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Case study:

# The Giant's Causeway



**The Giant's Causeway**, located near the town of Bushmills in County Antrim on the north coast of Northern Ireland, is an area of some 40,000 interlocking basalt columns flanked by the North Atlantic Ocean and a landscape of dramatic cliffs. Declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1986 and a national nature reserve in 1987 by the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland, the Giant's Causeway is primarily owned by the National Trust of England, Wales, and Northern Ireland (National Trust), a founding member of INTO. The remainder of the site is owned by the Crown Estate and several private landowners. Hilary McGrady is the Director-General of the National Trust and Max Bryant serves as the General Manager of Giant's Causeway and Carrick-a-Rede. Esther Dobbin, who worked with us on the development of this case study, serves as the site's Responsible Tourism Manager.

In 2019, the Giant's Causeway received more than 998,000 visitors, a slight decrease from the more than 1 million visitors who arrived on-site the year before. As owner of one of the most heavily visited sites in Northern Ireland, the National Trust has faced a variety of challenges to ensure sustainable, responsible tourism that works for the various stakeholders in the local community while ensuring conservation of the site itself. As part of a planning study for the future, the National Trust implemented an extensive community outreach program at the Giant's Causeway — one shaped with the particular history of Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and the United Kingdom in mind — to bring all the relevant stakeholders together to help shape a sustainable future for all.



### Key lesson learned in the study of the Giant's Causeway:

*Deep, authentic, and lasting engagement with the local community is crucial to building long-term trust.*

Another important learning resulting from dynamics between the National Trust and the local community arose from this case study.

- At times, the outsized influence of a stewardship organization, as well as the historical and political relationships between all the entities involved, requires special sensitivity to manage that influence and those relationships.

### Brief history

Created in a period of intense volcanic activity during the Paleocene Epoch, the Giant's Causeway came into existence as highly fluid molten basalt pushed through chalk beds to form an extensive volcanic plateau. That molten basalt fractured as the lava cooled, resulting in pillars — the tallest being some 12 meters (39 feet) high — producing the distinctive columns seen today. The tops of the columns form what look like stepping stones that lead from the foot of the cliffs and disappear under the sea. Most of the columns are hexagonal, although there are also some with four, five, seven or eight sides. Legends abound as to the creation and use of the causeway, the most prevalent involving the Irish giant Fionn mac Cumhaill (Finn MacCool), from the Fenian Cycle of Gaelic mythology and the Scottish giant Benandonner. Across the sea there are identical basalt columns (a part of the same ancient lava flow) at Fingal's Cave on the Scottish isle of Staffa. As noted in the site's description on the Trust website, the Giant's Causeway has inspired artists, stirred scientific debate, and captured the imagination of all who see it for centuries.

## **The beginnings of the tourist trade and the drive toward conservation**

The wider world became aware of the existence of the Giant's Causeway in 1693, with the presentation of a paper to the Royal Society in London. In the 18th century, paintings and engravings of the site, especially those by Dublin artist Susanna Drury, reached even wider audiences, so that by the 19th century the Giant's Causeway was a popular tourist attraction. The Giant's Causeway Tramway, a 14.5 km (9 mile) 3-foot narrow-gauge electric railway, brought many visitors to the site beginning in 1887, increasing both visitation and commercialism. Failing ridership and aging equipment led to the abandonment of the line following World War II.

In 1961, 13 hectares (32 acres) of the Giant's Causeway were bequeathed to the National Trust by its owner, Sir Antony Macnaghten (1899–1972). Later that decade, the Trust acquired an additional 57 hectares (141 acres) of freehold and leasehold land with financing from the Ulster Land Fund. The National Trust owns and manages the cliffs, foreshore, and hotel, and manages the site as a whole with the Moyle District Council. In 1986, the Giant's Causeway was listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site and the following year the Causeway Coast was created as a National Nature Reserve. The Antrim Coastline was declared an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in 1989. The site is monitored by the Environment & Heritage Service of the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland. Small sections of the cliff top path remain in private hands as the property of a number of individuals.

## **The growth of international tourism and the local response**

Always a popular destination for travelers, the Giant's Causeway has seen significant growth in tourism over the past two decades. In 2012 a new visitors center opened in response to this growth and the increase in mass tourism from overseas. At the time the center was built, the site was welcoming 600,000-700,000 visitors a year. In 2017 and 2018, visitation surpassed 1 million for the first time. As the facilities were built for two-thirds of that number, the impact of overcrowding at the site became more evident. The Trust established the position of Responsible Tourism Manager at the Giant's Causeway in 2018 to be the point person for sustainable tourism initiatives. Prior to the Covid-19 outbreak, the Giant's Causeway was the top generator for tourism in Northern Ireland, and it stood at #3 for the entire island of Ireland.

While not without some controversy, the National Trust, the site, and tourism driven by the site were generally seen through a positive lens by the local community into the decade of the 2010s. That began to shift mid-decade as the number of international tourists grew and local communities began feeling overwhelmed by the imbalance of tourism-related impacts. Without parameters for the site's carrying capacity and an understanding of the infrastructure needed to support growing numbers of international visitors, concerns grew on all sides as to the sustainability of the model at the Giant's Causeway.

Prior to Covid-19, most of the tourists to the Giant's Causeway were day visitors, and 78% came from overseas, with the main markets being Canada, the United States, Great Britain, and China. In recent years the number of Chinese visitors has grown, to the point where the site has the highest number of visitors from China in all of Ireland. The staff at the Giant's Causeway engaged with the tourism efforts from all the main markets in ways perhaps not seen at other sites in order to manage the message and visitor flow to alleviate selling of tours during peak times.

*“Many suggested 6-month plans for community engagement, just to tick off a box. The one we established for the National Trust at the Giant’s Causeway is for 15 months, with multiple conversations and lots of tea. It is at the fifth social setting where you get the real story, not the first.”*

Cillian Murphy, Interview

#### KEY CHALLENGE:

As the pre-Covid-19 levels of tourism reached and exceeded 1 million visitors annually, the relationships at the Giant’s Causeway between the local community, the National Trust, the government, and the larger tourism industry were fraying.

#### KEY LESSON LEARNED:

Deep, authentic, and lasting engagement with the local community is crucial to building long-term trust.

#### Challenges. Responses. Lessons learned.

As tourism increased from 2015 to 2019, the National Trust became increasingly aware of the impact overtourism was having on the conservation of the site itself, on the experience of tourists coming to the site, and on economic and quality of life issues for local residents. Those three topics led the Trust to commission the 2019 study to examine capacity, a study which remains in development due to the Covid-19 outbreak. Nonetheless, the impacts have already highlighted the major challenges and have shaped the Trust’s initial response. An overarching issue is how the influence of such a large heritage organization as the National Trust, along with the centuries-old relationships between Great Britain, the Republic of Ireland, and Northern Ireland, play a role in this effort at building a new tourism model in support of sustaining communities. For this case study, we focus on the challenges and opportunities that come from the efforts to engage the local stakeholders meaningfully in the work of building a new model for tourism as well as the effects arising from complex inter-generational and reputational relationships.

The issues around tourism models and sustaining communities have come to the forefront over the past decade at the Giant’s Causeway. It was clear as the pre-Covid levels of tourism reached and exceeded 1 million visitors annually that the relationships between the local community, the National Trust, the government, and the larger tourism industry were fraying. Signs of the challenges included:

- The tourism experience was deteriorating. Visitors were raising issues and suggesting that the site was too busy and crowded. It was not the rural setting they were expecting.
- The tourism industry was bringing an increasing number of visitors to the site. Unfortunately, some of those involved were taking steps that undermined Trust stewardship efforts and undercut the business models of both the National Trust (which supports conservation) and local businesses (which employs area citizens).
  - Large bus coaches coming from Belfast and beyond managed their visitation patterns at the site so that their visitors provided little or no support to the local economy.
  - Some local hotels and Airbnb owners encouraged their guests to skip the entrance fee to see the site, putting pressure on the Trust to manage additional visitors with no offsetting income to cover those costs.

- The local community push-back was also increasing.
  - Cars and buses were clogging roads. Individuals who do not want to pay the Visitor Experience fee (which includes parking, access to the visitors center, and an audio guide or guided tour) leave their cars parked alongside the narrow, rural roads, creating traffic problems.
  - Tourists were visiting parts of the site where they should not go, requiring more staff to manage the site. Tourists were also visiting places that impact both local community values and conservation of the site.
  - Concerns were raised that the government was not focused on their roles in helping manage community quality of life (as with parking regulations).
  - Perceptions among the local community were that little of the money raised by the Trust at Giant's Causeway was staying in the local area.

In the study initiated in 2019, the National Trust prioritized the engagement of the local community. The Trust's Responsible Tourism Manager noted that if the Trust and the tourism industry want to manage sites such as the Giant's Causeway to support new tourism models, they have to involve local communities in the decision-making process on a far deeper level. Cillian Murphy of Cillian Murphy Consulting was hired by the Trust to oversee this work, and he included Matt Scrimgeour, a veteran of community engagement and conflict resolution around the sectarian issues in Ireland, on his team.

Murphy and Scrimgeour prepared a 15-month process of engagement as part of the study, with the understanding that ongoing engagement — well beyond the period of the study — will be a key to building trust and ultimately achieving a successful outcome. They insisted on an honest and transparent process and used multiple platforms for the discussion. Murphy outlines their work program as:

- Identifying stakeholders and their stake,
- building relationships,
- opening clear communication channels,
- building trust,
- identifying projects,
- empowering community groups/clusters.
- creating a forum where all actors can discuss a common sustainable future for the area, and
- drinking lots and lots of cups of tea at kitchen tables and meeting halls.



A neighborhood survey designed to uncover the local sentiment toward the National Trust, toward tourism in general, and toward tourism to the Giant's Causeway and Carrick-a-Rede was an important first step. Murphy summarizes some of the most interesting findings from the 315 responses as:

- The community's clear wish to be asked for their input, their willingness to engage when asked, and their very strong views as to the impacts of tourism on their daily lives.
- Respondents across every sector felt the biggest negative impact of tourism would be on the environment. The community sees a contradiction in the perception of the primary purpose of the National Trust as custodians of a protected area and their current role as managers of the site as a tourist attraction.
- Historically, the National Trust has been seen to facilitate increased public access to sites that communities have not been allowed to visit. However, in the case of the Giant's Causeway, the local perception is they (the Trust) are restricting access to a site that we (the community) have had public access to for thousands of years. The perception is that this restriction is almost solely for monetary gain that does not benefit the local community

As Murphy notes, this last perception "makes it almost impossible for the managers to manage the site. Finding a workable solution to this will be key to unlocking the capacity for the Trust to move from volume-based to a value-based metric, one that would deliver far higher benefits for the environment and the local community."

In his summation for the *Responsible Tourism* blog, Murphy states the challenge at the Giant's Causeway and other sites as the need to rethink tourism development strategies to help sustain communities:

*"In short, we need to radically rethink our tourism development strategies, we need to focus not on creating a 'sustainable tourism industry' nor indeed 'sustainable destinations', we need to focus instead on the sustainability of the host community and their environment, and we can only do that by putting them right at the very centre of the tourism development process, and, with a hat tip to Cormac Russell from Nurture Development, move from the current position where tourism almost always happens 'to the community' in the destination and tourism development is done 'for the community', to a situation where we on behalf of the NT are at the very least trying to create a destination 'with the community' and where the ultimate goal is the destination and tourism development will be delivered 'by the community'."*

*(Cillian Murphy, RTP blog, 16 February 2020)*

To engage and sustain communities, governments and tourism industry representatives need to recognize, as Murphy puts it, that tourism's viability, its very sustainability, "is almost totally reliant on a social license to operate from the host community within which it takes place, a license that has been, mostly, freely given in the past because the perceived benefits have outweighed the perceived costs." Stewardship organizations, such as the National Trust, need to be aware that the metrics around values can easily become subservient to tourism and revenue numbers.

## ADDITIONAL CHALLENGE:

The influence of the National Trust and the historical relationships between the entities involved can be a two-edged sword in addressing tourism/community relationships at the Giant's Causeway.

## OTHER IMPORTANT LEARNINGS:

Be mindful of past and current power dynamics and historical relationships when working with local communities. Sensitivity to local perceptions is crucial to building trust.

Murphy is certain that at sites around the globe, local communities will not put up with negative social, environmental and economic impacts. Communities are finding their voice, and people are beginning to understand that things can change. Local citizens recognize this first, then local politicians. Many do not understand that there are different ways to do tourism beyond coaches running down the road. Part of that begins when one measures differently.

Communities are becoming less accepting of the prevailing "tourism = good" narrative, in Murphy's estimation, and are more demanding of their right to live free of overcrowding and other challenges of unsustainable tourism. That has only increased after the pandemic. While communities' capacity to host higher numbers of tourists may have grown, fear about outsiders coming to their communities while the disease is still raging has created another level of concern. Murphy believes that at the heart of it all is "trust" and the level of trust and toleration may have been significantly lowered due to Covid-19...and may stay that way for a long time.

The National Trust is the model on which almost all the member organizations of INTO have built their structure and work. Celebrating its 125th anniversary in 2020, the Trust is Europe's largest conservation charity with a mission to "look after nature, beauty and history for the nation to enjoy." The scale of its operations makes it both a leader and something of an anomaly in heritage conservation circles, as the Trust cares for:

- Over 1250 kilometers (780 miles) of coastline (including the coastline at the Giant's Causeway)
- More than 250,000 hectares (618,000 acres) of land
- Over 500 historic houses, castles, parks, and gardens
- Nearly 1 million works of art

While the primary mission of the National Trust is conservation (i.e., the "forever" part of the tagline), that goal co-exists with the mission to open up the places of nature and beauty for all to enjoy (i.e., "for everyone"). At the Giant's Causeway, the increasing number of visitors gathering at pinch points at the site — such as when tour buses from cruise ships and hotels deposit hundreds of tourists on the rocks — creates pressures on the land and natural resources that threatens to damage the characteristics that make the place unique, contradicts the core Trust purpose of conservation, and as a consequence causes reputational harm to the organization.





The Trust also operates within the complex historical, religious, and governmental relationships between England, Wales, and Northern Ireland — where it owns and manages property; Scotland, which is part of the United Kingdom but has its own well-established National Trust; and the independent Republic of Ireland. At a place such as the Giant's Causeway, where tourists from Ireland, England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, North America, China, and around the world gather on a daily basis, the interactions can require sensitivity and diplomacy not always expected of conservation organizations in other countries.

On a positive note, as a major player not just in County Antrim but in the United Kingdom and, in fact, around the globe, the National Trust can bring resources and a platform to its work not available to many other NGOs. With its standing, the Trust has the authority to bypass short-term economic opportunities, such as serving as a film site for *Game of Thrones*, that might tempt other stewards with fewer financial resources on which to draw. On the reverse side, it can also attract criticism that is out-of-scale to the issue at hand because it is a large and easy target.

At the Giant's Causeway, the 2019 study was commissioned with these factors in mind. Even before the study is complete, though, the Trust has focused on responses to the question of scale and the complexity of relationships. The Trust hopes to use the study as an educational tool with the local and national governments, seeking to provide data as to the importance of the site's conservation to the local economy. While the government has an economic focus that will preference a return to pre-Covid-19 levels of tourism, the Trust hopes to use its study and leverage its platform to demonstrate how local businesses cannot be sustained with the higher numbers.

Finally, the Trust is mindful of the local politics at play around all its sites. While seen locally as a "British" organization, the Trust has been aware of the background of the local community and strives to manage the sensibilities to ensure a pleasant experience for the visitors as well as the local residents. While working well, the Trust staff recognized the tensions that were growing with the increase in visitation from 2015 to 2019. That recognition was one of several reasons that the community engagement work has been prioritized by the Trust within the study.



## **Commit to deep community engagement: Other voices and views**

Beyond the efforts of the National Trust at the Giant's Causeway, we uncovered others involved in the study and work of serious, deep, authentic, and lasting community engagement. In "The New Frontiers of the Study of Tourism", his 2016 overview of the field, Antonio Paolo Russo notes that in the last 15-to-20 years "the academy seemed incapable of producing new conceptual and methodological developments to deal with the increasingly evident problems caused by the modern tourism model. We knew — and we have consequently educated several generations of tourism entrepreneurs and destination managers — how to attract tourists, how to host them and how to ensure a satisfactory tourist experience." However, Russo adds, "we also knew that not everything shines for residents of destinations affected by high rates of tourism growth, especially from the point of view of quality of life, social justice, as well as the environmental state of their surroundings."

In recognizing the lack of a "win-win situation" for all the stakeholders, including travelers, the tourism industry, host communities, and descendent communities, Russo suggests of those who are studying the problem that "perhaps they have been very unrealistic, since they have given little consideration to agency and power relations, governance structures, the multiplicity of agents involved and the extreme complexity of the conditions of tourism development."

The issues around agency, power relations, and community engagement can be especially sensitive when addressing forgotten or hidden history, the stories of the descendent community at former slave sites and places of colonial conquest, as well as at the places that tell the stories of national awakenings and independence.





- When Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman proclaimed Malaysian independence on August 31, 1957, he stood in the middle of the Merdeka Stadium field and shouted out “Merdeka” seven times. This scene, often shown on film and in print, is etched on the psyche of all Malaysians. Nevertheless, the stadium was nearly demolished in the 1990s. It was the National Trust, Badan Warisan Malaysia, that was able to help save Merdeka as part of a public-private partnership with deep involvement with the community. Today the stadium has a new lease on life for sporting events and concerts alongside “The Road to Nationhood” museum.



- In 2017, the National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP) in the U.S. launched its **African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund**, a \$25 million campaign to support 150 historic places that have been overlooked in American history and that represent centuries of African American activism, achievement, and resilience. In partnership with NTHP, American Express has helped fund restoration work at sites of forgotten history, such as Hinchliffe Stadium in Paterson, New Jersey, one of the few remaining stadiums in the U.S. associated with Negro League baseball. Through this preservation project and the broader work of the Action Fund, NTHP partners with and empowers Black and diverse communities to expand the American story.



- At James Madison's Montpelier, a NTHP historic site, an active Descendant Community of the enslaved individuals at Montpelier has shared their families' histories with the site in a deep and meaningful engagement over a number of years. Madison is known as the Father of the U.S. Constitution. Three generations of the Madison family also enslaved over 300 individuals. These enslaved men, women, and children raised the crops that generated the Madisons' wealth, and tended to the most intimate needs of the Madison family. The staff at Montpelier has worked since the late 1990s to honor the lives of the enslaved through ongoing slavery interpretation, reconstruction of the slave quarters near the mansion, and a groundbreaking exhibition, *The Mere Distinction of Colour*, which opened in 2017.

Photo: Proun Design, courtesy of The Montpelier Foundation



- Heritage can be seen as something for the elite — or as an irrelevant harping back to the past. Its economic value is not always recognized and is often even associated with poverty. And yet culture, historic buildings, landscapes, and traditions are essential to shaping the future, wherever we are in the world. Keeping alive even the most hard-to-tell stories helps communities and nations avoid making those same mistakes. With that perspective, INTO's *Encourage African Youth to Embrace Their Heritage* project sought to educate and build enthusiasm among young people in Sierra Leone, Uganda, and Zimbabwe to actively learn about and appreciate their cultural backgrounds — and those of their continental neighbors.

