

Irish cross-visit to Dartmoor, UK

Visiting LA: Burren

HNV-Link partner: Burrenbeo

Host LA: Dartmoor

HNV-Link partner: EFNCP

Date of visit: 22nd-25th of November 2018

1. Participants in the cross-visit:

The Irish contingent consisted of a mix of academics, farmers, NGO staff and farm advisors, with many in the group having more than one of those roles.

In addition, the visit was joined for its first half by two farmers from south Wales who had recently visited the Burren Winterage events as well as a results-based payments conference in south Wales earlier in the year. Their common grazing is a notable innovator within their region.

On the hosting side, as well as John Waldon and Gwyn Jones from the HNV-Link team and the farmers who participated directly by presenting their farm/common etc., a number of other farmers gave of their time to attend in support, to take part in the indoor discussions etc.. At least 15 farmers and their partners met the visitors.

2. The objectives of the cross-visit from the host's perspective were:

- to fulfil as much as possible the aspirations of the visitors
- to provide a safe, smooth, happy visit
- to provide stimulation, inspiration, ideas, contacts etc. to the local farmers at a time of great stress
- possibly to reinforce the foundations on which future contacts and collaborations could be built

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3. The Programme of the visit

The programme in detail is given in the visiting group's report. From the host's perspective, our aim was to provide a constant diet of stimulating experiences, while allowing time for reflection and without tiring the visiting party or hosts excessively. A number of constraints were felt:

- farmer availability (in the end, not an issue – there were always a number of farmers helping to host the group and to contribute to the discussion)
- weather and length of day. We had to finish outdoor visits early and our activity on-farm was also limited by low cloud and intermittent, sometimes heavy, rain. In fact though it would have been nice to have seen more of the area in panorama, these did not prove to be an issue. The shared language in particular meant that indoor discussions were much enjoyed and very fruitful for all concerned, Irish and Welsh visitors and hosts alike.
- Differences in system etc. We were very aware before coming that both the common land focus of the Dartmoor LA (very little commonage in the Burren) and the scale and nature of farming (Dartmoor's most engaged farmers all large and full-time; Burren's farms somewhat smaller, though not small on an Irish scale, and almost all part-time) could be a barrier. But in fact we moved beyond that immediately and found many common problems and some potential common solutions to explore.
- Mismatch between interests/things to see. Partly reflecting the common land focus of the LA work in HNV-Link, we were rather worried to see what the visiting group was most interested in (mostly not our selected innovations, for example!). We had to set out clearly the situation of the hosting area with regard to many or most of those issues – ones where we also were struggling to find ways forward – and that on those issues we would have to treat the visit as an opportunity for discussion between equals rather than a predominantly one-way knowledge transfer process. In the end, this proved not to be a problem, and probably enhanced the value of the visit from the host farmers' perspective.

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PEER LEARNING EXCHANGES – IRISH VISIT TO DARTMOOR – HOST REPORT

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4. Reflections on the visit

The visit went much better than anyone had thought possible, given the constraints outlined. Rather than being ‘something we had to do’, everyone is looking back on it as one of the highlights of their year. The voluntary presence of the two Welsh farmers, who came down even though they couldn’t be present for the final day, and their enthusiasm for a follow-up afterwards (there have been two meetings already to discuss this) is just one unanticipated indicator of the attractiveness of such visits and of their potential.

In some cases, the visitors left without total clarity; this was usually a reflection of the total chaos in England at the minute, with Brexit both consuming all the policy-making oxygen and also providing little more than massive uncertainty for not just the years ahead but for the immediate next few months. The future of one of the key innovations – Dartmoor Farming Futures – would be a case in point.

In some cases also, the hosts themselves have decided to follow-up on what *they* gained from the visit. Another visit from James Moran has been planned, with the aim of drawing up some ideas on how to develop Dartmoor Farming Futures.

From a practical point of view, the visit passed without incident; everyone was happy with the standard of food and accommodation.

