roles today. I have been involved with Michael in the GM-free Ireland Network, and also manage the largest organic cooperative in the country – the Leitrim Organic Farmers Cooperative – in terms of being a producer coop.

I listened to what Brody [Sweeney] had to say with a lot of interest. A lot of what he's talked about has already started, and I'd like to throw out a challenge to him.

The ultimate tourism experience is where it happens to you almost without your actually knowing it.

About three years ago, someone who would probably have liked to be here today, Conor Brennan, set up a brand called "Green Stuff", which was selling traceable Irish organic meat into London. Sadly he passed away this year, but had a tremendous vision for where Irish food should be, especially looking at it in terms of the UK. There's a place called the Borough Market which you probably know in London; at that time we were moving to set up a food hall there to showcase all the best of Irish organic food.

The other thing I would say on that, Brody, is that we need an awful lot more production as well to meet any of these large-scale ideas, and some of them are very good and they're novel.

Just on the eco-tourism front, without going into the slides, one of the best ever experiences I had as a tourist was in Umbria, in Northern Italy, back in 1998. It was something I picked up on offer in a newspaper, to stay at a rather large farm. It was what I would call real sustainable tourism. A place where you were fed, you enjoyed the walks, you enjoyed the woods. The farmer himself ran the place; he cooked the food, he was everywhere, he was down at your door in the morning; he was giving you olive oil, he was giving you bread, he was chatting about the football. And he was cooking in the evening, he was entertaining, and in fact I even spent a day at hay with him, which was a great bit of fun!

I think the ultimate tourism experience is the one where it happens to you almost without your actually knowing it. You're actually in the middle of it all, and it's only after you've gone home that you say to yourself, "God, did that really happen?" And the model of Euro-Disney that you painted is artificial and it never lives up to the dream; sometimes I think the kids are disappointed as well to some degree. But I do think that's a very good vision.

What's been attempted in the area of the country that I work in, is quite novel as well – the Greenbox thing.

There are two different types of tourism. You have sustainable tourism which is about minimizing the impact on the environment. And then you have eco-tourism which is about having positive impacts as well – to achieve a higher outcome in terms of environmental impact.

Looking at low-impact visitor behaviour: the type of activities that won't leave much trace behind.

Looking at the local culture and biodiversity: being sensitive to traditions in the area, and sustainable benefits to local communities. I see the issues in our own region: distance commuting to work, town and villages that are basically empty all day and devoid of activities for most of the week. Even farmers markets are hard to sustain because they nearly have to be on a Saturday or a Sunday. So that vibrancy that you want to bring in to a community cannot be achieved if we're going to continue working on the basis of attracting large multinational companies into urban centres.

The eco-tourism model would endeavour to create employment as well: more locally, the type of employment that allows for a better level of family life than we have at the moment.

We're looking at support there for conservation efforts.

Local participation in decision-making: the whole GM thing has highlighted the fact that decisions about the food we want to eat and the environment we want to live in are taken so far away from us.

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This whole GM movement is about re-gaining our ability to make decisions for ourselves on the type of environment and the food we want to eat in the future. That is reflected in what the Greenbox is about.

There is also the educational side for travelers and the local community.

The definition there of eco-tourism is travel that is small-scale, low impact, culturally sensitive, community- and conservation-orientated, primarily nature-based, educational, and capable of broadening people's minds, enlivening their souls while providing a unique experience firmly grounded in sustainable principles and practices. That is the modern definition of eco-tourism.

Tourism in Ireland has become urban-based. Most experiences are about coming to Dublin for weekends, or Cork or Galway, or flying in for quick breaks. And the tourists are not going out into the countryside, and those that do hire a car and have a quick spin around looking at Ben Bulbin in Sligo, going to a pub for a drink, and off they go! So we're not holding people in the countryside.

We really need to invest in the provision of accommodation facilities, and in something that gives people a unique experience. There is very low spend on product development under the National Development Plan. Tourism product development there is shown as 1% of forecast spend at €155.13 million; a lack of product development focus among tourism agencies; and revised regional tourism structures to change this.

The things that are making up the Greenbox to date: We're looking at things like the Kingfisher Cycling Trail, the Marble Arch Geopark. The good thing about the region we're in is it has so much natural beauty and already had some of all these things going, but a lot of it wasn't joined up. So the idea is that when you book through the Greenbox system, you can see all the different things that are on offer, and then create your holiday experience around those.

We are also lucky that we have resources such as the Organic Centre in Rossinver. We also have the Western Organic Network; this was set up to be a training network, but is now looking also at... It's fine having people trained, but as a friend of mine says, "How are we going to make a few quid?" The way that we see it happening is from an organic perspective: organic food becomes part of the tourism offering that's there.

At the moment within the Greenbox area there is an EU Flower Programme which is an accreditation for people who participate in it; there are points to be gained by people who produce local organic food. So you can very much use tourism to stimulate food production as well. I think that's a very good way.

Looking at the Sicilian model, down there virtually 70 to 80% of the food produced in Sicily actually goes to feed tourists, and they are very big on having as much produce as possible from the island.

The historical factor: having funding such as Peace money and Inter-Regional programmes as well has helped to fund this particular project.

Here is a picture of the Greenbox area. It roughly runs from Sligo across into Fermanagh, into South Donegal, back into Cavan and just skirts Monaghan and goes back down to the border with Roscommon. It's an area of outstanding beauty. It is an area where you can produce very good beef and high quality lamb. The Organic Centre has shown that you can also produce good quality vegetables if you use protective cropping, poly-tunnels, etc. So we know we can produce a lot of good food in the area to feed the tourists that come there.

Here is the history: a feasibility study carried out in 2002, funding approved in 2004, a steering group set up, and since then they have staff in place and we have a network of 82 members. Training is part of the thing: people need to understand what the product they are offering is about; they need to understand the certification programme, and the type of ethos behind an eco-tourism product. The Board representation is a partnership approach: Leitrim Co. Council, Fermanagh District Council, Fáilte Ireland, North-West Tourism, the Organic Centre, the Western Development Commission, and ICBAN – they are one of the funders and they administer INTER-REG funding in the Border Region. There is also private sector representation; Peter Quinn – Seán Quinn's brother of the Quinn Group – chaired the Greenbox in the early days.

The network comprises some 80 members in the following areas: you have accommodation, through organic operators all the way down there, and right at the bottom you have the Lá Nua cross-border group building ten eco-houses. This is quite a novel project: Lá Nua was set up after the Good Friday Agreement. I understand it's a branch of Sinn Féin; they have been heavily involved in the whole eco area in our Region, and this idea of taking ten houses and doing them up to an eco-tourism standard is certainly a novel one.

That's the funding. Under the INTER-REG Programme you have €867,000 spent over three years; €1.4 million in grant aid for Small and Medium Enterprises; Peace Funding of €298,000 over two years; and also matching funds from the International Fund for Ireland, the Western Development Tourism Programme, Fermanagh District Council, Leitrim Co. Council, and the private sector – quite a diverse range of funders. When you get buy-in from all of those different groups, it leads to a high impetus to make the project work.

The Greenbox company is working with product providers and communities, a team of six.

Eco-labels are a method of assessing environmental performance. The EU has developed a label for accommodation. The GreenBox has chosen this. Most countries now have some system in place. As far as I know the one we are now using is called the EU Flower. Within the accommodation, it encourages people to use environmentally friendly cleaning products such as Ecover, to reduce water consumption, to use double glazing – a lot of things that we should be doing as individuals now. The standard is quite basic, it's not difficult to attain, and it should be revised over a period as the project evolves.

Certification on standards; strong on renewable energy, cheaper commercial rates for members; strong on biodiversity; flexibility for different types of accommodation; you have to keep records; and it sits reasonably well with other quality ratings such as QA schemes etc. And there is a good focus on involving guests and staff.

There is also a training and mentoring programme. The mentoring is very good because it gives you one-on-one backup, so you have people to support you as you develop your guesthouse or whatever.

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They are trying to make it as un-bureaucratic as possible, because we all know that today if you're an organic farmer you have several different levels of paperwork, and we want to avoid another paper trail; so it's important to keep that down to a minimum and concentrate on the product.

Here is a map of the area.

Here are the participants to date: 12 B&Bs, 2 hotels, 3 self-catering providers, an activity and education centre, a hostel, a health farm, an eco-lodge, and one special needs provider.

The Greenbox wants to act as a guarantor of eco-tourism in the region. We want to provide a product that won't be dumbed down in any way over time, that will keep the standards up, with an emphasis on local food, all the visitor attractions, music, entertainment, arts, etc.

There is also capital development programme with small grants available to people who might be doing up accommodation, providing food: they have four flagship projects now, none of which have yet been announced; this is an opportunity for people in the region to do up accommodation, or to put in attractions to cater for tourists on farms etc.

Looking at the marketing of it, they're talking about branding, creating new products, adding value, small-scale events-based, niche marketing events, branding for various different markets, and the issue of carbon offset, green taxes, and leaving no trace on the environment. We are talking about traditional holiday breaks, the corporate environmental responsibility market. I didn't actually write this, so I'm not sure of all the different elements involved. Niche markets – caving is an area that we can exploit with some of the best caves in Europe. Green building is another aspect.

Ireland needs to have a strong policy at Failte Ireland and the Department of Tourism. Greenwashing is a constant worry with people either dumbing down the thing, or concern that it's not an authentic product.

Sustainable tourism is not eco-tourism. One of the big issues in our region is the danger of over-development. There are certain elements of construction in the region now that would certainly be at odds with what's desirable, given the type of eco-tourism product that's been developed. These are the things that need to be looked at for the future.

Just recently we had an eco-tourism conference in Carrick-on-Shannon with a range of international speakers, and it wasn't until then that we started to realize that the thing was actually happening. There is always the worry that "how do you get bang for your buck?" with anything involving a lot of agencies, but least we have a multi-agency approach involving the private sector to kick-start this in our Region.

This eco-tourism project could be replicated in other parts of the country. Things in Ireland sometimes happen in a non-joined up way in the various regions. People often say to me "organic farming seems to be synonymous with our area of the country", thinking that it's not happening in other regions.

We certainly need people with more vision, because agriculture will not survive and prosper in our region, as some of the earlier speaker said, by competing on the international scale.

We certainly need people with more vision, because agriculture will not survive and prosper in our region by competing on the international scale.

It's going to be about small-scale production, feeding into things like eco-tourism, providing very good experiences that encompass food and everything good that we have to offer locally.

Thank you.