

NORTHERN IRELAND'S VALUABLE HERITAGE

Northern Ireland has a unique natural environment and cultural heritage.

Tourism generates 5% of GDP, provides £530 million of revenue and supports 40,000 jobs (2009). Visitors consistently state that our unique natural and built heritage are major reasons for their visits.

Nearly 10 million visits were undertaken to tourism attractions by both residents and visitors in 2010.

DETI suggests that by 2020 a focused effort could increase employment supported by tourism to 50,000 jobs, grow the number of visitors to 4.5 million, generate £1 billion total revenue and be a source of local pride.

Visitor attractions do not exist on their own: they are part of a wider matrix of landscape, coastline, and historic buildings which provide an image for visitors.

To support tourism and local recreation it is vital that natural and built heritage features are maintained properly. This requires proper protection through legislation and designation, and investment in the heritage sectors.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Land use to promote landscape-scale conservation taking into account both built and natural heritage needs to be managed through the planning system, legislation and fiscal drivers.
- NGOs should be engaged in programmes to further to restoration and maintenance of sites of built and natural heritage importance, utilising their access to experience, resources and volunteers.
- Investment should be directed towards public engagement and enabling public access to sites of historic interest.
- The draft Planning Policy Statement PPS23 could allow the future of some historic buildings to be secured through Enabling Development, but plans for restoration and development must be subject to independent analysis for approval. Associated grounds could be at risk from development, but their importance to the setting of the building must be realised and taken into account in planning decisions.

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Background of the issue

Northern Ireland's natural and built heritage are widely regarded as being a vital asset which has great potential for improving the lives of its citizens and for attracting visitors. Our landscape has been shaped by man for over 9,000 years, leaving a wealth of monuments, buildings and archaeology set in a unique landscape which is strongly associated with Northern Ireland.

With tourism contributing almost 5% to NI's GDP in 2009, and the industry providing 40,000 jobs, there is clearly an economic incentive to preserve and promote our heritage. This is further evidenced by the fact that 9 of the top 10 tourist attractions in NI in 2010 were strongly linked to natural or built heritage. These features exist as part of the whole landscape, nature sites, archaeology and historic buildings, all combining to give a picture of Northern Ireland which is rich in attractions. Historic buildings in Northern Ireland (with a few exceptions, often tended by the National Trust) have not received the attention and care that is due to them and is essential for upholding the strong image of a country which is proud of its built heritage. Similarly, the natural environment has not received adequate protection, and recent development and fragmentation of natural habitats has detracted from the integrity of our distinctive landscape. From the view of both economic goals and environmental protection, it would be foolish to allow these features to be further eroded by neglect and inappropriate development.

Built heritage requirements

It is not possible to protect the built heritage if it is not publicly recognised as being of importance. Therefore, buildings and archaeological sites of interest or heritage value should be identified and catalogued, and appropriately designated for protection or conservation. With climate change likely to cause erosion of stone, subsidence of land and coastal erosion, "vulnerability maps" of buildings and archaeology most at risk from the effects of climate change should be produced and used to inform priority actions.

Natural heritage requirements

To protect our natural heritage it is necessary to strengthen designation and protection from development of natural or semi-natural sites, and ensure that there is a network of such sites throughout the countryside which together deliver a huge range of public benefits. In addition, the wider countryside must be managed in ways which ensure delivery of many benefits, from food provision to water purification and flood prevention.

A joined-up approach is needed for effective management and preservation of our built and natural heritage, which are associated with the image people around the world have of Northern Ireland. This would be most effectively achieved through whole landscape approaches to conservation, with co-operations between government departments, NGOs, communities and businesses.