



CONNECT

CONNECT Project Co-Design Workshop

Pilot 1: Páirc Náisiúnta Na Mara

Hosting Partner - Leave No Trace Ireland

4 – 5th November 2025

Killarney House and Gardens,
Killarney, Co. Kerry. V93HE3C

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The CONNECT Project

The CONNECT Project aims to strengthen relationships between the outdoor sports and protected area sectors by identifying key elements for successful cooperation on a local level, leading to long term, sustainable, and regenerative outdoor sport in protected areas.

Partners

- European Network of Outdoor Sports (ENOS)
- EUROPARC Federation
- Mid Sweden University
- Surfrider Foundation Europe
- International Mountain Bicycling Association Europe (IMBA Europe)
- European Hiking Federation (ERA)
- Leave No Trace Ireland (LNTI)

Pilot Sites

Throughout the project, five pilot sites were identified in which to run a kickstarting event to collaborate between the two sectors. The purpose of these would be to:

- Build trust and mutual understanding between the sectors
- Raise awareness of challenges
- Discuss possible solutions
- Co - create plans for future joint projects if possible
- Create a regular space for stakeholders for future discussions and updates if possible



Participants

The event took place in Killarney on the 3rd - 5th of November 2025. Day 1 involved setting up and preparing and was also a travel day for partners. For the first day of meetings (on 4th November), 25 participants were in attendance and of those, 16 were able to participate on the second day of meetings (5th November). These included:

- 8 sports organisations
- 2 tourism sector organisations
- 3 state agencies
- 2 community groups

Organisation	Stakeholder category
Diving Ireland	Sport
Wildwater adventures	Sport
Splash Sports	Sport
Kenmare Rowing & Sailing Club	Sport
Kingdom Waves Surf School	Sport
Mountaineering Ireland	Sport
Kerry Recreation & Sports Partnership	Local Sports Partnership
Office of Public Works - OPW Ireland	State agency (Conservation)
National Parks & Wildlife Services NPWS	State agency (Conservation)
Kerry County Council	State agency (Local authority)
Kenmare Tidy Towns	Community group
Maharees Conservation Association	Community group
Dingle Peninsula Tourism	Local Tourism Partnership
Failte Ireland	Tourism Sector
Sea Synergy	Social Enterprise
Clean Coasts	Non-Profit Organisation

Programme

The 2-day co-design workshop centred mostly about increasing understanding between the outdoor sport sector and the nature protection sector. The participants were given up to date information on the new National Park by both:

- National Parks and Wildlife Service (William Hunt)
- Office of Public Works (Eleanor Turner)

Three success stories from the region were invited to share their experiences. These were:

- Maharees Conservation Association (Martha Farrell)
- Derrynane Dune Project (Christopher O'Neill)
- Coastal Clean-ups (Elaine Doyle)

The programme included participatory activities to brainstorm challenges and potential solutions as well as ice-breakers and active games to incorporate physicality into the programme. This included a beach session led by Sea Synergy at Rossbeigh Beach with a mixture of marine education, a beach walk and cleanup action.

The discussions led naturally to topics around community engagement which was paired with two talks on more niche topics on the cooperation between biodiversity and outdoor sport:

- Inclusive approaches to environmental stewardship (Eleanor Turner)
- Kerry Outdoor Education at the Capanlea campus - preparing for future tourism (Aodhait Carrol)

Insights around nature protection:

- The fragmented and marine aspect of the national park is a challenge for awareness raising due to “out of sight, out of mind”. Efforts should be made to connect communities to the marine environment “as the rivers all eventually flow into the sea”.
- Awareness raising needs to create a space that is inviting and open to questions.
- Relationship building between wildlife experts and local communities leads to broader acceptance for biodiversity conservation efforts e.g. “walk and talks in the Maharees leading to broader understanding of dune retreat and acceptance of dune protection measures.
- Good jovial communication is important for the national park as opposed to images of wrongdoing. It is important to show positive impacts of national park activities.
- Zoning helps to create space for all while minimizing impacts. It should be fit for purpose and clearly communicated.
- In general, access to nature should be open and inclusive, but managed to be sustainable and perhaps limited in highly sensitive areas.

Insights around outdoor sport & providers

- Outdoor sport providers are custodians of their own area of activity .
- Outdoor sports practitioners and providers are also community stakeholders who can build bridges in areas of opposing perspectives.

- Outdoor sports providers have a unique opportunity to provide inspiring knowledge and information both with locals and tourists on the importance of the protected area and its natural and cultural heritage.
- Possibilities to give back to landowners and nature e.g. “Tap to tip” on trails or the Pembrokeshire “1% for the planet” effort.

Areas of conflict

A participatory workshop looked into the various conflicts and potential solutions. A key message that resulted from the discussion is that the two sectors (outdoor sports and nature protection) align with their core values and that outdoor sport is about nature connection not consumption. Additionally, conflict only results when there is a lack of communication, awareness and participatory processes. If effort is made to work together based on the shared values, then solutions are possible with financial and political support.

Core values:

- High biodiversity and “pristine nature”
- Nature education to increase enjoyment and appreciation
- Outdoor sport practiced in a safe and sustainable way
- Connection to nature and sense of local pride

Current areas of conflict in the local area

Issue	Current situation	Possible solutions
Disturbance of nature	Impact of activities on nature (e.g. boat traffic, anchors) and impact of invasive species.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Create guidance and (if necessary) regulations together with the outdoor sport community. ● Create limits for disturbance (set routes/permanent moorings). ● Involve outdoor sport community in cleanup actions, invasive species management. ● Train local volunteers to become experts and leaders.
Parking	In some areas there is beach parking for sport equipment, other areas have high densities of illegal or wild parking. Car parks are not sufficient or not well communicated.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Create more car parks. ● Park and ride options for car parks further out with shuttles. ● Clear communication about the free spots in available car parks (redirect traffic as soon as possible).
Toilet & Shower facilities	Not every beach has a toilet. Some are locked outside of working hours which may be when certain sports are practiced (e.g. before or after work).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Make the toilets free of charge but charge for showers. ● Potential discounts for local club members.

	Partnerships with private companies were developed to build toilets which require payment and some only allow card payment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consult local sports practitioners about the required opening hours for the toilets. ● Have information about infrastructure available online.
Bins	Locations without bins cause frustration and littering (e.g. dog defecation bags). Locations with bins are often overloaded or used as dumping sites.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Install crushing bins that reduce space needed for storage. ● Know dogs defecate within 5 min of the car park - install bins specifically for dog excrement bags close to the parking area. ● Have art rubbish collector.
Land access	Not specific to the national park, but many trails and areas overlapping with the National Park may cross private land. Landowners are nervous of insurance and liability.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● New law which shifts responsibility from the landowner to the visitor / recreational user. This should be communicated to all, especially land owners.
Financing	Many projects and infrastructure maintenance need funding. Governments are requiring more blended finance models.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Tourist tax. ● Tap to Tip along trails. ● 1% for nature added to other costs.
Visiting with dogs	Many dog owners do not have well trained dogs and yet let them off lead. These can disturb wildlife, scare other visitors, cause accidents and introduce nutrients/chemicals to fragile ecosystems if their excrement is not found and disposed of correctly.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ranger with own dog doing awareness raising in public. ● Special dog license for well trained dogs allowed off leash. ● Zoning for protection of fragile habitats. ● Partner with dog organisations and local trainers.
Unbalanced tourism	Due to viral marketing, some areas receive disproportionately more visitors than others. Visitors may also not stay long (low quality tourism).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ensure marketing of slow tourism. ● Partnerships between tourism operators to suggest complementary activities / programmes. ● Partner with influencers to spread awareness about less visited options available. ● Potential limits to access (e.g. 1 boat per mooring for dive sites).
Seasonality	Will impact the types of sport and the numbers of practitioners. This could cause conflicts between different sport types and also other users.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Adaptive management plan for high season and low season. ● Be inclusive to all sport types when creating stakeholder engagement plans.
Disjointed access to	Many sources of information are difficult to access as if they are	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Require national maps and databases of information; infrastructure, zoning,

information	available online, they are managed at local levels.	behavioural regulations, links to relevant authority for permits. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Possible national stakeholder forum.
Legacy	Landowners inheriting land or having a long memory of unsuccessful collaboration.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Build relationships with current landowners. ● Be respectful of their time and perspective.

Potential Future Cooperation

Overall the event highlighted the need for community involvement and the benefits for all. Much can be achieved by bringing people into a room, building relationships and having conversations. These should be safe spaces where stakeholders can voice grievances but are also guided to work on solutions. They also need a long-term vision which builds capacity and develops into a self-sustaining legacy. Core funding is important to cover coordination roles and not burn goodwill. Another observation was to ensure any process or research benefiting from local expertise communicates clear benefits that feed back. Lastly, any groups created should create a welcoming space for new people to join.

Principles of Support from local authorities

Eleanor Turner, the local biodiversity officer shared a step by step process that any community group or sports organisation could follow to make a contribution to nature protection.

Step 1: Identify the area and the category of conservation (e.g SAC/SPA/Natura 2000/National Park)

Step 2: Speak to the assigned conservation officer

Step 3: If it is close to water, speak to the Local Authority Waters

Step 4: Reach out to Eleanor (Local authority biodiversity officer) as she can advise on potential funders for the project

Volunteering

Local communities, including outdoor sport communities, are interested in making a positive impact on their environment but need training and a framework for participation. Programmes such as volunteer rangers have been considered and trialled. Outdoor Sport leaders could be trained to lead regenerative volunteer actions such as coastal cleanups or invasive species management. [The SEE Project](#) previously developed through the Erasmus + funding provides excellent examples of how to empower outdoor sport leaders to deliver environmental engagement. Models such as SeaSynergy that mixes outdoor sport and nature education in a social enterprise can also be successful at reaching a wider audience. The Coast Clean-up organisation shared their best practices for a good volunteer programme:

- Focus on “Enjoy & Protect” keeping the work activities light and fun.
- Use the data to raise awareness and connect to behaviour change.
- Build connection to less visible places “all rivers end up in the sea.”
- Visibly appreciate volunteers e.g. Volunteer Award Ceremony.

- Possible to take action alone or as groups.
- Document actions e.g. before and after photos in the CoastSnap app.

However, volunteering can be challenging through a National Park Authority due to health, safety and governance issues. These would have to be resolved with the new management authority. An example of success from the Wicklow Mountains National Park is to have volunteers join an NGO that covers member insurance and to restricts activities to the use of “hand tools” only.

Stakeholder Fora

In Ireland there are many stakeholder fora and local community meetings, not all of which are productive and fruitful. In order for it to be so, the following points need to be included:

- A core individual with responsibility to coordinate the body (preferably paid).
- Clear agendas and facilitated discussions.
- Momentum towards clear actions and tasks.

There are examples of partnerships and programmes with successful stakeholder fora and the development of a “Friends of the National Park” group was suggested by participants.

Another example of such fora working would be the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism where stakeholders build a 5 year action plan to implement together with all taking on responsibilities and tasks. Similarly Northern Ireland has an Outdoor Action Plan whose Forum meets 2-3 times a year and has a clear Terms of Reference. The forum is managed but incorporates their co-design principles. By involving other kinds of organisations such as NGOs, a larger diversity of funding opportunities would be available for the fora.

Final conclusions

- The primary goal of the National Park is the conservation of nature.
- Community and sports organisations’ involvement is important and should be incorporated into finance plans.
- There is a need for adaptive and flexible management strategies both for climate change and tourism.
- Multiple solutions exist and should be developed into a functional toolbox.

Outcomes and Next Steps

Immediate follow up actions

- Contact information of participants shared among the stakeholders to continue to build relationships
- All stakeholders invited to join the CONNECT Project LinkedIn page to network internationally
- The sharing of mentioned tools:
 - Toolkits and information from SEE project,
 - EU Green Sport Manifesto,
 - EUROPARC Case Studies
 - Water Trails Check list from Sport Ireland

Long term follow up:

- This report will be shared with the stakeholders and the management team for Páirc Náisiúnta Na Mara once it has been established.
- All participants will be invited to the CONNECT project final conference in Brussels in 2027.

Contribution to project deliverables

The CONNECT project workshop insights will play a contributing role in strengthening and informing the project deliverables. The dialogue and consultation throughout the two days have contributed to insights that will inform further pilot sites workshops, surveys, reports and decisions throughout the project. Stakeholders contributed practical information on local and regional issues, resources available, operational needs and communication issues. They provided insights on guidance, policies, regulation and ethics that hinder and challenge businesses in and around the National Park Area. Stakeholders also identified solutions that could be implemented throughout the project.