

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

The objective of a *Landscape Character Assessment* is to analyse the character, value, and sensitivity of landscapes identified within a particular area, in this instance County Clare. By understanding how different landscapes developed and evolved from both a natural and social perspective, decisions relating to the management and planning of the landscape can be made from an informed basis. Moreover, as landscape character assessments seek the views of communities living within particular areas, the process encourages debate and assists in gaining consensus on what is distinctive about each landscape. In turn, this facilitates a stronger understanding and engenders a greater appreciation of the considerable landscape resource of communities.

This study built upon an earlier pilot study undertaken by the same team in 1999 that sought to investigate the suitability of using Geographical Information Systems (GIS) as a basis for landscape character assessment. The pilot study essentially assessed the currently available digital data relating to landscape such as geology, land cover, natural and cultural designations. The study sought to develop landscape types using only the GIS system.

The current study sought to build and refine the previous work. A number of landscape types had been identified in the pilot study, and through extensive fieldwork these were refined by the study team. This required the recording of landscape elements, as well as considerable baseline research investigating land use patterns from prehistory to contemporary times. Additional research relating to settlement patterns, ecology, archaeology and geology all further informed this baseline understanding of the landscape within County Clare. A further task related to the identification of Seascape Character Areas around the County and this was further analysed by a dedicated workshop held in February 2003.

Throughout the assessment, consultation was a key element. An integral element of the process was the centrality of the people who live and work within the landscapes of the County. A number of people and organisations were also initially consulted, ranging from the state agencies based and operating locally to people with particular expertise on local history. Furthermore following the initial development of Landscape Character Areas, the team undertook a number of workshops around the County to allow local people to add further details, provide additional information and revise or amend boundaries and names of Landscape Character Areas.

Relative to the earlier study, this recent work had a broader remit and sought to demonstrate best practice in landscape character assessment. A number of

lessons have been learnt and the team found a series of tasks of particular importance in assessing landscape in such detail.

Key lessons learnt include:

1) Consultation is essential.

The consultation programme was extremely useful for a number of reasons. Firstly, at the initial stage of the project, discussions with key people and organisations facilitated the rapid gathering of information that otherwise may never have been identified or would have taken a long time. It also provided the team with an initial insight into the perceptions associated with landscapes.

Secondly, the extensive consultation programme allowed people to engage in discussions about their surrounding landscapes. In most instances, this led to very lively discussion and also demonstrated the depth of local people's knowledge of features within the landscape that field surveyors would otherwise have difficulty in interpreting or indeed identifying.

Thirdly, the consultation workshops facilitated the creation of consensus on key pressures on the landscape. This helped the team to understand how local communities perceive and regard their surrounding landscapes. It identified particular elements or aspects of their landscape that are of particular value whether for social, economic, environmental or spiritual reasons. This consultation process also ensured that the subsequent principles for landscape management for each area aimed to reflect key concerns and considerations identified by consultees.

The consultation process had a profound impact on the study contributing to a significant change in the study team's understanding of both LCA boundaries and names. Furthermore, consultation added a level of local knowledge and ownership to the whole LCA process that should be of significant benefit in future planning and management of the landscape.

2) The importance of fieldwork. This exercise allowed the team to verify that the Landscape Character Types derived from the GIS are valid in the field. Fieldwork also provided an invaluable opportunity to engage with the landscape and gain a thorough understanding not only of how the landscape is structured and has evolved but how it is evolving currently.

Two teams carried out the fieldwork. This ensured that the County was surveyed by people who could examine and discuss in detail issues such as key characteristics of the landscapes and boundaries between different areas. This approach to fieldwork also meant that when particular areas were problematic to define, the team had the opportunity to clarify these issues, largely through reviewing maps, field survey notes and discussion. To have this opportunity whilst carrying out daily fieldwork significantly assisted the assessment of the landscape and allowed for a number of people (in this instance a core team of four) to fully engage in assessing the character of the

landscape. This approach was particularly appropriate considering the scale of the assessment (i.e. at county level), for smaller units of assessments, a smaller number of surveyors would most likely suffice.

Additional fieldwork was also undertaken by the team to specifically assess the historical landscape, this brought archaeologists, and historical geographers together. This provided the opportunity to discuss in detail the evolution of the landscape and to understand the significance of historical activities on the landscape.

3) That the use of GIS offers a unique opportunity to collate data quickly and to initiate analysis of the landscape. The pilot study had used GIS as the principal means to assess the landscape and whilst it was at the time found that GIS in its own right could not adequately capture landscape assessment, that nonetheless, the GIS was an excellent tool that can support the preparation of a landscape characterisation. The team used the thematic maps (such as geology and land cover) to assist in their fieldwork in the first instance. The analytical opportunities offered by GIS were of particular benefit as it was used in conjunction with fieldwork as a means to help identify key drivers behind landscape character types. This led to a typology of landscape types accompanied by key characteristics that should be able to assist in future landscape assessments at the County level. The GIS was able to facilitate the quantification of certain aspects (such as % surface geology, or distance from rivers) that greatly assisted in the development of this typology. This approach should be of benefit in other landscape assessments.

Further Recommendations

A number of recommendations arose from discussions throughout the LCA process and from the Landscape and Seascape Working Group of the Heritage Council. These include the following:

- Further consultation and work with local communities in relation to the historic landscapes could assist in the local communities naming these landscapes with locally recognisable and identifiable names. This would further engage local communities with the surrounding landscape and generate local ownership of the landscape character assessment.
- In order to advance the development of a national model for landscape character assessment, an initial benchmarking exercise is necessary. Currently there is no analysis of the extent, detail or scope of LCAs that have been carried out a county level within Ireland. In order to develop a national model, it is necessary to assess the current situation around the country and to see how existing LCAs may be integrated and synthesised into a national LCA.
- The relationship between national parks and the surrounding landscape should be investigated further. A review of national parks

and their wider landscape context would be of considerable benefit for both the planning and management of the landscape. For example, the report identifies that the Burren National Park is contained largely within the *Landscape Character Areas Low Burren*, yet fieldwork and consultation identified an ambiguity in the boundaries and definitions associated with this national park and the wider Burren area.

- As a signatory to the European Landscape Convention, Ireland is obliged to undertake a number of measures including awareness raising and training, and identification and assessment of landscapes including values assigned to landscapes by local populations. Furthermore, to implement landscape policies, each country must introduce measures aimed at protecting, managing, and/or planning the landscape. In its statutory role to propose policies and priorities on the national heritage (including landscapes and seascapes) the Heritage Council has a critical role in the development of such landscape related policies and programmes.

The Landscape Character Assessment of Clare Report

Two key terms are commonly used throughout this report and definitions of these are presented below:

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.

Figure 1: Landscape Character Type Loughside Fringe



Figure 2: Landscape Character Type Low Drumlin Farmland



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, land use, cultural, historical, and ecological features. Commonly, a landscape character area may be composed of a number of landscape character types. For example, the Lough Graney LCA is composed of three LCTs – Forested upland valleys, loughside farmland and glacial valley. However, the settlement patterns, historical and cultural associations of this area contribute to the distinctive character of this LCA.

Figure 3: Landscape Character Area Sliabh Bernagh



Figure 4: Landscape Character Area Lough Graney



The full report on the landscape of Clare is structured as follows:

Chapter 1: Landscape Character Assessment of County Clare: Overview

Chapter 2: The Evolution of the Clare Landscape- a discussion on the physical and social evolution of the County's landscape.

Chapter 3: The Present Day Landscape of County Clare- a discussion of the Landscape Character Types and Historic Landscapes found within the County.

Chapter 4: A Presentation of each Landscape Area-21 LCAs are discussed in terms of geology and landform, landcover and ecology, historical and human influences, condition and sensitivity to change, forces for change and principles for landscape management.

Chapter 5: A Presentation of each Seascape Area – 12 SCAs are discussed in terms of geology and landform, ecology, historical and human influences, condition and sensitivity to change, forces for change and principles for seascape management.

Chapter 6: Forces for Change- a discussion and analysis of forces for change operating on the landscapes of the County, identified through fieldwork and consultation and augmented by Principles for Landscape Management.

Bibliography and Glossary

Annex A Consultation Report

Annex B Oblique Photos

Annex C GIS Development

Conclusion

In essence, landscape character assessment aims to improve our understanding of landscapes and provide a framework that allows landscape considerations to be taken into account in all aspects of decision-making and promotes a unified approach to landscape management. This study should provide a baseline against which change can be gauged and monitored.