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The values and vulnerabilities of ‘Star Wars Island’: exploring tensions in the sustainable management of the Skellig Michael World Heritage Site

Abstract

This paper explores challenges in reconciling the cultural, economic and ecological pillars of the sustainable development concept. It does so by examining how conflicts in the management of an island off the Irish coast called Skellig Michael, which has been internationally designated for its significant cultural and ecological attributes, have been intensified by: (a) increasing tourist numbers; (b) a re-framing of the site’s identity; and (c) changing visitor motivations. These have resulted from the amplified attention the island has received following the release of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* and *The Last Jedi* in which it features prominently. Following a critical identification and discussion of the fault lines between different stakeholders involved in the conservation and use of the island, the paper advances a roadmap for action to help resolve animosity in the governance of the site and facilitate its sustainable management in the context of changing visitor numbers and profiles.

Keywords

Sustainable management, stakeholder tension, multiple values, value change, Skellig Michael

Introduction

The challenge of reconciling the economic, social and environmental pillars of sustainable development has long been debated (Brady 1994; Redclift 1994; Shao 2011). Perhaps nowhere is this challenge thrown more into relief than in the efforts required to facilitate the sustainable management of sites specifically designated for their unique cultural and ecological attributes (Nicholas et al. 2009; Opschoor and Tang 2011). Research in this field highlights the importance for sustainable management of positive relationships between those stakeholders involved in the conservation and use of such sites (McCombes et al. 2015; Snyman 2016). This work emphasises the role of benefit-sharing in enhancing local support for management initiatives (Acquah et al. 2017) and thereby creating the conditions necessary to facilitate future sustainability (Heslinga et al. 2017; Cave and Negussie 2017). Nevertheless, changing perspectives on the value of a site can present a series of problematic issues for its sustainable management as it may result in altered interpretations of what sustainability should mean (Baker 2015; Liburd and Becken 2017). This can aggravate tensions between different

stakeholders and intensify frictions resultant from power asymmetries (Healy et al. 2012). While a growing body of research stresses the need to engender successful working relationships that are responsive to multiple interests (McCool 2009; Jamal and Stronza 2009), relinquishing control and incorporating the objectives of others' can seem an unattractive prospect in situations of mutual suspicion between stakeholders (Zachrisson et al. 2006; Heslinga et al. 2017), and where the changing motivations of visitors are viewed unfavourably (Wray et al. 2010). It is reasonable to assume that such issues may be heightened during periods of rapid change in how the value of a site is perceived. Nonetheless, there is a deficit in our understanding of how such rapid change impacts the sustainable management of such sites. Hence, this paper responds to this knowledge gap through a case study examination of stakeholder dynamics in the context of the rapid re-evaluation of an internationally designated cultural and ecological site.

Specifically, the case study concerns a protected area management regime operative on a small and precipitously rocky island called Skellig Michael located 11.6 km off the southwest coast of Ireland (Figure 1). As a World Heritage Site and a habitat protected under EU nature conservation legislation, it is a mixed cultural and ecological site of international significance. Although occupying a long established position in local history, music, literature and art, Skellig Michael gained global recognition from its inclusion as a filming location for the 2015 film *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. This fame has been intensified by the even greater exposure given to the island in *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*ⁱ, the subsequent movie in the *Star Wars* franchise, which was released in December 2017. However, there is a dark side to the force of the increased attention the island has been receiving: the increased visitor demand placed on this fragile cultural and ecological site has intensified friction between different interests involved its management and deepened long-standing tensions between those charged with the governance of this site and those stakeholders influenced by their decisions. This paper explores the source of these tensions, how the popular re-identification of Skellig Michael in the wake of *Star Wars* has impacted both the relationship between the island's management and stakeholders, and the island's integrity, and proposes some recommendations for the sustainable management of the site. This is achieved by first reviewing the suite of values associated with the island. These are then set within the complex and overlapping governance arrangements for the protection and governance of the site. The paper subsequently outlines and discusses the information obtained from a series of stakeholder interviews concerning the

social dynamics related to the management of site. These interviews were guided by a purposeful sampling approach based on an examination of grey literature and a review of media reports regarding the island following the commencement of *Star Wars* filming activity in 2014. The interviewees were drawn from three stakeholder groups broadly aligned with the three pillars of sustainable development: cultural stakeholders, environmental stakeholders and tourism/economic stakeholders. Following this discussion, the paper closes by employing the information garnered from this research to advance a series of proposals to address problematic issues identified in the sustainable management of Skellig Michael.

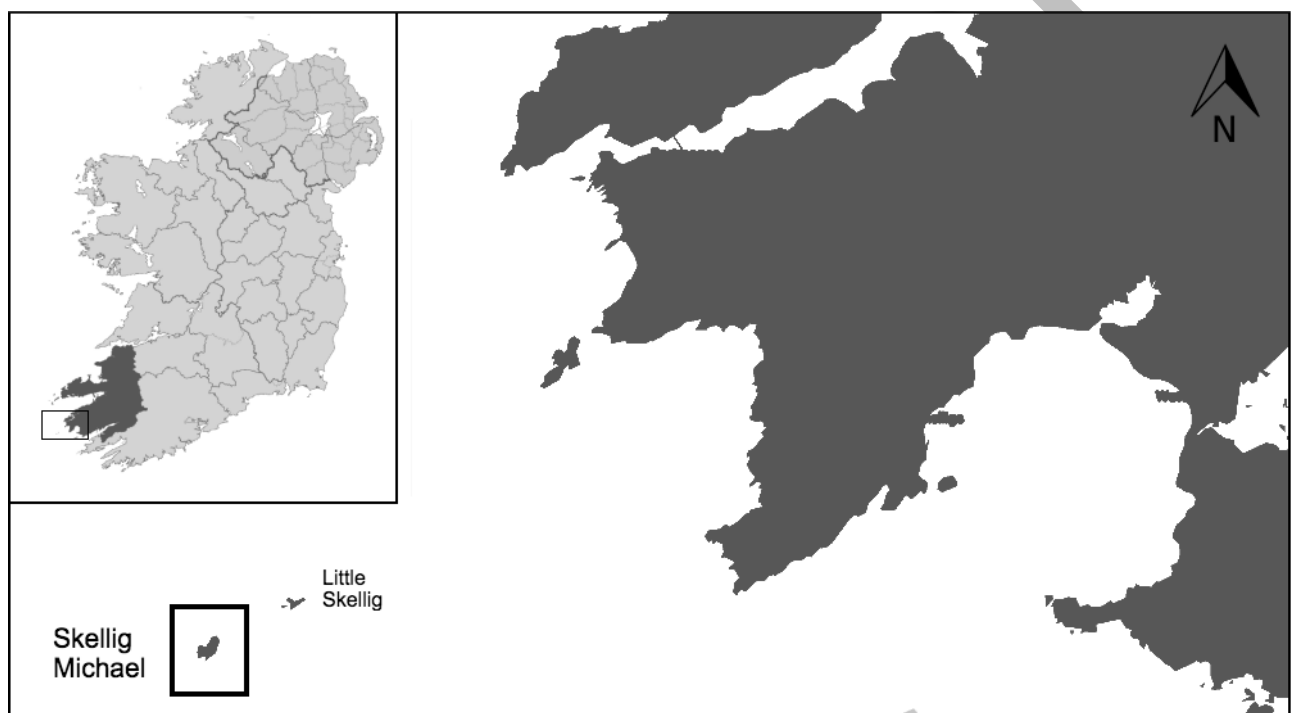


Figure 1: *Skellig Michael site location*
(Adapted from: DOEHLG and OPW 2008)

A complex set of values

In 1996, Skellig Michael was awarded UNESCO World Heritage Site status in recognition of the island's 'outstanding universal value' as 'an exceptional, and in many respects unique example of an early religious settlement deliberately sited on a pyramidal rock in the ocean, preserved because of a remarkable environment' (UNESCO 1996). The unique cultural heritage of the monastic site on Skellig Michael is also nationally recognised through its protection under the National Monuments Act (DoEHLG and OPW 2008). Moreover, the island is highly valued for its internationally important natural heritage. Specifically, Skellig Michael was designated a Special Protection Area (SPA) under the provisions of the EU Birds

Directive in 1986 (European Communities...1986; DoEHLG and OPW 2008) for its internationally significant and diverse populations of breeding seabirds species, namely the Puffin (*Fratercula arctica*), the Northern Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*), the Storm Petrel (*Hydrobates pelagicus*), and the Manx Shearwater (*Puffinus puffinus*). Although the island is legally protected on account of its bird populations, it also supports many internationally important species of lichens (DoAHG 2015). Furthermore, at the national level, Skellig Michael was designated a Statutory Nature Reserve in 1988 under the Wildlife Act (Nature Reserve...1988) in recognition of its ecological importance hosting significant seabird breeding colonies. Also at the national level, Skellig Michael is a proposed Natural Heritage Area, thereby heightening its nature conservation status with further restrictions on various works that might compromise the habitat (DoEHLG and OPW 2008; Kerry County Council 2015). In addition to this cultural and ecological significance, Skellig Michael is vital to the local economy. The tourism revenue generated by visitors drawn to the island constitutes the livelihood for a large proportion of the population living in nearby coastal towns that work in the hospitality industry or as tourism operators (DoEHLG and OPW 2008).

A complex governance arrangement

Skellig Michael is currently administered by the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (DoCHG). Working beneath the aegis of the DoCHG, the Office of Public Works (OPW) is charged with managing the cultural heritage attributes of the island. However, consequent on the ecological designations enjoyed by the island, the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), also operating within the administrative ambit of the DoCHG, has a statutory role in the monitoring and management of the island's protected seabirds. Nevertheless, there is no conservation management plan for the Skelligs SPA. Instead, what exists is a one page document produced by the NPWS titled 'Conservation objectives for Skelligs SPA [004007],' which specifies a generic goal of achieving 'favourable conservation status' for bird species and just one specific objective for the Skelligs SPA: 'To maintain or restore the favourable conservation condition of the bird species listed as Special Conservation Interests for this SPA,' followed by a list of the protected species related to the protected site (NPWS 2016). While there are a couple other short documents available on the status of the Skelligs SPA, none of these contain management information (NPWS 2015a; NPWS 2015b).

In contrast, the conservation of the island's cultural heritage has received significant attention. Indeed, following concerns over the management of Skellig Michael from a number of local archaeologists, UNESCO visited the island in 2007 and subsequently produced a report of recommendations in 2008 for the management of the site. The principal focus of this document was on cultural management practices, primarily on issues of transparency concerning the OPW's archaeological works on the island. However, it did note that experts from Birdwatch Ireland, a national ornithological organisation, were concerned about the low level of attention given to natural heritage issues in the draft of the Skellig Michael World Heritage Site Management Plan that had been produced at the time by the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government (DoEHLG), which was then the ministry charged with the island's managementⁱⁱ (UNESCO 2008). Many national government departments were involved in the development of this Management Plan, including the OPW, the NPWS, the National Monuments Service, the DoEHLG and Fáilte Ireland, the latter of which is responsible for promoting tourism in Ireland (DoEHLG and OPW 2008). When published in 2008, the Skellig Michael World Heritage Site Management Plan proclaimed an objective 'to achieve a balance between conservation of the built and natural heritage, visitor management and increased public awareness,' (DoEHLG and OPW 2008, p. 29). However, these four matters do not receive the same amount of attention in the Management Plan. Indeed, the specified objective of developing a separate ecological conservation management plan for the island suggests that the information in the Management Plan devoted to natural heritage was not intended to be comprehensive (DoEHLG and OPW 2008). While two potential impacts to the birdlife are identified in this plan, namely archaeological conservation works and visitors to the island, the OPW did not see either of these pressures to be particularly significant at the time, as an NPWS employee met regularly with the works team to minimise habitat damage and visitors tended to stay on recognised walking paths where there is little chance of trampling breeding bird sites. Nevertheless, the plan did note the challenge of balancing 'the preservation of the island with the socio-economic benefits that tourism can bring to the area,' (DoEHLG and OPW 2008, p. 44).

Differing to the government's Management Plan, the UNESCO report, which was also published in 2008, devoted significant attention to the role of stakeholders in the management of Skellig Michael. This was considered particularly important given that relations between the site management team and the boatmen had been tense for decades on account of the site

management team: (a) restricting the number of boatmen permitted to operate a service to the island; (b) limiting the number of visitors permitted to visit the island per day; and (c) reducing the length of the season in which tourists are allowed to visit the island. Against this backdrop, it was noted that the boatmen felt ‘that they should be consulted over all aspects of the management of the site’ (UNESCO 2008, p. 8). While the UNESCO report encouraged compromise and more open communication through annual meetings, it did not go so far as to suggest that the boatmen should be consulted on all management issues connected to the island. A dispute surrounding the ‘non-transferability of the landing permits’ was mentioned, although it was immediately stated that the OPW would not change their position on the topic, and it was instead recommended that the OPW clarify the ‘future criteria for the issuing of permits,’ (UNESCO 2008, p. 13). It was also recommended that the OPW investigate the possibility of extending the opening season for the site. These last two recommendations were addressed by the OPW, resulting in a three-year trial period of a longer opening season, which was subsequently retracted (Bramhill 2016), and a new competition-based permit system that has proved unpopular with the traditional boatmen (Lucey 2016). It is against this complex background characterised by different stakeholder objectives and mutual suspicion that the *Star Wars* filming activity began in 2014.

Increasing Vulnerabilities

Visitor numbers to Skellig Michael increased by 16.9% from 12,560 to 14,678 between the 2015 and 2016 season (May 15th through September 30th). Moreover, early reports suggest approximately 16,700 people visited the island during the 2017 season, an increase of almost 33% on the 2015 visitor number (Lucey 2017; McQuinn 2017) (see Figure 2). While some interviewees credited this surge to an increase in boat permits from 13 to 15, many felt that *Star Wars* had led to growth in demand for access to the island. As asserted by one interviewee,

The rise absolutely is attributed to, first and foremost, Star Wars...Beyond anything else, it's increased numbers drastically...I would say the majority of the people were American that were there, and a lot of Star Wars cloaks (Interviewee TE1).

Indeed, interviewees directly involved with the management of visitors to the island relayed stories of *Star Wars* fans trespassing off the standard walking paths into ecologically sensitive

areas when attempting to recreate scenes from *The Force Awakens*. As reported by one such interviewee,

With regard to the crosses and the birds nests, they're being trampled more than they were previously because people have figured out exactly where these things have been filmed. They take around phones with copies of the movie and they try to recreate exactly where the actors went (Interviewee CE1).

The *Star Wars* filming activity along with the subsequent change in visitor numbers and motivations following the release of *The Force Awakens* has thus become a concern for many of those involved with the island's management. As noted by one member of the island's management staff,

There's plenty of data to show that the island can't sustain such a project [Star Wars filming] and also that it can't sustain the promotion that would follow such a project (Interviewee CE2).

Indeed, one interviewee involved in the administration of the island felt that this problem was intensified by the enthusiasm of *Star Wars* fans as they,

...are much more focused than people who are interested in the history and things like that, with the result that, and this has never happened before, the boats are all booked out. You probably experienced that. And that's really, really bad... A lot of people who really should be seeing the place and experiencing it are not having the possibility to do so (Interviewee C1).

Such changing trends are perceived to result from re-identifying Skellig Michael as 'Star Wars Island' (Bramhill 2016; O'Grady 2017). The changing profile of visitors resulting from this has intensified existing frictions between those seeking to manage the island's protected ecological attributes and those charged with conserving the site's cultural assets. Additionally, the increased demand for access to Skellig Michael following the release of *The Force Awakens*

has heightened long-standing tensions between the OPW and the boatmen who rely on exploiting the tourism potential of the site for their livelihood. In this way, *Star Wars* has increased tensions in the management of the site and presented a considerable challenge to the sustainable development of the island as a cultural asset of economic benefit with unique ecological attributes.

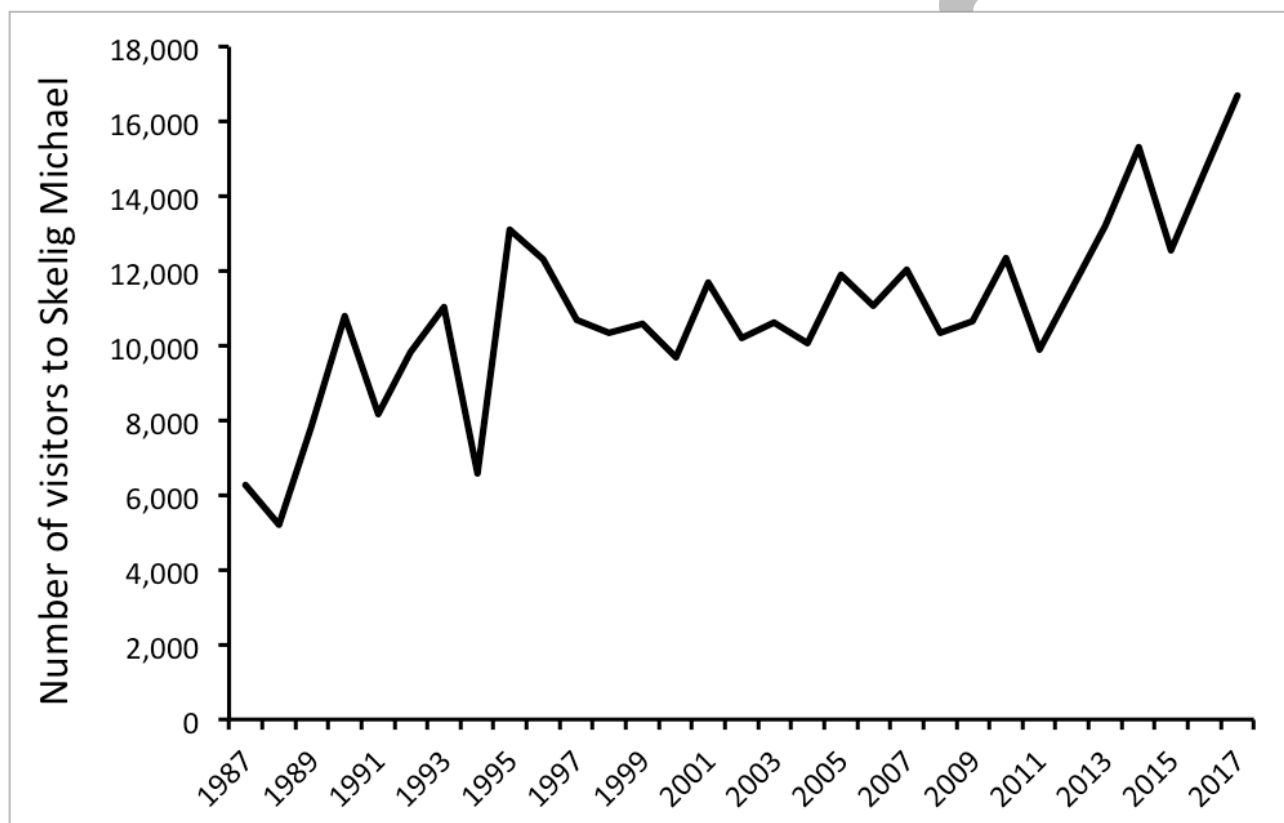


Figure 2: Number of visitors to Skellig Michael between the years of 1987 and 2017 (Creagh House Environmental Ltd. 2013; Solearth Architecture 2017; OPW 2016; McQuinn 2017)

Increasing Tensions

The notice afforded by *Star Wars* has highlighted the imbalance of power between the various stakeholders with respect to the governance of Skellig Michael. In particular, the significant influence exerted by the OPW in the management of the island has become the focus of much attention. While interviewees from the OPW view this asymmetrical power arrangement as a positive aspect of the island's governance in that it facilitates rapid adaptive management to unforeseen events in a relatively isolated location, other stakeholders in the island's governance view the OPW's administrative dominance less favourably. Indeed, from the perspective of an interviewee involved in the conservation of the island's protected avifauna, natural heritage

management on Skellig Michael is a ‘second interest, rather than a principle interest or an equal interest’ compared with cultural heritage management (Interviewee E1). This interviewee believed such a situation is explained by the fact that the,

OPW own and manage the island and they...principally manage buildings and the built environment... myself and wildlife service staff would visit the island regularly most summers, but we don't live on the island for whatever it is, four or five months, like the OPW staff (Interviewee E1).

In contrast, an OPW interviewee involved in the administration of the island considered that the birds are ‘calling the shots’, such that,

Basically the nesting birds are dictating when we can work. If this site was on the mainland, it wouldn't matter because we could work all year, we wouldn't have to work in the summer (Interviewee C1).

Nevertheless, despite frictions between those concerned with the protection of the island's bird populations and those focused on the conservation of the site's cultural heritage, both of these interests are united in their view that access to Skellig Michael should be restricted. This position, coupled with the increased demand for access to the island following the release of *The Force Awakens* has intensified existing tensions with the third group of stakeholders in the island's management; those economically dependent on tourism associated with the site, particularly the boatmen who ferry visitors to the island from the mainland. In this context, one of the boatmen interviewed expressed his negative assessment about the imbalance of power between the different stakeholders when asserting that, ‘The OPW work on their own. They give lip service, but if they decide something then that's it. They work on their own,’ (Interviewee T1). Even some of those stakeholders primarily concerned with the conservation of the island's monastic and avifaunal heritage held the opinion that local community stakeholders have no voice in the current system, as ‘stakeholders working together’ usually meant cultural and natural heritage staff attempting to resolve diverging management priorities and then communicating the decisions agreed to the local community (Interviewees C2, C3 and E1). For some, this contradicted the objectives of the UNESCO status of the site as,

Well there isn't any forum for the stakeholders. There's meant to be. I mean one of the principles of World Heritage Site management is that the international criteria of managing the site are meant to be combined with the involvement of stakeholders (Interviewee C3).

However, for others connected with the OPW's management of the site, the emergence of conflict between the OPW and local community stakeholders is unavoidable given the latter's desire to capitalise on the economic opportunity presented by the island's increasing fame in the wake of the *Star Wars* filming activity. As conveyed by one such OPW staff member,

I think they're probably at odds, to a certain extent. I think it's inevitable that they are. Obviously, people who are interested in the commercial side of tourism are interested because, well I'm sure that it's not just strictly crass moneymaking, but moneymaking is essential, and so right now there's definitely a push to exploit the fact that the place has such a high profile at the moment, as much as is absolutely possible. And from the point of view of the island, there's only a certain amount of pressure and footfall and, sort of, exposure that it can take and sustain (Interviewee CE1).

Indeed, one interviewee involved with the administration of the island conveyed the general sense of mistrust on the part of the OPW management with respect to the boatmen when recalling that,

Over the years there's been lots of issues with the boatmen. We discovered afterwards that some people got two [permits] by putting in two different applications under different names... We also had issues with people getting older. What was going to happen? We noticed that there were younger skippers; the nephew might come out! So that needed to be arranged... So they were saying, No, no, we own these [permits], we can pass them on to anybody,' and we said, 'No, no, no. They're not transferrable.' ...The boatmen try it on occasionally. So you'll notice our guides check (Interviewee C1).

Thus, the recent attention afforded the island has intensified existing relationships of mistrust and suspicion between the different stakeholders involved in the management and use of

Skellig Michael. In particular, it has thrown into relief animosity felt by some stakeholders regarding asymmetries of power with respect to the governance of the site. Such hostility is set against a complex set of reasons to value the island, the diversity of policy objectives governing the site, and the recent re-identification of Skellig Michael as ‘Star Wars Island’. Accordingly, how to reduce such acrimony in the management of this site is an issue of importance for the sustainable development of the local economy in a manner that protects the site’s international cultural and ecological significance.

Developing an alternative dynamic

The celebrity and re-identification of the island consequent on the release of *The Force Awakens* was consistently viewed as heightening demand for access to the site. Moreover, it is probable that this demand will intensify following the release of *The Last Jedi* in December 2017, which features Skellig Michael more prominently than *The Force Awakens*. Hence, it is possible that boat trips to the island will be entirely booked out for the 2018 season, with numbers seeking to visit this fragile conservation site potentially rising above the record levels set in 2017. Against this backdrop, a small minority of interviewees suggested that it might be possible to manage the amplified pressure on the site by extending the island’s opening season and thereby spreading the numbers visiting Skellig Michael throughout the extra days. However, with the high demand for access to the island following the release of *The Force Awakens*, and the potentially increased demand in the wake of the release of *The Last Jedi*, it seems unlikely that having more days in which Skellig Michael is open to the public will do anything other than increase overall visitor numbers.

While there was some divergence in views on the form and degree of harm that higher levels of visitors may generate, a majority of interviewees felt that *Star Wars* fans tend to be less informed and concerned about the unique qualities and challenges of the island, with some interviewees revealing incidences of *Star Wars* fans inadvertently causing damage to sensitive seabird breeding areas when recreating scenes from *The Force Awakens*. Overall, it was believed that increased numbers of informed visitors would not likely be a threat to the island’s ecological integrity. However, it was broadly held that an increase in the number of visitors who are not aware of or disregard the vulnerabilities of the site, can be potentially harmful to the conservation of the island’s protected environment. In this context, it was considered by those charged with the island’s conservation that the media’s increasing focus on Skellig

Michael as ‘Star Wars Island’ could have a detrimental impact, especially in regard to travel features that are essentially advertising the island purely as a film tourism destination (Ahern 2014; Robinson 2015; Quigley 2015).

To help mitigate the challenges posed by the increased numbers and changing profile of visitors to the island, it may be appropriate to encourage the boatmen to discuss the environmental sensitivities of the island before leaving the mainland, as interviewees suggested that the excitement of arriving on Skellig Michael often distracted visitors from the talks led by the guides before visitors started their ascent. In addition to potentially improving visitor awareness of the sensitive nature of the island, entrusting the boatmen with this responsibility could help foster a more positive relationship between them and the OPW management team (Selin 1999; Byrd 2007; McCool 2009; Snyman 2016). However, evidence suggests that a more impactful initiative in this context may be to increase the number of guides on the island with the inclusion of a greater balance in the specialty of guides, specifically through the addition of guides with an environmental orientation or the introduction of environmental training for guides (Weiler and Ham 2001; Skanavis and Giannoulis 2009). Not only would this present the potential to better educate uninformed visitors on all of the unique elements of Skellig Michael, but an increased presence of guides could also help counter the growing incidences of trespassing by *Star Wars* fans onto avifaunal breeding sites. This initiative could be complemented by the development of a more site-specific and comprehensive management plan by the NPWS on the conservation of the island’s natural heritage. Such a plan would need to actively respond to the changing tourism circumstances of the island and mounting concerns regarding the increased potential for interference with protected seabird breeding sites (Hughes and Morrison-Sanders 2005).

Nevertheless, evidence suggests that the most effective response to the increased pressures on the site may be to enhance alternative tourism opportunities on the mainland (Stobart and Ball 1998; Saarinen 2003). Indeed, some of those tourism stakeholders interviewed were already involved in projects promoting the expansion of the region’s tourism offer, with the majority of interviewees specialising in cultural or environmental heritage agreeing that this was an important strategy for the region’s future economic sustainability. However, this strategy does not appear to account for the concerns of the boatmen, who are the stakeholders that feel most disenfranchised by the current management regime operating on Skellig Michael. Without

extending the visitor season, which the OPW has refused to do, or raising the cost of tickets, which have already gone up in price by €15, to €75 per passenger, since filming was completed (O'Sullivan 2017), there does not seem to be a clear way for the boatmen to increase their livelihood. A solution to this conundrum may be found in the Skellig Coast Visitor Experience Development Plan that was produced in 2016 by Fáilte Ireland (the Irish tourism promotion organisation). Recommendation number D3.2, Catalyst 10 of this plan mentions increasing support for the 'operation of a marine eco-tour from Portmagee, Cahersiveen or Valentia Island as an alternative or addition to the Skellig Boat journey,' (Fáilte Ireland 2016, p. 28). Working with the boatmen in the development of such an eco-tour and other ventures from these coastal towns could supplement the boatmen's income and reduce pressure on Skellig Michael, while concurrently helping to empower this group of stakeholders. This would entail proactive consultation in the formulation of a coherent plan of financial and educational assistance to this stakeholder group in helping them to upgrade the existing fleet and up-skill their knowledge in interpretive instruction. It may also entail the provision of financial support for the training and employment of dedicated on-board guides to provide knowledge on the cultural and natural heritage of the coastal region, including, but not limited to Skellig Michael.

This paper has identified and explored how the adverse relationships between stakeholders involved in the administration and use of Skellig Michael is an overarching issue in its sustainable management. Resolving the conflicts engendered by such hostility has become increasingly important in recent years as the attention afforded the island consequent on its use as a filming location for *Star Wars* has both amplified the desire to visit the site and changed the profile of those seeking to do so. It is in this context of pressing need that this paper has critically examined the social dynamics related to the site's management and advanced a roadmap for the creation of an alternative governance and management arrangement that respects the site's complex set of values, stakeholder objectives and regulatory arrangements.

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ⁱ This is the island where Luke Skywalker, played by Mark Hamill, is hiding (*The Force Awakens*) and where he subsequently meets Rey, played by Daisy Ridley (*The Last Jedi*).

ⁱⁱ The Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht currently administrations Ireland's designated cultural and natural heritage sites. However, up to 2011 the administration of such sites was undertaken by the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government. Hence, in 2011 the administration of Ireland's cultural and natural heritage sites was separated from the management of the broader natural environment (e.g. pollution control) conducted by the Irish Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) operating beneath the aegis of the 'Environment' division of this department. This administrative rearrangement separated the National Parks and Wildlife Service, which is charged with conserving the ecology of Ireland's national parks and sites designated EU nature conservation legislation (e.g. the Skelligs), from the EPA, which is charged with protecting Ireland's environment. Unsurprisingly, such an administrative change generated concern among environmentally orientated non-governmental organisations that considered this an inappropriate division of necessarily overlapping functions that would reduce the efficiency and effectiveness with which Ireland's natural heritage would be protected.