

Leitrim — Ecotourism or Fracking?

Can we have both? Mary Mulvey GREENBOX



LEITRIM REMAINS one of the most biodiversity rich counties on island of Ireland. As well as our rich natural heritage of flora and fauna we have many resources that remain hidden and preserved in our farmlands and brens. The economics of agriculture has also ensured that many farmers have embraced Reps and other EU programmes that have added much value and enriched this biodiversity further over the past 20 years.

Leitrim is home to the Organic Centre which is based in Rossinver. A large number of organic farmers operate in the county, maintaining an organic co-op as well as holding an organic mart in Drumshanbo regularly. Drumshanbo is also home to the 'Food Hub' as well as the National Organic Skillnet Training project. Since mid-2005 Leitrim has also been recognised as the source of best practice in developing standards for ecotourism on the island of Ireland.

The Greenbox Project has a cross border remit covering Co Fermanagh, parts of south Donegal, Counties Leitrim, Cavan, and Sligo. The project oversaw the investment of over 4 million euro in a wide range of activities and businesses including: The Leitrim Sculpture Centre; the Lough Allen Adventure Centre, as well as rolling out training programmes such as the training that enabled the Bush Hotel in Carrick On Shannon to gain EU Recog-

nition for Communicating its EU Flower Label, the Ecolabel for the hotel.

Leitrim was the unknown county in Irish tourism and broke onto the international scene with 3 Global Awards for the Greenbox project in 2007 including an award from the World Tourism Council. This project has hosted study visits from a wide variety of national and international projects including a ten person delegation from the state administration of West Virginia, a group from East Galway as well as from the Burren and has hosted two international conferences with study trips to many eco enterprises.

But what you might ask does Leitrim offer the ecotourist? They seek local food, small scale accommodation, culture, heritage, and nature based experiences. In particular, they seek a chance to experience what local life is like in Leitrim. This type of tourism has real long-term potential and great spin offs for everyone in the local economy. It benefits a wide range of people including farmers, butchers, publicans, restaurateurs and other service sectors.

Many studies have proven that the low leakages that occur from tourism and much of the visitor spend will stay in the local economy and provide part time employment.

The ecotourist comes all year round. Recreational educational tourism is on the rise. Ecotourists come to learn

many of the available skills ranging from an organic course to yoga to traditional craft making. Tourists may also attend one of the many summer schools or festivals covering music, art, literature and film or the more recent addition of the Inspirational Homes of Leitrim Green Door weekend.

The Celtic tiger will leave lasting scars both on the Irish memory and our landscape. We have many examples on our Leitrim landscape of public and local policies that didn't work for the benefit and future of all in our society. We saw the short term jobs boom in construction and the results of a housing stock that didn't bring renewal to our rural communities.

In 2011 the newly elected government highlighted tourism in the national recovery plan as having the potential to play a big part of the future of our economic recovery. Ecotourism has been highlighted as a potential growth product in this tourism mix. If Leitrim continues to further develop a quality ecotourism sector, it can provide a long term economic sustainability for its people. The Leitrim of 2011 is a mosaic of a wide range of people like myself who moved to Leitrim.

Eco-tourism embraces sustainability in a new type of tourism, which will endeavour to ensure the touristic area keeps its unique landscape and culture, and provides an authentic experience for the visitor.

Leitrim has a long and rich legacy of mining and energy innovation. According to Drumshanbo Energy Heritage in 1906 Drumshanbo was the first rural town in Ireland to have domestic electricity. This was hydro-generated from the local millrace and remained in place until the ESB Rural Electrification Scheme 50 years later. Electricity generation continued in this area with the opening of the ESB's first major power station in Connaught in 1958. This exploited the abundant availability of coal from the Lough Allen Coal Field until its closure in 1990. The mining heritage of Iron ore/bauxite from Sliabh an Iarainn, coal mining in Arigna and the ESB power station in 1970s provided a boom in the economy of Leitrim. The legacy of mining today remains as ruins in the hills and the profits have long gone from the area with those jobs. A visitor centre employing ex miners has been developed

The writings of Robert John Kane were explored in a symposium in Drumshanbo in April: www.rjkenergy.com. Sir Robert John Kane 1809-1890 was commissioned by the Royal Dublin Society (RDS) to conduct what turned out to be the world's first energy cost benefit analysis. This was first published on June 1st 1844 and analysed the 'Position of the Lough Allen Coal Field...and...its productiveness'.

Leitrim is set to become part of the Marble Arch Global Geopark, an area with a UNESCO designation which will also embrace Co Cavan. This unique landscape designation can provide a seal of approval for the visitor demonstrating that the locality wishes to manage and

conserve its geological heritage.

In 2011 a new source of energy exploration — shale gas exploration has come to Leitrim, Fermanagh and the North West with many promises of employment for the county. Unlike the tapping of resources in the past, this process does not come with a good track record from other countries where it is used, a particular case in point being the USA. Fracking can also affect many other sectors ranging from agriculture to ecotourism. According to the industrialists involved here, Ireland is to get the world's first chemical free fracking, never tested before!

This extract from the EU Directorate—General for Internal Policies, Policy Department, on the Impacts of shale gas and shale oil extraction on Environment and on human health is informative.

The technology of hydraulic fracturing has a significant impact in the USA, which at present is the only country with several decades of experience and long-term statistical records. The technology for shale gas development has characteristics which partly show unavoidable environmental impacts, partly have a high risk if the technology is not used adequately and partly have a possible high risk for environmental damages and hazards to human health even when applied properly.

One of the unavoidable impacts is huge land consumption and major landscape changes as the well density must be very high in order to fracture the source rocks at large scale for access to the stored gas. The individual well pads — in the USA up to 6 well pads per

km or even more are reported — must be prepared, developed and connected by roads which are accessible for heavy duty transport. Producing wells must be connected by gathering lines with low throughput, but also with purging units to separate waste water and chemicals, heavy metals or radioactive ingredients from the produced gas before it is pumped into the existing gas grid.

There are a wealth of arguments for and against this process. However, we need to ask what will be the legacy of the infrastructure of fracking? What will the effects be on water tables and ecology. The legacy of other energy extractions may have left visual scars of abandoned mines and workers with health problems so we must ask what the legacy fracking will leave? Why have many countries banned this activity ranging from France to Canada?

Can Leitrim afford to take such a gamble with its long-term future, and risk the demise of losing its green and eco credentials of ecotourism, artisan food and nature experiences. Is fracking and ecotourism compatible? Why have many countries banned or issued moratoriums on this activity including France, the UK and Canada? The cultural legacy of John McGahern's writings on the small holdings and lanes of Leitrim is a unique resource to allow the visitor discover and gain a great desire to explore the place before they ever come to Leitrim. It reflects a landscape and way of living that to date we have all been very proud of.

Do we want to change that?