



The Issue

The first wind farm in Ireland was completed in 1992 at Bellacorrick, Co. Mayo and by mid-2007, there were 67 wind farms connected to the national grid. Wind farms have elicited a range of reactions from Irish people and in 2002, Sustainable Energy Ireland (SEI) commissioned a survey aimed at identifying public attitudes to renewable energy and to wind energy in Ireland. The results of this survey¹ can be downloaded from SEI's website at www.sei.ie.

The SEI survey found that, in general, Irish people are positively disposed towards the development of wind farms. However, the survey also indicates that people will not accept wind farms everywhere and that special care should be taken to ensure that wind farms respond to contextual landscape characteristics.

Ireland's scenery has been a cornerstone of international tourism marketing campaigns for decades. In 2007, 80% of overseas holidaymakers to Ireland rated scenery as an important reason for their trip (the second highest category), followed by the natural / unspoilt environment at 74%². Furthermore, over one quarter of holidaymakers believed that scenery is a factor that distinguishes Ireland from other destinations. The future sustainability of Ireland's tourism industry is, therefore, inextricably linked to the maintenance of the character and scenic qualities of the Irish landscape.

If Ireland is to meet its Kyoto Protocol commitments and to achieve the more ambitious EU targets of a reduction in Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions of 20% by 2020, as well as

a target of renewables to account for 16% of overall energy consumption by 2020³, then an increase in the number and distribution of wind farms will be required. Wind farms tend to be located in upland areas where the wind speeds are greatest. Our upland areas also contain some of our most valuable scenic landscapes. In response to the potential conflict that could arise from this confluence of scenic landscapes and opportunity areas for wind farms, Fáilte Ireland, in association with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB), decided in 2007 to survey both domestic and overseas holidaymakers to Ireland to determine their attitudes to windfarms. The survey drew on many aspects of the original SEI survey including the photomontages of windfarms in particular landscape types that were used to elicit an opinion from respondents. The purpose of the survey was to assess whether or not the development of wind farms would impact on the enjoyment of the Irish scenery by holidaymakers.

The survey was undertaken by Lansdowne Market Research and involved face-to-face interviews with 1,300 tourists, both domestic (25%) and overseas (75%) (1,000 in the Republic; 300 in Northern Ireland). This short document summarises the main findings of the survey. The full results can be viewed on the Environment page of Fáilte Ireland's website www.failteireland.ie.

¹ Sustainable Energy Ireland (2003), Attitudes Towards the Development of Wind Farms in Ireland, Dublin.

² Fáilte Ireland (2007), Visitor Attitudes Survey, Dublin.

³ European Commission Climate Change Package published on 23rd January 2008: 20 20 by 2 020 – Europe's climate change opportunity.

What our visitors think

The survey results indicate that although most visitors are broadly positive towards the idea of building more wind farms on the island of Ireland, there exists a sizeable minority (one in seven) who are negative towards wind farms in any context.

Awareness

Awareness of wind farms is very high amongst visitors to Ireland. Almost nine in ten claim to have ever seen a wind farm and the incidence of seeing a wind farm is similarly high across domestic and overseas tourists. Almost half claimed to have seen at least one wind farm on this holiday on the island of Ireland and of those who had seen a wind farm, two thirds claimed to have seen up to two during the holiday. Typically, wind farms are encountered in the landscape while driving or being driven (74%), while few experienced a wind farm up close. For more than three in ten, the wind farm noticed was viewed on the horizon and for a further one in four it was viewed from a distance of one to two kilometres. Almost half of the wind farms viewed were sited in mountain moorland and a further 37% were in a coastal landscape. Of the wind farms viewed most contained less than ten turbines and 15% had less than five turbines.

Perceived impact on sightseeing

Despite the fact that almost half of the tourists interviewed had seen at least one wind farm on their holiday, most felt that their presence did not detract from the quality of their sightseeing, with the largest proportion (45%) saying that the presence of the wind farm had a positive impact on their enjoyment of sightseeing, with 15% claiming that they had a negative impact. It is worth noting however that the type of landscape into which the wind farm is to be sited can have a significant impact on attitudes. Although 15% feel wind farms have a fairly or very negative impact on sightseeing in general, this figure increases to 25% for wind farms sited in coastal locations. Older people (those aged 55+) are most likely to feel that wind farms will have a negative impact on sightseeing.

As part of this survey, tourists were also asked to express their views on the impact on the Irish landscape of housing development, electricity steel pylons and mobile phone masts, in order to compare the relative impact of these developments to those of windfarms. Compared with other types of development in the Irish landscape, wind farms elicited a positive response

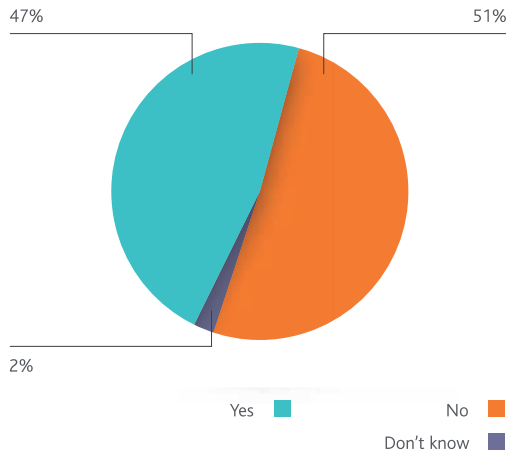


with compared to telecommunication masts and steel electricity pylons. Only 14% of tourists thought that electricity pylons had a positive impact, with only 9% stating that mobile phone masts had a positive impact. Housing, however, was considered to impact less on the Irish landscape with 53% stating that this type of development has a positive impact.

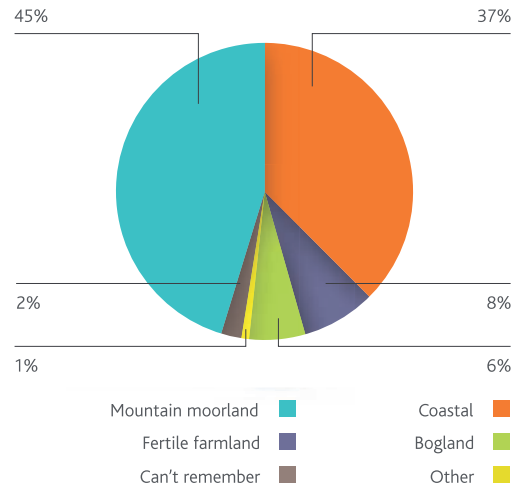
Perceived impact on beauty

Visitors were asked to rate the beauty of five different landscapes types: Coastal, Mountain, Farmland, Bogland and Urban Industrial, and then rate on a scale of 1-5 the potential impact of a wind farm being sited in each landscape. Results indicate very clearly that each potential wind farm and site must be assessed on its own merits. Looking across all sites, the numbers claiming a positive impact on the landscape due to the wind farms are greater than those claiming a negative impact, in all cases. However, the proportions rating the impact of the wind farms as negative increased with the perceived beauty of the location. For instance, there was greater relative negativity expressed about potential wind farms on coastal landscapes (33%) and mountain (27%) or farmland (27%). On the other hand less than one in five were negatively disposed to the construction on bogland (18%) or urban industrial land (13%).

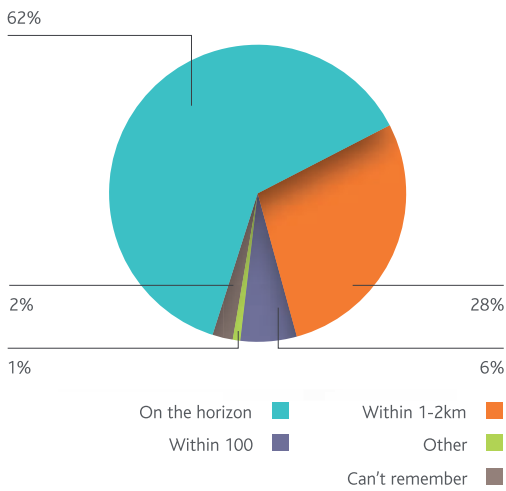
Have you seen a wind farm on this holiday?



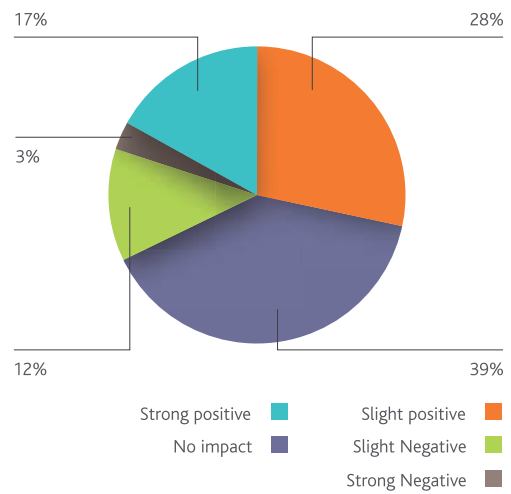
What type of landscape was the wind farm situated within?



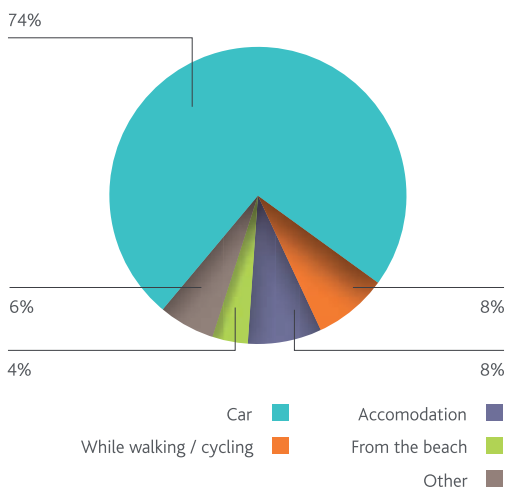
What was the position of the wind farm when you viewed it?



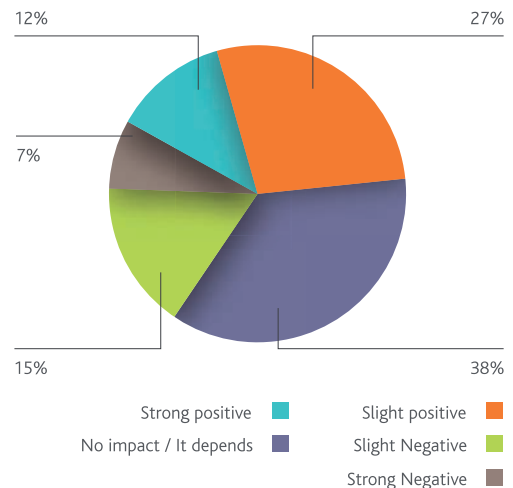
How did viewing a wind farm impact on your sightseeing?



Where were you when you saw the wind farm?



How would wind farms impact on your decision to visit Ireland?



Perceived impact on future visits to the area

Almost three quarters of respondents claim that potentially greater numbers of wind farms would either have no impact on their likelihood to visit or have a strong or fairly strong positive impact on future visits to the island of Ireland. Of those who feel that a potentially greater number of wind farms would positively impact on their likelihood to visit, the key driver is their support for renewable energy and potential decreased carbon emissions. Those who are negatively disposed are more likely to cite that wind farms look ugly, are noisy and can frighten or damage wildlife. A small number also claim they have preference for other forms of renewable energy.

In terms of the size and composition of wind farms, tourists tended to prefer farms containing fewer turbines. If both produced the same amount of electricity, tourists also preferred wind farms containing a small group of large turbines (55%) to a large group of smaller turbines (18%).

The Challenge

While there is a generally positive disposition among tourists towards wind farm development in Ireland, it is important also to take into account the views of the one in seven tourists who are negatively disposed towards wind farms. The challenge lies in striking a balance between the maintenance of landscape character and scenery as a tourism asset, and facilitating the development of further wind farms to ensure Ireland meets its GHG reduction targets. This requires good planning on the part of the wind farm developers as well as the Local Authorities, particularly at the site selection, design and pre-planning consultation stages.

The *Planning Guidelines on Wind Energy Development* issued by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, require developers to assess the effect of wind

energy development on tourism and recreational activities and to consult with Fáilte Ireland or Shannon Development as part of the planning process. The *Guidelines* state that *'in many areas in Ireland, tourism and recreation underpin the local economy and can depend to varying degrees on the quality of the environment. Wind energy developments are not incompatible with tourism and leisure interests, but care needs to be taken to ensure that insensitively sited wind energy developments do not impact negatively on tourism potential'*⁴.

It is the view of Fáilte Ireland that National Parks and areas of national scenic importance should be avoided for wind farm development. However, the survey results suggest that in other landscapes, the development of wind farms can have a positive impact in terms of the visitor's perception of the Irish landscape and of Ireland's commitment to renewable energy.

Given the preference among tourists for wind farms with a smaller number of turbines, Fáilte Ireland considers that Strategic Environmental Assessment should be used as a tool in the planning of wind energy developments, in the case of both on-shore and off-shore wind farms. This will help to avoid negative cumulative impacts that might arise resulting from too many wind energy developments occurring in a particular area.

Fáilte Ireland will provide advice to Local Authorities, as resources allow, on the preparation of wind energy strategies for their administrative areas and will provide comment on individual wind farm proposals either at the pre-planning stage or as part of the planning process.

⁴ Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (2006), *Planning Guidelines on Wind Energy Development*, Dublin, p15.



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