

The Agenda emerging from 'The Survey of Burren Farm Families'

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(Commissioned by Burrenbeo Trust Ltd and Burren IFA)

Introduction

Burrenbeo Trust Limited (an independent, registered charity established to create a greater appreciation of the Burren as a living landscape) and the Burren IFA (the local branch of the national Irish Farmers Association established to represent the unique interests of Burren farmers at a national level) believe that farmers are central to the conservation and sustainable management of the Burren given that they own and manage the majority of land.

Both organisations are very clear that farmers have a critical role to play in the conservation of the Burren. In practice however, many of the decisions in relation to the Burren have been taken at a distance from the area and its farmers. Burrenbeo Trust and Burren IFA believed it was time to actively seek out the voices of the farming community and went on to collectively develop the research objectives.

The aim of the research, which was funded by the Heritage Council, was to explore Burren farm families' views on: the role of farming in the Burren; the Burren in general and the level of interest that exists among the families in becoming more actively involved in shaping the future of the Burren.

The key objectives of the research were:

- To identify the vision farm families have for the Burren;
- To explore farm families views on the role of farming in the Burren;
- To assess the level of interest among Burren farm families in becoming more actively involved in

shaping the future of the area.

The Research Methodology

The research had two distinct parts. The first part was the survey of a sample of farm households from across the Burren. The survey was undertaken through the completion of a questionnaire. The

questionnaire was administered by an interviewer, in the home of the farm family. The questions included in the questionnaire were identified and agreed by the Researcher and members of Burrenbeo Trust, the Burren IFA and other people involved in farming and the Burren.

The questionnaire was divided into five parts and included open and closed questions with both qualitative and quantitative answers. A total of four survey administrators were recruited and trained. The survey area was divided into four areas, the West, Central, East and Galway Burren. A number of key local farmers were identified in each area and these individuals assisted the survey administrators to identify an initial batch of potentially suitable survey respondents. The questionnaire was piloted with two different farm household types to assess its comprehensiveness and suitability for use with different household types. The survey was finalised following the experience of the piloting.

Survey respondents were selected from across the area, across the spread of ages, across the spread of household types (e.g. single person households, two person households, families with young children, families with older children, etc), across households where farming is a full time occupation and households where farming is part-time, across the spread of farm sizes, and included IFA members and supporters as well as non IFA Members and non –supporters (26 % of the survey respondents were not members of the IFA).

The second part of the research took the form of consultation meetings around the Burren to discuss the findings emerging from the research. The meetings were held in the evening in three locations (Lisdoonvarna, Carran and Tubber) in late April 2009. The purpose of the meetings was to give those who participated in the research and others an opportunity to shape and prioritise the issues emerging from the survey.

The farm families who participated in the research were invited to attend, as indeed were any other farmers in the area. A total of 85 individuals attended the consultations. These consultations all followed a similar format with a brief introduction and welcome, a presentation on the key findings emerging from the research and a discussion of these findings in smaller groups, with feedback to the larger group at the end of the evening. The participants at the evening consultations endorsed the findings emerging from the survey, while also adding weight and detailed examples of the issues in practice.

The Key Conclusions

The survey provides a broadly representative view of the opinions and experiences of what Burrenbeo Trust estimate to be '1 in 6 farm families' across the Clare/Galway Burren. It is interesting to note that this survey was the first time the views of farmers in the Galway Burren had been actively sought on Burren-related issues.

Burren farm families are long term residents who appreciate the Burren

The farm families surveyed had a long history of farming in the Burren, and three quarters had been farming in the area for more than 100 years, while more than a third had been farming for more than 200 years. The farm families were generally very positive in their descriptions of the Burren and their role as farmers in it, with a majority (72%) intending to continue farming in the area into the future.

There have been significant recent changes in farming practices in the Burren

Among the most significant changes that have taken place in farming in the Burren have been the changes in farming enterprises with significant numbers of farmers having gone into suckler beef farming, and substantial numbers having got out of dairy and sheep. The building of slatted sheds and the housing of animals over winter has also proved to be a significant change for the farmers, and indeed for the wider landscape as upland areas that used to be grazed in the winter are now underused and are slowly being taken over by scrub.

The key drivers of change at farm level

The key driver of change in farming practices has been the need to reduce the labour requirements and increase 'convenience'. This has been driven by an aging farming population and a growing level of part-time farming among the farming community. The availability of grant funding for the construction of slatted sheds and the advice that this is the way forward for farming can also be seen to have been strong incentives for farmers to build sheds. Changes at farm level can also be seen to be driven by concerns in relation to sustaining adequate income levels and increasingly a concern about the need to reduce the amount of costly external inputs required.

Key farming concerns

Many farm families' concerns focused on the restrictions imposed on them by an SAC designation, by national regulations (in relation to the spreading of slurry under the Nitrates directive and hedge cutting under Section 46 of the Wildlife Act) or by restrictions imposed as part of their participation in the REPS Programme. Farm families were also very concerned about the speed and extent of scrub infestation in the area. Profitability was another key concern for some farm families, who questioned their ability to

remain farming if profitability did not improve. Other concerns related to the difficulties associated with getting planning permission for family members to build homes on the farm, linked to the need to put in place family supports for aging family members. The destruction of habitat and the need for enhanced levels of conservation of the flora, fauna and walls and the management of the goat population were also identified as concerns for farming as indeed were pollution from slurry, the role of tourism and issues related to public access.

Local communities under pressure

Across the Burren there are a number of smaller rural communities feeling the pressure of an aging population and falling school rolls. In one or two communities the future of the local national school is in question. The post offices in many of these areas have closed with services now provided in larger towns. Individuals too have become increasingly socially isolated with the demise of the rural pub and the social fabric of communities. In some locations it is difficult to get broadband and mobile signals. The farming community's contact with the wider local community has also been reduced as many people now commute significant distances for work. It was also noted that there is less mixing of locals and new residents given that the opportunities for meeting have been reduced with the closure of local shops and businesses. Social isolation was also highlighted as an issue within the farming community.

The Role of Tourism in the Burren (from a farming perspective)

There would appear to be very limited connections between farming and tourism. Only a small number of farm families identified tourism either of concern or of interest to them. This is probably not surprising since only nine (8%) of the families surveyed had tourism-based businesses on their farm, with a further 11 household members employed off the farm in the tourism and hospitality sector. Where tourism was raised as an issue, there were some very diverse views. There was a strong view that issues threatening farm futures and the Burren landscape need to be addressed, before the Burren is further promoted as a tourism destination. Some farm families had no interest in tourism given that they and their farm were located in an area that tourists generally did not visit. Others simply had no interest in tourism although some expressed concerns about public access. Where individual families (16) were actively interested in tourism there was a view that tourism in the Burren tended to be focused on some key sites and locations (e.g. the Aillwee caves and the Cliffs of Moher). Most respondents were keen that methods and products should be developed to ensure the benefits of tourism would be spread across the wider community, while some clearly saw potential for family members to train and act as local guides for visitors to the area and indeed for farm families to work together to develop initiatives that would attract visitors to the farm as an additional source of income.

Public Access (from a farming perspective)

The issue of public access which was frequently linked to tourism was raised by farm families across the Burren. It was an emotive issue with two very different sets of responses. One response was that if the issue of liability was sorted and access was controlled and managed to ensure the privacy of the farm

family and the safety of livestock and crops, then there would be no problem with public access. A minority view linked to this was that access should be provided only in limited areas. The second response was scepticism about whether the issue of liability could be sorted and a view that public access and farming were generally not compatible.

The need to enhance levels of awareness of the Burren

The need for enhanced marketing of the Burren, locally, nationally and internationally was identified by a cross section of farm families who believed that marketing was needed to raise awareness of the uniqueness of the Burren as a landscape and as a habitat. The example of the Burren Beef & Lamb Producers Group was cited several times as an example of how the Burren could be used as a unique brand and quality symbol. It was suggested that further such initiatives could be developed. There was also a view that many local people had limited levels of awareness of the Burren and the role of farmers in conserving the Burren and that some work could perhaps be done with farmers and the local schools to ensure that young people growing up in the area were aware of the complexities and interdependencies associated with the landscape around them.

The role of farming in the Burren

The farm families surveyed believed that farming is central to the conservation of the unique landscape of the Burren. They saw farming and farmers as having a key role in controlling scrub and conserving the plant life of the Burren. They identified themselves as being knowledgeable about the wildlife and cultural history of the area but identified that they would like to learn more about not only the wildlife and cultural heritage of the area but also the archaeology, geology and plant life. Family and friends were identified as the most important source of knowledge about the Burren suggesting that there is a repository of local knowledge within the farming community in Burren that may have the potential to be shared with others.

The Role and Potential of Designations

There was no clear consensus about the role and value of designations in the Burren. Very few people were clear about what might be involved in either the possible UNSECO World Heritage site designation or indeed the UNESCO Geo-Park designation and as such were not able to give a clear response to either designation. Most people were however open, and in many cases keen, to learn more about what would be involved in such designations and what impacts they might have on their farming practices, thus enabling them to have a clearer position on the designations.

Representing the Views of Farming, Farmers and Farm Families

96% of the farmers believed that the voices of farmers needed to be better heard. Mechanisms identified that could be used to better represent the views of farmers were found to include one to one and group consultations linked to participation in decision making structures. Particular groups that were identified as having a role in representing the views of farmers included the Burren LIFE programme,

Burrenbeo Trust and the IFA locally and nationally. 73% of survey respondents agreed with the statement that 'There is an absence of a long term dedicated centre where farmers can go to get information and advice about the Burren'. Burren LIFE was seen by some to fill this role but its future remains uncertain as its funding is currently due to run out in 2009.

An organisation to represent Burren farm families?

The IFA, the Burren IFA, Teagasc, Burren LIFE and Burrenbeo Trust were all identified as having potential to represent the views of Burren Farm Families. In reality the views of farm families could be represented by a number of these groups in different ways, in different contexts. There is, it must be noted, some confusion between Burren LIFE and Burrenbeo Trust, probably because an individual who works for one organisation is very closely associated with the other. It is also the case that the Burren IFA currently only operates in the Clare Burren, although there may be potential for them to extend their remit and engage with the IFA parish structure in the Co Galway Burren, thus strengthening their ability to represent the views of farmers across the Burren.

A Possible Agenda

The current economic downturn poses unique challenges for farming, for the west and indeed for the communities and individuals who live and work in the Burren. Burren farmers also need to consider the implications and respond to the wind-down of the Burren LIFE Programme and the proposals emerging to designate the Burren as both a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a Geo-Park. This survey is therefore very timely in that addressing these challenges will undoubtedly require the adoption of new ways of working and new approaches to the management of scarcer resources.

This research has found that the Burren farming community are steeped in the heritage of the area, broadly appreciative of the landscape about them, keen to continue farming and are open to working with others to ensure the sustainable management of the Burren as a unique landscape.

This provides a very positive context both for the farming community to develop their role in the Burren and for other organisations working in the Burren to seek out and engage with the farming community. From this survey we can see that what is needed to enable this work to be progressed would include the following:

1 There is a need for ongoing and effective representation of the interests of Farmers and the Farming Community

Burrenbeo Trust, Burren LIFE, the Burren IFA and Teagasc all have roles to play in the ongoing collection and representation the views of farmers in the Burren. These groups also need to develop

meaningful feedback mechanisms to ensure that the farming community is up-to-date with progress.

2 **There is a need for ongoing pro-active involvement of the farming community in consultations and decision making about the Burren**

Burren farmers as the managers and owners of the majority of the land need to be consulted and centrally involved in decision making about the area.

3 **There is a need for the development of a shared vision and longer term management plan for the wider Burren, with farming as a central element of the plan and farmers involved in the development and management of the plan**

The Burren is a complex landscape with enormous potential that requires a multi-dimensional management approach. There is a need for all the various interest groups to work together to develop a shared vision and plan for the sustainable management of the area in the longer term. In this context consideration should be given to the establishment of a wider Burren Management Structure/Authority that would oversee the overall development and management of such a plan. To be effective this structure would need a long term commitment with associated resources and staffing.

4 **The farming community needs to, and is keen to, work with other groups and local communities to ensure the long term management of the Burren (ideally as part of the structure identified above)**

5 **The management of the Burren needs to be led by a locally based organisation that farm families trust**

Farm families work best with individuals that they know and trust. As such it is important that organisations working with, or indeed intending to engage with, the farming community, identify one or two key individuals who will work with, and establish relationships of trust over time with, the farmers. The management of the Burren needs a local structure (which involves active representation from the farming community) led by an organisation that farm families and others involved in the management of the wider local area trust.

6 **There is a need for more information and consultation with the farming community in relation to the possible UNESCO World Heritage Site and Geo-Park Designations and any other relevant options**

Farmers and farm households are keen to learn more about these proposed designations and how they might impact on their farming in real terms. Ideally farmers would like to learn about the designations from other farmers who are living and farming within these types of designations.

7 **There is a need for a regular and accessible forum where practical questions in relation to landscape management can be discussed and information shared**

- Key issues to be addressed for the farming community include:

- Scrub Control
- Control of goat population
- Securing some local flexibility in relation to the application of national restrictions

- 8 The Burren LIFE Programme needs to be extended and open for participation to all farmers within the Burren
- 9 There is a need for, and an interest in, the provision of further information and knowledge about different aspects of the Burren to farm families and to the wider local community particularly through the provision of walks and talks and work within the local schools.
- 10 There is need for the different interest groups working in the Burren to come together to develop a clear 'Burren' identity. This identity could be used to market, promote and raise awareness of the area and the products produced there. The development and marketing of this identity will need to be effectively resourced with skilled personnel.
- 11 Mechanisms need to be found to spread the benefits and income derived from tourism across the wider community of the Burren and the farming community in particular