

## 1.1 THE LANDSCAPES OF COUNTY CLARE

County Clare (shown in *Figure 1*) possesses a high diversity of landscapes, reflecting a wide range of landscape forms and elements that have been influenced by various human activities over time.

Lough Derg provides a natural boundary to the east and is fed by numerous rivers and streams, many of which weave their way through the extensive drumlin belt in the eastern part of the county. Other watercourses include the Graney, which rises from Lough Graney, nestled within the uplands of the Sliabh Aughties.

Considerable contrasts emerge between the east and west of the county, with extensive limestone areas composed of lower limestone pavements, pastures and loughs fringing the distinctive Burren uplands. The Fergus River, which rises above Corrofin, is a key landscape influence in the central part of the county, flowing through the county town of Ennis and feeding into the extensive Fergus estuary with its numerous islands and historical settlements. The Shannon estuary and its widening into the Atlantic has a profound influence along the south of the county, creating inlets and smaller estuaries. The Atlantic influence is seen along the extensive coastline, particularly in the rocky and dramatic coast on the north of Loop Head and indeed further along the coast in features such as coastal stacks and islands. The human impacts are evidenced along the Atlantic, with the high number of defensive promontory forts that provide distinctive punctuations along the coastal landscape.

Building on a pilot study undertaken in the late 1990s, the current study represents the first attempt to characterise, analyse and document the physical and historic landscape of the county in an integrated and comprehensive manner.

## 1.2 BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

In 1999, the Heritage Council commissioned ERM in association with ERA Maptect, to undertake a pilot landscape character assessment of County Clare. This earlier study assessed the capability of Geographical Information Systems (GIS) to aid the landscape character assessment process.

In August 2002, Environmental Resources Management Ireland (ERM), in association with ERA-Maptect, was commissioned by the Heritage Council to prepare a *Landscape Character Assessment of County Clare*.

This current, follow-up study aims to conclude the landscape character assessment of County Clare and to meet the following additional objectives:

- To demonstrate the value and importance of landscape character to all activities that may impact upon that landscape and also incorporate consideration of the value and importance of seascape and historical landscapes as integral elements of the landscape;
- To reflect an integrated approach to landscape development and management that characterises all landscape types in natural and cultural terms, and not solely as designated or special landscapes;
- To reflect quality of life aspects of the landscape throughout the study and to recognise the views and concerns of communities living and working within the Clare landscape; and
- To fully reflect the principles enshrined in the European Landscape Convention and the Draft Guidelines on Landscape Character Assessment.

### 1.3

#### *APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY*

The study has used accepted, systematic methods of landscape assessment<sup>1</sup> supplemented by recent guidance on landscape character assessment<sup>2</sup> and draft guidelines specifically designed for use in Ireland<sup>3</sup>.

Key elements of the study approach are outlined below:

- *Desktop Research and Familiarisation:* The information base of the pilot study was reviewed, supplemented and updated as appropriate. Any policy changes were integrated, as were any recent data derived from ecological or archaeological field work, new academic research and finalised technical reports. The County Galway LCA was also reviewed with a view to ensuring consistency in approaches and level of detail between the two neighbouring counties. The team also met with a number of key individuals and organisations to inform their understanding of local landscape character and forces for change.
- *Fieldwork:* Field surveys were undertaken, between 26 August and 12 September 2002. The fieldwork survey team was led by Ruth Minogue of ERM. The team consisted of four experienced landscape professionals. In addition, the team carried out coastal fieldwork to assist in the seascape analysis. Two further days of fieldwork were oriented towards the historic landscape and were undertaken on 25 and 26 September 2002; the historic landscape team was co-ordinated

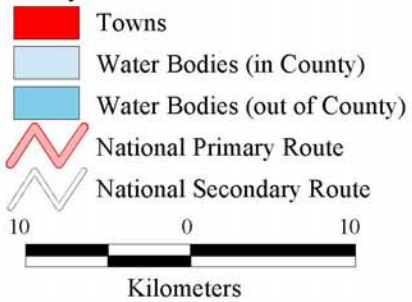
---

1 Countryside Commission, Landscape Assessment Guidance, CCP 423, Countryside Commission, Cheltenham, 1993.

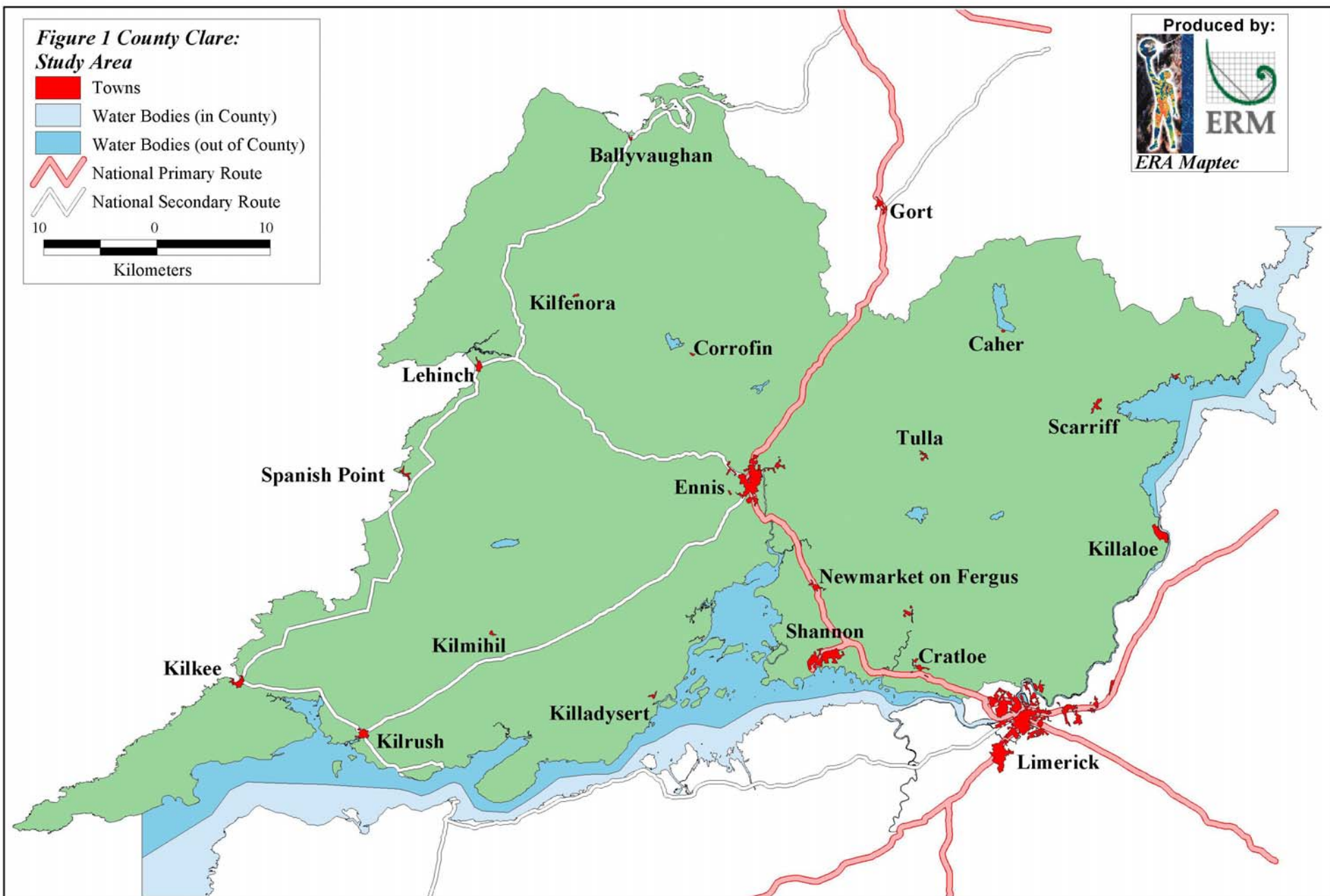
2 Countryside Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage, Interim Landscape Character Assessment Guidance, 1999.

3 Department of the Environment and Local Government, Landscape and Landscape Assessment, Consultation Draft of Guidelines for Planning Authorities, 2000.

**Figure 1 County Clare:  
Study Area**



Produced by:



in the field by Ruth Minogue and comprised Gina Johnson, David Sankey and Peter Marsden with specialist advice and guidance from Dr Pat Nugent.

- *Public Consultation:* A total of six workshops were held between 21 and 25 October 2002 at a number of locations within County Clare. These workshops were led by Sean O’Riordain and Ruth Minogue of ERM. A copy of the consultation report is presented in *Annex A*.
- *Report Preparation and Mapping:* Extensive use was made of the GIS in order to quantify LCTs within the county and to facilitate validation of boundaries identified through fieldwork and through the GIS analysis. The GIS was also used to provide baseline information on topics including glacial processes and land cover, to allow analysis of historic landscape elements and in the identification of lines of vision around the county.

#### 1.4 STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

This *Final Report* provides a detailed evaluation of the landscapes of the county, including historical landscape types and seascape character areas. This discussion on the landscapes and seascapes of the county is augmented by the identification of forces for change within the county.

This report has been amended considerably in light of an extensive consultation programme within the county in late October 2002. In particular, the consultation process assisted in the refinement of names and boundaries of landscape character areas (LCAs) as well as providing considerable insight into local landscape values and forces for change.

The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

Chapter Two: *The Evolution of the County Clare Landscape.* This chapter presents an overview of the physical development of the landscape over time as well as the social history of the county. The chapter concludes with a brief overview of the development of the county over the past twenty years.

Chapter Three: *The Present Day Landscape of County Clare.* This chapter provides the definition and identification of landscape character types (LCTs), historical landscape types (HLTs) and habitat types (HTs) within the county. A description of each LCT and HLT is presented, accompanied by an identification of pressures on each type.

A *Landscape Character Type* is defined as follows:

*Landscape types* are distinct types of landscape that are relatively homogenous in character. They are generic in nature in that they may occur in different localities throughout the country. Nonetheless, where they do occur, they commonly share similar combinations of geology, topography, land cover and historical land use. For example, limestone river valleys or blanket bog uplands are distinct landscape character types and are recognisable as such whether they occur in County Clare or other counties.

A *Historic Landscape Type* may be defined as follows:

In broad terms, an *archaeological or historic landscape* can be defined as a discrete landscape based on the 'scale and integrity of the archaeological features [that] reflect significantly on the human history and land use of that area' (Cooney et al. 2000, 22).

Chapter Four: *A Presentation of each Landscape Character Area.* These presentations are accompanied by written descriptions on formative influences, elements and features defining each LCA, including historical landscapes, principal forces for change, their impact on the landscape, current condition of the landscape and sensitivity to change. Attention is drawn to those characteristics that are particularly distinctive, rare or special. An important aspect of this assessment is that all landscapes matter and that characteristics and features may be identified even in non-designated landscapes.

A *Landscape Character Area* is defined as follows:

*Landscape character areas* are units of the landscape that are geographically specific and have their own character and sense of place. Each LCA has its own distinctive character, based upon patterns of geology, landform, landuse, cultural, historical and ecological features.

The key to accommodating landscape change successfully is to understand landscape scale and character, and appreciate patterns of geology, soils, land cover, habitats, communications, field boundaries, settlements and local landscape values. Therefore, for each LCA landscape guidelines are also presented.

Chapter Five: *The results of the Seascape Character Assessment.* This chapter describes each seascape character area (SCA) as well as accompanying LCTs, pressures and sensitivity. Our analysis followed the guidelines set out in a Guide to Best Practice in Seascape Assessment devised by Countryside Council for Wales et al in 2001.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines the *Seascape* as a ' picture from sea to land, while the team largely based their assessment on this definition the following definition provided by the Guide to Best Practice in Seascape Assessment was also largely taken into account (except for views from sea to land which were beyond the scope of the study).

In the context of the landscape character assessment process a Seascape may therefore be defined as comprising one or more of the following:

- *Views from land to sea*
- *Views from sea to land*
- *Views along coastline*
- *The effect on landscape of the conjunction of sea and land*

In this study, while fieldwork has taken place along coastlines, data is still awaited to fill in gaps concerning bathymetry and biodiversity, which is not currently available.

Chapter Six: Forces for Change. This chapter discusses the various pressures identified to date on the landscape of the county. It also summarises key issues for each force for change and indicates some general principles that may assist addressing these forces.

The report concludes with a *glossary* of key terms and a *bibliography*.

In addition, the report is supplemented by:

- *Annex A: Consultation Report*
- *Annex B: Oblique Aerial Photographs*
- *Annex C: GIS Development*

