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### **Stakeholder Involvement: An Identified Invaluable Resource in the Management and Conservation of Ireland's Natural Religious Heritage Croagh Patrick: Insights and Challenges**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This paper seeks to explore how the concept of stakeholder involvement has been applied for the very first time in the management and conservation of the 800 years old Ireland's Holy mountain Croagh Patrick. In doing so, it explores factors that facilitate and hinder the effectiveness of this new-found partnership towards the sustainable management of this sacred natural site, which simultaneously serves as a place of pilgrimage and tourism. Crucial given scholarly demand for greater understanding of the opportunities and barriers that stakeholder involvement may entail, Woodland & Acott (2007), and even more crucial given that routes and directions for practically implementing sustainability in tourism remain unclear Walingo *et al.*, (2013), and more importantly, the paucity of empirical research that explores the effectiveness and challenges in collaborative efforts towards the management of tourism at sacred sites, especially at holy mountains that are yet to be designated as world heritage sites within the religious and pilgrimage tourism scholarship (RPTS). Utilising a mixed-methodological approach to inquiry, and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders across a range of stakeholder groupings, revealed crucial drivers and inhibitors to the partnership, to include issues of shared ownership, power dynamics, strategic management and stakeholder marginalisation and representativeness in decision-making and planning processes. The study has implications for the conservation/management of natural religious heritages/landscapes where there is the need to understand the practicality in the formation of stakeholder groupings in the sustainable management of many such heritages.

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## Introduction

The need to preserve heritages for the present and future generation consumption has attracted much academic attention (Garrod & Fayall, 2000). Likewise, their developments could infringe on the interests and values of its stakeholders. Nonetheless as Aas, Ladkin & Flecher (2005) purport, threats to such developments may arise because of the level of degradation of many such heritages, which inadvertently deprives a community of its heritage, as well as the benefits that may ensue from its touristic activities. However, from a conservation and managerial standpoint, the inability to effect plausible management and conservation strategies and their implementation, are usually due to the complexities surrounding the ownership and management of these heritages.

Thus, an identification and participation in the decision-making process of all stakeholders involved in the usage and management of these heritages is crucial in the sustainable management and conservation of these resources. However, although the positive and negative impacts associated with collaboration and stakeholder involvement (SI) in the effective management and conservation of heritages have been well acknowledged and embraced, for Ireland's Sacred Natural Heritage, Croagh Patrick, the need to effectively manage and preserve the heritage for future generations, while simultaneously meeting the needs of its visitors, by employing a multi-stakeholder involvement approach to management and conservation, have only recently gained traction, prompted by the deteriorating condition of the mountain.

Thus, given the paucity of empirical research on issues involving stakeholders in the context of tourism (Dodds, 2007 & Hall, 2007) and especially for sacred natural mountains that are popular tourism destinations, but are yet to be designated as world heritage sites, in the religious and pilgrimage tourism scholarship. And the lack thereof in the Irish context, represents a significant gap in literature, and thus suggests the timeliness of an exploration into the importance, usefulness and effectiveness of this new-found multi-stakeholder collaborative efforts towards visitor experience management and the conservation of the natural heritage/ sacred landscape the Holy Mountain Croagh Patrick in Ireland.

## 1. The Business Case for the Management and Conservation of Natural Heritages

The importance of the effective management and conservation of natural heritages cannot be overemphasized, especially give their importance and significance to

humanity. Given their increasing significance to a myriad of stakeholder groupings, these natural resources are apparently under numerous threats to include exploitation and destruction. As Rutte (2011) posits, it is being acknowledged that such threats can change or weaken the resources value, and consequently deprives a community of its heritage. As well as the benefits that may ensue from its touristic activities (Aas, Ladkin & Flecher, 2005). Consequently, it is this weakening in value and change to existing structure, that calls for effective management and conservation measures that ensures the sustainability of these natural heritages for future consumption. Especially given that they serve a dual purpose, simultaneously acting as places of strict religious adherence and for touristic purposes to many individuals and destinations respectively. For which the sacred mountain and natural heritage/landscape Croagh Patrick is a typical case in point.

## **2. Natural Heritages as Sacred Sites/ Landscapes**

### *2.1 Towards a Definition of Sacred Natural Sites*

Sacred natural sites as defined by Oviedo & Jeanrenaud (2007) and Wild & McLeod (2008), are areas of land or water having special spiritual significance to peoples and communities. They also consist of all types of natural features including mountains, hills, islands, rivers, etc., and vary in size considerably. While ranging from a single rock formation to mountain ranges and landscapes. They might be the location of churches, shrines, mosques and temples, while incorporating other features such as pilgrimage trails (Wild & McLeod, 2008). Consequently, the term sacred natural therefore implies that these areas are in some way holy, venerated, or consecrated and so connected with religion or belief systems, or set aside for a spiritual purpose. Nonetheless, the term sacred have different meanings to different peoples and communities. Thus, safeguarding the spirit of place is vital, and should be at the core of a management strategy at many such sacred sites and landscapes.

Concurrently, the importance of the effective management and conservation of religious heritages is increasingly growing in popularity. It is for this reason that organisations were formed to set the standards for the effective management and conservation of these historical and cultural landmarks. Organisations/ bodies include; the 2011 ICOMOS General Assembly resolution, which called for the protection and enhancement of sacred heritages, buildings and landscapes. While the UNESCO MAB/IUCN, provided guidelines for the conservation and management of Sacred Natural Sites [www.whc.unesco.org/en/religious-sacred-heritage/](http://www.whc.unesco.org/en/religious-sacred-heritage/).

Thus, for the very first time in the history of the world heritage convention in 2010, the issue regarding the protection of religious and sacred heritages was discussed at an international level. Involving active participation of religious leaders at the international seminar on the role of religious communities in the management of world heritage properties that was held in Kiev (Ukraine) from the 2 to the 5<sup>th</sup> of November 2010, under the patronage of the president and UNESCO. With the principal objective

to explore ways to reflect the complexity and importance of developing proper dialogue between all stakeholders for the common goal of protecting world heritage. Thus, showcasing the importance of stakeholder involvement in the sustainable management of heritages of which religious heritages or landscapes are a subset. However, despite this acknowledgement, there is a dearth in empirical research that explores stakeholder involvement in the sustainable management of tourism at holy mountains, and their conservation for future generation consumption. Where simultaneously catering to a diverse visitor requirement, and preserving the natural fabric, and upholding its spiritual values is challenging. As exemplified in the current case study, where a multi-stakeholder approach to management and conservation has been considered a plausible approach to finding solutions to the problem.

### **3. Conservation and Management Issues at Sacred Natural Sites/ Landscapes**

Conservation and management issues at sacred natural sites abound. This is essentially so given the fact that sacred natural sites are maintained through traditional methods by communities and are deeply rooted in local culture, as well as being protected through social norms that are based on spiritual values (Rutte, 2011). Hence, any attempt towards a more holistic approach to management and conservation of such heritages inevitably attracts conflicts. Usually due to the custodial situation of the sacred natural site. It is against this backdrop that the International Union of Conservation of Nature (IUCN), in their guideline for the protection and management of sacred natural sites, suggest that very careful analysis is needed to understand the custodial situation of a specific sacred natural site (Wild & Mcleod, 2008). Which must be approached with care. Crucial in that many custodians reject the western concept of "ownership", but embrace community responsibility for taking care of land, sacred site and other resources. It is therefore, no wonder therefore that most governmental approaches to the management and conservation of natural heritages have failed, or proven ineffective despite huge financial investments in the projects, because they have often excluded local stakeholders in the decision-making process (Rutte, 2011). Hence, in ensuring the sustainable management and conservation of these natural heritages, the concept of stakeholder involvement has been identified and idealised as a plausible strategy towards a more sustainable approach that is mutually beneficial to all parties involved. As Brick *et al.*, (2000) and Weber (2000) posit, this reduces conflicts among stakeholders, as it builds social capital and allows environmental, social and economic issues to be addressed in tandem and produce better decisions. Thus, encouraging sustainability.

Nonetheless, Woodland & Acott (2007), suggest the need for greater understanding of the opportunities and barriers that stakeholder involvement may entail, as well as an exploration into the factors influencing stakeholders when engaging with sustainability, and even more crucial, given that routes and directions for practically implementing sustainability in tourism remain unclear (Walingo *et al.*, 2013). And more importantly,

the paucity of empirical research that explores the effectiveness and challenges in collaborative efforts towards the management of tourism at sacred sites, and especially holy mountains in the religious and pilgrimage tourism scholarship (RPTS). Thus, suggesting the timeliness of an investigation into the stakeholder collaborative approach towards the sustainable management of the Holy Mountain Croagh Patrick, where the concept of managing the site has come into play for the very first time in its 800 years of existence, serving as a place of pilgrimage and tourism. With the approach to stakeholder involvement considered an invaluable resource or tool for achieving their desired goal.

However, although the importance and positive impacts of the stakeholder involvement theory has been well embraced and acknowledged, as an essential toolkit in the sustainable management and conservation of natural heritages. There is still an identified paucity of research that explores the effectiveness and challenges in collaborative efforts towards simultaneously managing visitor experiences and the conservation of sacred mountains, that are yet to be designated as world heritage sites. With the sacred mountain Croagh Patrick in Ireland as a forerunner. Whereby the introduction of multiple-stakeholder involvement in simultaneously catering to the diverse needs and expectations of visitors and the conservation of the sacred heritage, only recently gained traction. Prompted by the deteriorating condition of this heritage. Hence, given that a stakeholder collaborative approach has only been recently employed towards the effective management of the visitor experience, as well as the conservation of the holy mountain, and the absence thereof, of a documented exploration of the phenomenon in the religious and pilgrimage tourism scholarship and in the Irish context, represents a significant gap in the literature on the management and conservation of sacred natural resources, and especially given that the paths and tips for the practical application of sustainable tourism development remain blurred (Walingo *et al.*, 2013). And more importantly given that from a tourism standpoint, there is growing interest in understanding current practices in collaboration in tourism and the obstacles that stakeholders face when engaging in collaborative activities and possible ways to overcoming the challenges that serve as deterrents as demonstrated in a more recent study on the role of stakeholder collaboration in sustainable tourism competitiveness by Fathimath (2015). Therefore, it is against this background that the purpose of this paper is to explore the issues and challenges prevalent in this new multi-stakeholder involvement/collaborative approach and its effectiveness as a strategic tool towards the effective and sustainable management of the holy mountain Croagh Patrick in Ireland. Essential in providing a holistic insight into the phenomenon, as it evaluates its processes, strategies, the facilitating and inhibiting factors, as well as successes till date. Therefore, an exploration of these factors, advances theoretical discourse in natural sacred heritages/sites management and conservation, while providing novel insights from an Irish context.

#### 4. Stakeholder Collaborative Approach to Sustainable Tourism Management

Theoretical and empirical analysis reveal that the sustainable development, management and competitiveness of tourism can only be achieved through the collaboration of those who directly or indirectly have a stake in it. Thus, given the complex and multifaceted nature of the industry, there are a multiplicity of stakeholders, who are impacted directly or indirectly by the activities of the sector. Concurrently, Ayres (2000) posit that given that the tourism industry is a collaborative industry, there are a multiplicity of stakeholders who have an interest in the industry's impacts and management. Thus, their collective views and values must be taken into consideration in the decision making and planning processes. Crucial in that stakeholders play a critical role in the development and implementation of sustainable tourism (Timur & Getz, 2008). Byrd (2007) categorises these stakeholder into four groups to include; the present visitors, future visitors, present host communities, future host communities (p. 10). Likewise, they have been categorised in to six different types by Walingo, Clarke & Hawkins (2013) namely tourists, the local community, government, industry, educational institutions, special interest groups. Given that these groups of stakeholders are able to influence tourism development initiatives in different ways including regulation, demand and supply, research, management of tourism impacts and human resources (Fathimath, 2015, p. 39). Likewise, when a wide range of stakeholders are involved and their active role is important in sustainable tourism development, their partnership, collaboration and interaction also become key elements of sustainable tourism (Fathimath, 2015, p. 41). However, Donaldson & Preston (1995), had argued that it is not mandatory for all stakeholders to be involved in the decision-making process, but however suggested that it is crucial that their diverse interests are identified and understood. Beeton (2001) however, theorise that an inclusion of all stakeholders in the decision and planning phases, as well as the effective management of stakeholders is a precondition towards achieving sustainable tourism development (Hardy & Beeton, 2001). Sanchez & Adams (2008) contend that in the event where stakeholders have been excluded from decision making pertaining welfare of a heritages management or conservation, the resultant attitude is resentment from different stakeholder groupings. Concurrently, Aas *et al.* (2005) equally suggest that complications are inevitable, based on the extent to which the stakeholders involved can represent the local community. Besides, it can be a tough process to identify or rather engage stakeholders due to issues of capacity to participate, informal networks, hidden groups and cultural barriers (Bramwell & Sharman, 2009). Vested interests, power dynamics, history, culture, politics and many other dimensions can further complicate the process of identifying and including stakeholders (Tosun, 2000). Franco (2008, p. 268) however posit that the choice of collaboration type depends on the goal pursued by the collaborators, whether it is staying competitive, reducing uncertainty, obtaining legitimacy, resolving a conflict, or developing a shared vision.

Consequently, stakeholder involvement/collaborative approach towards tourism sustainability is not without its own pitfall, given the multiplicity and diversity of stakeholders with differing goals, objectives, values, perception etc. Serious disintegration may arise from the incongruities that can be characteristic of such a grouping of individuals (McCamley & Gilmore, 2015). Thus, stakeholder involvement can be costly, cumbersome and lead to disappointing compromises (Aas *et al.*, 2005). Managing such diversity is an often-expensive challenge (Swarbrooke, 1999). Skills sets and investment required to overcome such barriers might not be readily available (Adu-Ampong, 2014). Thus, the ability to create a balance, the art of inclusivity makes it difficult to select stakeholders who are a direct representative of their community.

Therefore, from a tourism context, collaboration as defined by Robinson (2009) is a "a process of joint decision making among autonomous and key stakeholders of an inter-organisational domain to resolve problems of the domain and or to manage issues related to the domain" (p. 387). Consequently, collaboration occurs when a group of autonomous stakeholders of a problem domain engage in an interactive process, using shared values, norms, and resources to act or decide on issues related to that domain (Wood & Gray, 1991, p. 146). Hence, stakeholder collaboration can be understood as a process of joint decision making, in a domain about a future of that domain (Adu-Ampong, 2014). Collaboration however, goes beyond public involvement, as collaborative processes are characterised by inclusiveness, sharing of power and responsibilities and joint decision making among stakeholders such as government representatives and resource users who interact as equals (Keogh & Blahna 2006).

Conversely, a collaborative approach to management and conservation of heritages among different stakeholders leads to better decision-making, the minimisation of potential conflicts, while fostering great guest and host relationships (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2005). As well as the reduction of associated management cost (Jamal & Getz, 1995). In reiterating the importance and benefits of collaborative efforts in heritage management Aas, Ladkin & Fletcher (2005) suggest that a pool of different stakeholders can bring together disparate resources, knowledge and capabilities in to sum greater than the individual parts, with which to respond to such structural challenges. Thus, in Almeyda, Broadbent, Wyman, & Durham, (2010); Tao & Wall (2009) viewpoint, collaboration allows for more appropriate development plans to be established, which take account of and respond rapidly to local stakeholder needs, ambitions and sensitivities. This collaborative approach to the management and conservation of heritages in Hardy & Beeton (2001) view, is a sign and source of tourism sustainability. And as Moote *et al.* (2009) posit, collaboration is closely associated with managing the impacts of tourism.

Extant literature espouses that the management of the visitor experiences, its impacts, and community cohesion, can be enhanced through stakeholder collaboration (Almeyda *et al.*, 2010; Go & Govers, 2000). As it provides a basis for the development of mutually beneficial solutions to an existing problem or issue. In addition, the ability to draw from new and diverse perspectives, and innovative approach to thinking/strategizing about an issue. As well as the ability to tap into in-depth knowledge of the local community, can lead to the development of best practices, towards the effective

planning for local tourism (Yuksel, Bramwell & Yuksel, 1999). Chapman & Speake (2011), opine that collaborative approaches to management of heritages are vital when destinations experience deep and rapid changes. Such changes are evident in the increasingly deteriorating conditions of Mt Croagh Patrick, that calls for collaborative efforts in the effective management and conservation of the site for the very first time in its 800 years of existence. Thus, the effectiveness of the collaborative approach towards an enhanced visitor experience and the conservation of the holy mountain is the focus of this study. However, from a community involvement point of view, scholars have observed that in the absence of community stakeholder involvement, it may be virtually impossible to develop and manage tourism sustainably (Byrd, Bosley & Dronberger, 2009). Crucial in that the involvement of the local communities in decision-making is a successful path towards sustainability (Southgate & Sharpley, 2002). As such, stakeholder collaboration at all levels of tourism planning and management is closely associated with successful implementation of sustainable development: which implies that at the most rudimentary level, natural and cultural resources are not degraded or over exploited, and which brings long-term widely distributed, socio-economic and environmental benefits to a community (Almeyda *et al.*, 2010 & Hoyt, 2005).

## 5. Stakeholder Collaboration in Natural Resource Management

Thus, with regards to collaboration in natural resource management, extant research reveals that collaborative approaches to natural resource management is gaining prominence. As Lauber, Decker & Knuth (2008. p. 677) posit, the growing emphasis on effective natural resource management over the last 20 years has significantly elevated attention placed on collaborative processes and increased reliance on collaboration. Thus, collaboration is important in natural resource conservation and management (*ibid*). Public-private collaborations, collaborative programs involving different governmental agencies, and collaborative policy development among different levels of government have long been necessary to achieve natural resource conservation and management objectives (*ibid*). Likewise, successful collaboration is important for landscape level natural resource management because it provides an avenue for diverse stakeholders to make collective decisions and implement action regarding important issues (Coleman and Stern, 2016. p. 6). Concurrently, in natural resource management, Wondolleck and Yaffee (2000) conducted a broad study of collaboration and demonstrated its importance in that context. Likewise, Krist (as cited in Conley, 2003) notes, the demand for collaborative decision-making regarding the management of natural resource is equally on the rise as evident in political speeches and promotional videos. This thus attracted scholarly interest and saw an increase in scholarly investigation into the phenomenon. Thus, as Moote *et al.*, (2000) purport, "an idealised narrative of collaborative natural resource management has emerged across popular academic literature. In it collaboration is hailed as having the potential to



reduce conflict among stakeholders; build social capital; allow environmental, social and economic issues to be addressed in tandem; and produce better decisions" (Brick *et al.*, 2000; Weber, 2000).

Thus, the current research in to the multi-stakeholder involvement in the management and conservation of the sacred and natural heritage Croagh Patrick is timely giving increasing scholarly demand for the evaluation of collaborative movements in general, as well as its initiatives (Moote *et al.*, 2000; Kellert *et al.*, 2000; and Selin *et al.*, 2000). However, an evaluative approach, is not within the remit of this study, given that the partnership under investigation is still in its infancy. Thus, an explorative approach is most suited in understanding the phenomenon, and in providing insightful information. Nonetheless, these collaborative approaches have attracted vocal criticism (Blumberg and Knuffke, 1998; Coggins, 1998; Conley & Moote, 1999; McClosky, 1998; and Southern Utah Wilderness Association, 1994 (as cited in Conley & Moote, 2003). Crucial in that some national interest groups claim that state laws and public interest are not adequately considered in local decision-making efforts, while environmental groups opine that these efforts are co-opted by local economic development, while industry groups contend the opposite. Likewise, those outside the "inner circle" sometimes charge that their views are excluded, while agencies question whether successful collaboration efforts are replicable in other communities. Whereas, participants in the process that fail to achieve their desired outcomes may question the time and effort they invested in (Wild & McLeod, 2008).

Such observations and remarks inevitably raises questions as to the importance and effectiveness of a collaborative approach to the management and conservation of this sacred heritage. Especially given the sensitivity and complexity surrounding the spiritual nature and the touristic significance of the Holy Mountain Croagh Patrick. Thus, necessitating an inquiry into the phenomenon in the Irish context, where up until now, there has been no documented exploration of stakeholder involvement/ collaboration in the management and conservation of this internationally recognised sacred natural mountain. Although literature espouses that actual experience with collaborative efforts introduced in response to resource management have grown exponentially over 20 years across the United states (Weber, 2000) and other regions and communities, to include many case studies that describe specific efforts (Braxton Little, 1997; KenCairn, 1996; Smith, 1999), as well as studies that index some of the experiences relating to stakeholder involvement in the management and conservation of natural resources Kenney *et al.*, 2000; Kusel & Adler, 2001 (as cited in Conley, 2003) and (Wondolleck & Yaffee, 2000).

Yet, an extensive review of the literature, reveals a paucity of research that explores the collaborative efforts/stakeholder involvement approaches in the management of sacred natural sites, especially sacred mountains that are yet to be designated as World heritage sites in the religious and pilgrimage tourism scholarship. To that end, the current case study seeks to explore stakeholder involvement in the effective management and conservation of the holy mountain for future generation consumption, through an exploration of its processes, challenges and strategies employed towards the sustainable management of the natural heritage/ landscape.

## 6. The Study's Site

Croagh Patrick is Ireland's 800 years old sacred heritage of international repute. It is traditionally known as Ireland's holiest mountain, and an internationally recognised destination for pilgrimage and religious observance for decades. Thus, has been dubbed the Reek. (which is normally the last Sunday in July and the main pilgrimage day). It is equally one of Ireland's most visited touristic attraction. Thus, it serves a dual purpose, simultaneously serving as a place of pilgrimage and tourism. This historic landmark is situated near the town of Westport. This century old mountain is approximately 764m above the sea levels, and it's about 8 km from the city of Westport, 92 km from Galway city and 230 km from the Dublin city centre. It sits above the cities of Murrisk and Lecanvey. The holy mountain boasts of over 1 million visitors who climb it annually. However, these numbers skyrocket especially during the reek Sunday, with visitor numbers reaching a threshold of 25.000. However, it is the increasingly deteriorating conditions of the mountain that led to the formation of a stakeholder group aimed at managing the visitor's experience and impacts, while conserving the sacred natural heritage for future generation consumption.



**Figure 1:** The Location of Croagh Patrick on the Map of the Island of Ireland

Source: [http://www.voyagesphotosmanu.com/ireland\\_map.html](http://www.voyagesphotosmanu.com/ireland_map.html)



**Figure 2:** Croagh Patrick Mountain: Photos Depicting the Deteriorating Condition of the Holy Mountain

Source: personal picture

## 7. Research Design and Methodological Approach Employed

As the purpose of this research is to explore stakeholder collaboration and involvement in the management and conservation of the sacred Holy mountain Croagh Patrick in Ireland, a case study approach that makes use of a multiplicity of data collection sources as suggested by Yin (2013) was employed. Essential in that “the distinctive need for case studies arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomenon”, because “the case study method allows investigators to retain a holistic and meaningful characteristics of real life events (Yin, 2003, p. 2),” Thus, a qualitative approach to inquiry was employed given the exploratory nature of the study. Guided by a pragmatists philosophical assumption to knowledge development, a range of data collection instruments were employed as data collection tools to include expert conversation, desk research (government reports), and observation techniques were employed to provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. However, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were used as the primary data collection instrument, given their ability in eliciting rich, thick and organic accounts of stakeholder’s experiences and perception of the collaborative effort towards the management and conservation of the Holy Mountain. Employing a multiplicity of data collection tools is in line with Flick’s (2002) suggestion that qualitative research is characteristically multi-method in focus.

With regards to sampling strategy, a purposive sampling strategy was employed in the selection of research participants, as one participant was selected from each

representative stakeholder group (*i.e. a government official, the local authority, the community of faith, Local community member, Local business owners, local authority, land owner and visitor*). Thus, a total of 8 stakeholders were interviewed. Consequently, the interest influence matrix as suggested by Reed *et al*, (2009) was utilised in selecting relevant stakeholders for interviews. This strategy is theoretically informed, given that in stakeholder analysis it is imperative to identify the stakeholder group that is clearly of importance to the issue to be researched. Thus, as the study aims at developing an understanding within a systems context, information from the main stakeholders is invaluable in providing insightful information regarding the ongoing strategic partnership.

Thus, key informants as listed above were chosen, as suggested by Grimble (1998) in his work on stakeholder methodologies in natural resource management. Thus, those chosen were based on the researcher's confidence that they would provide insightful information regarding the ongoing strategic partnership, and advance our understanding of the issues and challenges inherent in this newly founded collaborative efforts. Hence, one individual from each stakeholder group was chosen and an in-depth interview was conducted with them exploring the dynamics of the partnership, the processes and its challenges and strategies and stakeholder participation/ involvement in decision-making and planning processes. As well as their personal perception of the union, and its ability to achieve its desired goals, while safeguarding their interests and values. This questioning and investigative approach was theoretically informed.

## **8. Research Findings and Discussions**

Stakeholders were asked to express their views and perception of the collaborative efforts towards the importance and effectiveness of the partnership or collaborative efforts towards the sustainable management of the sacred site. Findings reveal that overall stakeholders are in a collective mindset that a collaborative approach to the sustainable management of the historic, cultural and religious landmark Croagh Patrick is the way forward, if it is to be preserved for the consumption of future generations and its ability to provide long-term economic wealth for the rural regions, which consequently improves on the livelihood of its diverse stakeholders. The significance of this collaborative effort towards the conservation of the holy mountain is amplified by the fact that the mountain is one of Ireland's most visited destination and a main source of revenue and economic wealth for the region.

Findings generated from exploring the collaborative efforts by Croagh Patrick Stakeholder groups towards the management and conservation of the Holy mountain for enhanced visitor experience and the sustainability of the site provided insightful information regarding its processes, strategies, the facilitating and inhibiting factors, as well as successes till date. Therefore, an exploration of these factors, serve as pointers,

towards an evaluation of the importance and effectiveness of the partnership or collaborative efforts towards the sustainable management of the sacred site.

### *8.1 Stakeholder Processes, Strategies and their Effectiveness*

As opposed to ad-hoc approaches to choosing stakeholders as posited by Reed, Graves, Dandy, Posthumus, Hubacek, Morris, Prell Quinn and Stringer (2009), the partnership began by identifying main leaders across different stakeholder groupings who have quite an experience in tourism and heritage related matters to avoid the marginalisation of other group members. Thus, stakeholder capability was considered invaluable in terms of ease of communication at the initial stages. Given the difficulties that may ensue from communicating the partnership's goals, visions and values to a lay audience, and the challenges envisaged. Thus, findings indicate that stakeholders certainly share a common vision, and all have an equal say in decision-making regarding the management and conservation of the land.

From a conservation point of view findings revealed that because of the partnership, a unilateral decision was reached among stakeholders that the use of large signage's will be invaluable in enhancing the visitor experience while at the same time educating its diverse visitors on the rules and regulations that needs to be adhered to while on the site. In an attempt at minimising visitor's impact on the mountain given the increasingly deteriorating conditions that has led to its loss in value. Such key strategies include;

1. "Leave no Trace" is a management and conservational strategy aimed at minimising visitor impacts on the mountain, especially the growing amount of litter left behind by visitors, as well as in enhancing visitors satisfaction and experience at the site, where such mounting dirt dilutes the experience of the visitor.
2. Signage: a whole lot of signage's and rules and regulations that govern their diverse visitor's attitudes, behaviours, needs and expectations while on the mountain have been developed in unison as a way forward towards environmental preservation and upholding the sites value.

The findings reveal that the use of this strategic approach seems to be a potential way forward towards simultaneously catering to visitors needs and expectations, and minimising their impact on the holy mountain. Crucial in conserving the holy mountain for the consumption of future generations, and in upholding its spiritual values.

## 8.2. Power Dynamics

It was revealed that some stakeholder's belief that achieving the partnerships sustainable development goals could meet with some resistance given issues surrounding the ownership of the site. As one of the participant states;

"the issue of ownership presents as an issue, given that a majority of power over access to and from the mountain still rests in the hands of the land owners, who still have the absolute power to restrict and moderate or rather sensor who ever uses the landed property. This statement was in view of the decision stating that;

*"all users of the mountain should be respectful towards the landowners and accede to their request and instructions at all times, but most especially during climbing seasons"*

Thus, from the remarks from some interviewees, it indicates that the issue of ownership and power distribution seems to be presenting an issue for the partnership, given that absolute power is wielded to the landowners. Thus, there is the expectation that a decentralised approach to decision making regarding the conservation and the management of the visitor experiences will lead to better decision-making that has some mutually beneficial outcomes. As well as socio-economic and environmental outcome. While minimising stakeholder antagonism where a possible negative comment or reaction from the land owners to the visitors might lead to antagonism.

## 8.3 Stakeholder Marginalisation and Lack of Strategic Focus

When asked about how the values and interest of the diverse stakeholders were dealt with in their opinion, one of the stakeholders commented;

I think other stakeholders have not been included in the decision-making process, and I think their views would be much appreciated. In addition, the idea of restricting recreational users or banning them completely from using the holy mountain is completely unacceptable and shouldn't be an option at all.

A multiplicity of recreationalist uses this mountain for different reasons, and it is a long-held tradition for them to race up and down the mountain. However, as the comments indicate, the exclusion of certain stakeholders in the decision -making process and the restriction from using the heritage, which is rightfully theirs, is against the ethos of sustainable development that calls for decision that favours all parties involved. Thus findings revealed that thus far, the partnership management plans seem to be lacking a holistic approach, as it does not take into consideration some site users'

needs and expectations. Aside from those of the pilgrims. As there is growing consideration/decision towards restricting recreational users of the site. It is thus suggested that this inevitably calls for stakeholder antagonism, which might spark off another management issue. Especially given that such suggestions and decisions have been met with mixed feelings especially from some stakeholder grouping such as local business owners and the local community who have benefited a great deal from the influx of people from all walks of life, and especially the tourism industry, who feels will be hard-hit by this decision. With the most impact felt around the Murrisk region, where most of the tourism to this region, is mostly triggered by visitor's primary motivation for visiting the region, which is making a trip to the holy mountain.

Thus, findings revealed that the interest and values of both the local business owners and the local community and their consensus on requirements that drive the sustainable management and conservation of the heritage, and that adds value to businesses have not been understood and prioritised. As the focus seems to be upholding the spiritual and environmental values of this site, while the socio-economic aspect seems to be relegated to the backgrounds. To this end, findings indicates a lack of strategic and professional approach to dealing with issues of stakeholder involvement. Thereby indicating a move away from the principles of stakeholder involvement and their shared responsibility to a heritage that they supposedly share ownership. The finding thus revealed that the principles that govern world heritage sites as stipulated in their guideline for natural heritage managers are far from been applicable in this case. As such. It questions if the idealised narrative used to justify collaborative natural resource management holds true for the management and conservation of the holy mountain Croagh Patrick. As well as questions the potential for this collaborative approach to provide a long-term solution to the problem inherent and emerging in simultaneously managing the visitor experience and conserving the holy mountain for future consumption. The findings therefore suggest that if sustainability is desirable, a more professional approach must be employed for the sustainable management and conservation of the sacred Mountain.

#### *8.4 Effective Lines of Communication*

With regards to effective communication within the partnership, one participant commented;

It is difficult to access information regarding the workings of the partnership, however, when that is even the case, then it is infrequent and as such it is difficult to say at what stage we are and what is the future of this" we expect to be communicated more frequently on decisions taken and activities and strategies, as well as challenges encountered, like what is the success story, what is the government saying especially relation to the policy regarding who is to be sued for casualties recorded on the mountains and things like that...

Thus, findings reveal that one of the deterring factors of the union going forward is that, stakeholders do not have access to full information when making decisions, and they misunderstand some of the concepts that are explored. Thus, calling on more transparent and open lines of communication from key stakeholders, that is envisaged would lead to a better understanding of the effectiveness of the partnerships, and if it is delivering on its promises or its visions and values. Thus, comments by various stakeholders illustrate that communicating and effecting this change in management and conservation with the use of a stakeholder involvement strategy has been a daunting task. Albeit, it was revealed that stakeholders were not proactive in bringing feedback on project development and decisions, as they are not knowledgeable about some tourism management and planning concepts, especially the complex and sensitive phenomenon of simultaneously catering to increasing visitor needs and expectations, while at the same time minimising their impact on the mountain. And its conservation for future generations to meet their own needs and expectations, while at the same time upholding its spiritual values.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this article has been to explore the collaborative efforts towards the management and the conservation of the sacred heritage Croagh Patrick in Ireland. It sought out to explore and evaluate the processes, strategies, as well as the factors that facilitate and hinder the collaborative efforts towards management and conservation of the holy mountain. As well as the implications for simultaneously preserving the site and enhancing its diverse visitor experiences. Thus, the findings and discussions presented showcases significant challenges inherent in the new-found partnership, and questions the visions and values of the collaborative efforts, and suggests the need for more strategic management and conservational decision-making processes, if success is desirable and long-term sustainability envisaged. Therefore, as Ghirelli (2013), suggest, survival depends on the ability to be comprehensively governed, managed and coordinated through new forms of collaboration. As seen in the newfound partnership made up of multiple stakeholders towards the management and conservation of Croagh Patrick. Hence, being a natural heritage with shared ownership, thus call for a synergistic approach to management that ensures the involvement of all necessary stakeholders in the decision -making and planning processes towards achieving the desired goal of simultaneously catering to visitor's diverse needs and expectations and preserving the site for future consumption/usage. Through the development of more inclusive approaches to stakeholder involvement, to include an understanding of stakeholder needs and expectations, ensuring a more strategic management approach and focus, as well as the non-marginalisation of certain stakeholder groups, enhanced lines of communication, as well as educational opportunities for enhanced stakeholder



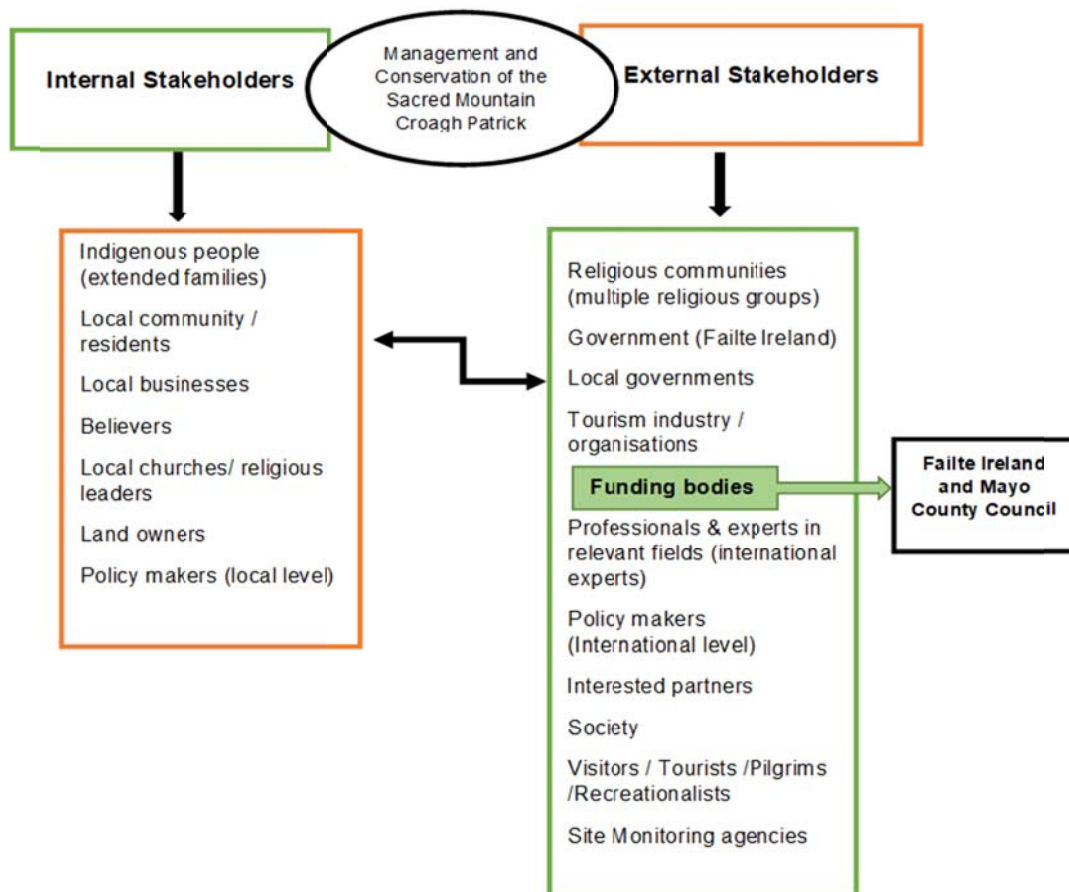
understanding of tourism concepts and their implications for both management and conservation of the heritage.

### **Limitations**

Despite the strengths of the research as demonstrated above, there are possible limitations to the study, especially given that results cannot be generalised as the research was based on a single case study, while utilising on a single representative across a range of stakeholder groupings as a key informant. Thus, their views might not be completely representative of the other stakeholders in a grouping.

### **Future Research**

The concept of stakeholder involvement in the management of sacred heritages and landscapes is new in the religious and pilgrimage tourism scholarship, thus further research into the phenomenon will advance theoretical discourse and understanding of its applicability in the management of sacred sites and landscapes. There is a paucity of research that explores stakeholder involvement in the management and conservation of holy mountains that are yet to be designated as world heritage sites, but that serve as important touristic and pilgrimages destinations.



**Figure 3:** A framework for stakeholder involvement in the management and Conservation of the Sacred Mt Croagh Patrick in Ireland.

Source: The Authors

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