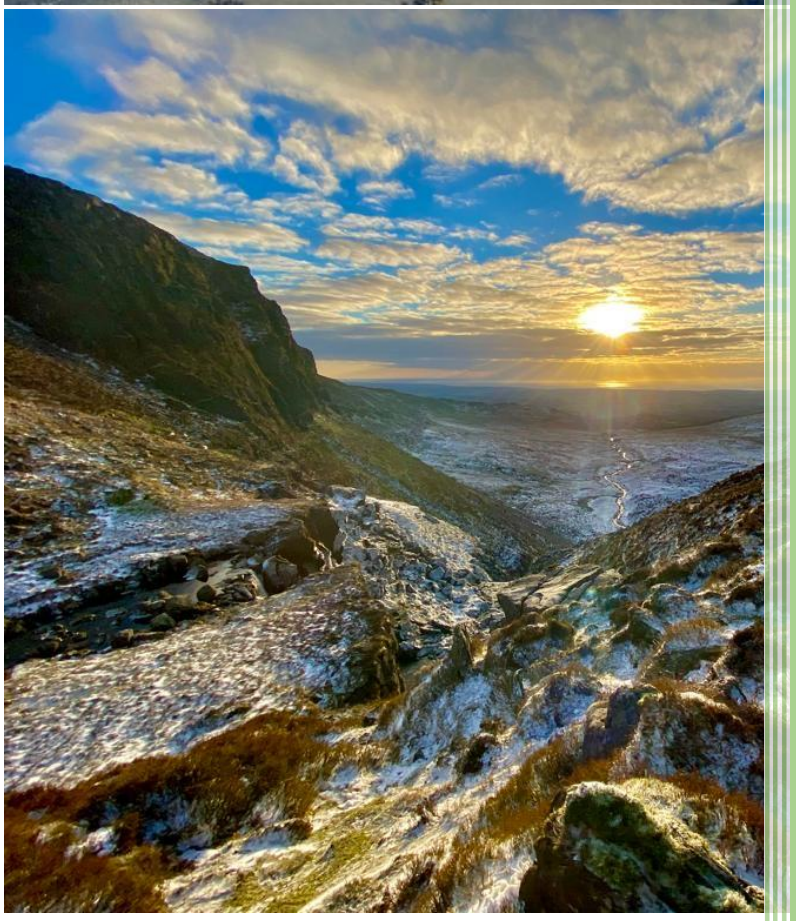


2023

Why people are drawn to different landscapes





Dr. Jane Russell-O'Connor

6/1/2023

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1.0 Introduction

The idea for this research was born out of a post-swim chat at the Guillamene (Figure.1) about the increased numbers of people swimming during Covid. My colleague Dr Méabh Savage and I wondered what it was that drew people to the sea. We continued these conversations before and after our regular swims, and from there we expanded our thinking to include the mountains. Ironically, both of us have lived beside the sea and near/in the mountains in North Wales, so on reflection this seemed like a natural development for us in our thinking. Méabh and I are both regular open water swimmers and do a number of other activities in the sea. Although our current areas of teaching and research are different, we have a common interest in the natural world.



Figure 1 The Guillamene swimming cove

Although not a Tramore native (from the northwest of England), I grew up on a peninsular and spent a lot of time at the beach and was encouraged to open water swim with my Dad growing up, which led to a love of the sea and coastal habitats. I also lived very close to the mountains in North Wales (the Denbigh Mountains and Snowdonia) and the Peak District, where I also spent my free time walking and climbing, with family, friends and the Scouts. I am a practicing ecologist and heavily involved in protecting and improving the biodiversity of habitats. I did my PhD on multidisciplinary landscape evaluation and have since carried out research and

published on multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary landscape as well as supervising PhD students in similar areas. I however, have never involved people in my research and was interested to investigate the interactions that people have with the landscape. Teaching fourth year architects on their landscape module, I always begin the module by asking them to imagine a beautiful landscape and to then identify the different elements of those landscapes. Ironically, very few students have multiple people or buildings in their landscapes (other than vernacular ruins or human made features such as piers, stone walls etc.). When asked why? The students said that they see their landscapes as '*somewhere to escape to*', '*to be alone*', '*and to get away from it all*'. Based on the in-class work with students and earlier research on the Sublime Landscape (Russell-O'Connor, 2019) where I discussed how being in certain landscapes can make you feel happy, the research ideas were further developed (Dr Jane Russell-O'Connor).

Méabh grew up in Tramore and has a deep love and draw for the ocean. Méabh spent her childhood playing and swimming at the pier, Newtown Cove and the Guillamene and has always lived close to the sea or the water her whole life. Méabh's love for the ocean led her to move to North Wales as a young person to study Marine Biology at university. Living next to the Snowdon Mountains, she spent time as a student walking with the mountaineering society and then living in villages surrounded by these beautiful mountains. Although her academic and career path changed considerably over time, Méabh has continued to have a love for the ocean, natural world, alongside a strong passion for social justice and care ethics. As a qualitative researcher, with specific interests in using creative methods as a way to gain insights into people's subjective worlds, this interdisciplinary project has opened the way for Méabh to explore connections between both of her passion. She looks forward to developing these ideas more in future articles.

1.1 Aims and objectives of the study

Given that we both have physical and emotional connections with the sea and moutainscapes ourselves, the main themes we wanted to explore in this project were the following:

Why are we (people) drawn to certain landscapes? What relationship do we (people) have with these landscapes and what are the emotions that we (people) experience when being in them?

The aims for the project were as follows:

- To investigate why people are drawn to certain types of landscapes and how being in these types of landscape promotes a sense of connection with the environment and connections with other users.

- To explore what aspects of these landscapes people experience and to develop insights into landscape justice and value.

- To compare the differences in why people feel various emotions in mountain landscapes compared with seascapes. The two locations are the Waterford County side of the Comeragh mountain range and Tramore coastal location.

- To explore the activities that people pursue whilst there and why they choose one landscape over the other, or both, to pursue these activities.

The objectives of the research were:

- To evaluate different perspectives of people's experiences in mountainous landscapes and seascapes by conducting interviews with people of various ages and ethnicity.

- To utilise photo story methodology and drone footage to identify focal points in these landscapes and the main areas of activity.

- To utilise Geographical Information Systems (GIS) mapping to record the distances and locations participants have travelled from.

- To utilise GIS to record the activities that people undertake in the two locations and the distances they move when undertaking these activities

1.2 Study areas

Both locations are in the South East of Ireland in the Province of Munster. The Comeragh Mountains is a mountain range that spans over the counties of Waterford and Tipperary, covering an approximate area of 65km^2, with a maximum elevation of approximately 700m (OSI, 2023). It is designated as a Special Area of Conservation (NPWS, 2021) due to the diverse habitats present and the rare Slender Green Feather-moss *Hamatocaulis vernicosus*, which is protected under the EU Habitats directive (EEC, 1992). The Comeragh Mountains has a rich cultural history with a number of ancient sites recorded on the Sites and Monuments database (National Monuments Service, 2023). In more recent history the mountains were used to hide members of the Irish Republic Army in the war of independence against the British (Waterford County Museum, 2023). The Comeraghs were also used to hold mass in secret during the penal years when it was illegal to practice the Roman Catholic religion (Duchas.ie, 2023).



Figure 2 Location of the Comeragh Mountains (OSI, 2023).



Figure 3 Coumshingaun Lake in the Comeragh Mountains

Tramore is located on the south east coast of Ireland in County Waterford (Figure 4). It has been a popular seaside resort since the 1800s. It has a 5km beach

(strand) hence Tramore's name as gaelige (in Irish) is Trá Mhór, meaning Big Beach (Ó Cróinin, 2000). Tramore, is a bay with a sand dune covered spit and also has a tidal lagoon, an area of salt marsh, mudflats and sandflats called the Back Strand. Both the Back Strand and the extensive dune system are designated as an SAC due to the species and habitats present (DAHG, 2013).The Back Strand is also designated as a Special Protection Area due to the bird species present, in particular over-wintering wading species (DAHG, 2014) . The Newtown and Guillamene Coves are approximately 2.5km from Tramore town centre (EPA, 2023) and are popular for swimming. Tramore and its environs has a rich history and the headlands that encompass the bay each contain three pillars to warn mariners of the dangers of the rocks below. To the east is Brownstown Head and to the west is Westown. In Westown the Metal Man stands atop one of the pillars dressed in British Sailors' Clothes, pointing to the sea (Figure 6). The metal man was commissioned by the Admiralty after the HMS Seahorse sank off Brownstown Head in 1816 with the loss of 360 souls (Tramore.ie, 2023). Thus showing Tramore and its environs to be a place of physical, cultural and ecological beauty and interest, with an interesting maritime history.



Figure 4 Location of Tramore (OSI, 2023).



Figure 5 Tramore Promenade Circa. 1907 (Waterford County Museum, 2023).



Figure 6 The Metal Man (Tramore.ie, 2023)



Figure 7 Tramore Strand



Figure 8 Newtown Cove

2.0 Theories- Understanding our relationship with landscape through an interdisciplinary lens

As humans, we have an innate need to connect with the natural world. It can help to release the stresses and complexities of modern living. By connecting with the natural elements of landscape and engaging all our senses, it can help us to feel happiness (Russell-O'Connor, 2019). Stress levels in people has been shown to be reduced when they are in calming landscapes (Ulrich, et al., 1991).

Understanding how we as humans connect with the landscape is very complex. At a basic level it can be seen as being connected to our biology, whereby we are reliant on the natural environment for our survival, thus explaining why we might have an innate interest in the natural world and the organisms living within it. Fromm (1973) developed the theory of Biophilia which comes from Bio meaning 'life' in Greek and philia meaning 'love of life'. Biophilia is defined in the Cambridge English Dictionary (Cambridge.org, 2023) 'as the love of living things and nature'. Wilson (1984) who writes about his own personal experiences with nature in his book Biophilia defines it "as the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes" (Wilson, 1984, p1).

3.0 Methodology

The research approach is deductive research, as we are building on previous theories and methodologies. Importantly, it is also interdisciplinary, as we involve a number of disciplines such as physical and social geography, ecology, sociology, care ethics, social justice and landscape aesthetics to the study.

We used a post-positivist qualitative cross-sectional research design to conduct the study, using a number of different research methods and tools to explore the objective and subjective relationship that people have with different landscapes (Ryan 2010). We carried out thirty, one-to-one semi-structured telephone or zoom recorded interviews with participants, which lasted between 30-70 minutes each.

Participants were asked to take photograph(s) of their favourite place in the landscape, which we used as a discussion point during the interview, as a means of understanding people's relationship with the landscape more at an emotional level (Bignante 2010). By doing this, we aimed to engage in reflective dialogue with participants and use the photos to encourage discussion. The photos also provide tangible examples of the different aspects of landscapes that people are drawn to.

Following ethical approval, we used purposive judgement sampling to recruit participants by contacting organisations who emailed their members with details of the study (consent form and information sheet) and our contact details. Information about the study was also shared by them on their different social media platforms. To widen recruitment we displayed posters in cafés used by people who avail of these landscapes. We also used snowball sampling to recruit participants, as we are members of various local groups ourselves, so we made use of these connection to

discuss the study with interested persons and sent on the study details, also via email. All details relating to the study were stored on One drive and only accessible to the researchers

4.0 Findings and Analysis

The research involved 30 participants of whom 17 are women and 13 are men. A number of the respondents did not discriminate between the seascape and the mountainscape in terms of their preference, but tended to go to the sea more due to ease of access. In addition we found it more difficult to recruit people interested in the mountains, which may be another contributing factor. However, the most popular landscape was the sea with 43% respondents favouring the seascape in one form or another i.e. walking on the beach, swimming in the sea, kayaking etc., whereas 27% of respondents favoured the mountainscape. The breakdown of preferences is illustrated more visibly in Figure 9.

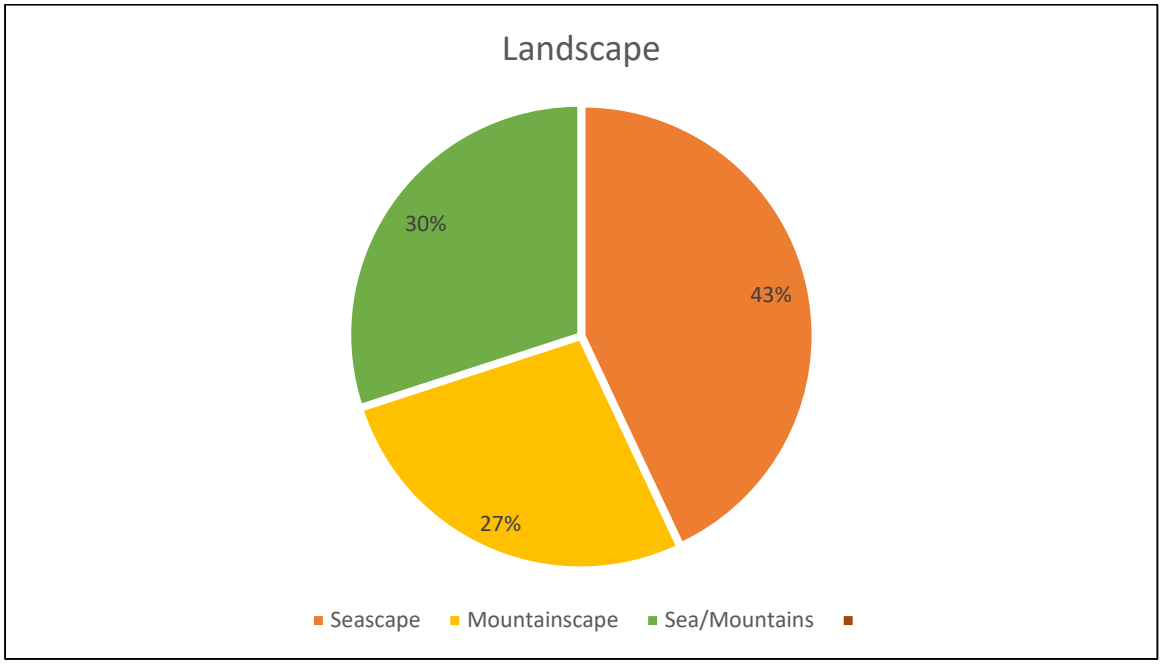


Figure 9 Landscape preferences of respondents

In terms of the ethnicity of respondents, all are white with the highest percentage as white Irish as illustrated in Figure 10.

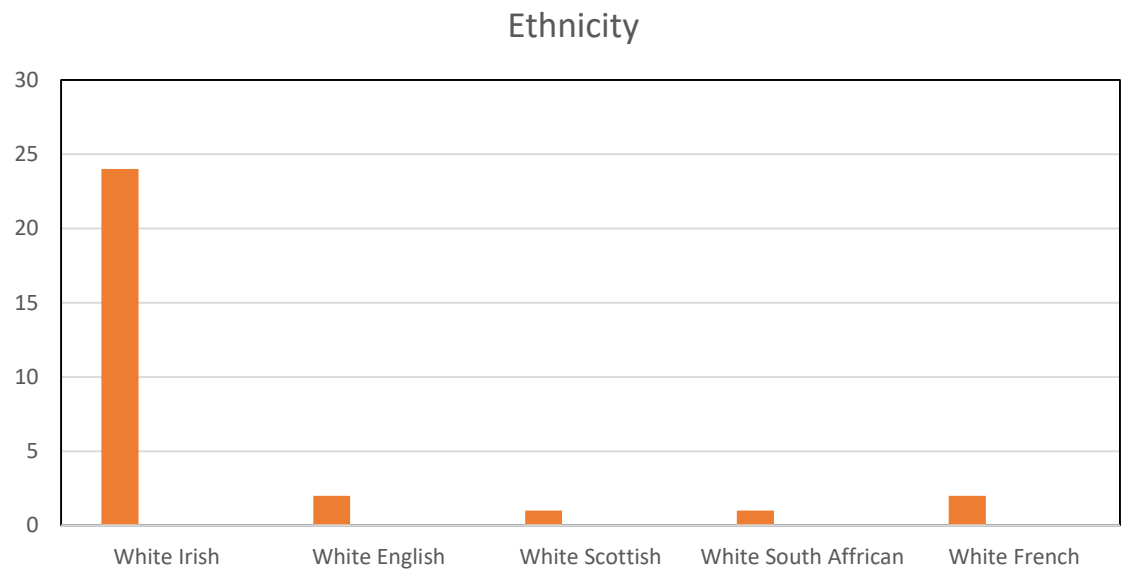


Figure 10 Ethnic breakdown of respondents

The majority of respondents live in Tramore at 50%, but not all of those favoured the sescape as their preferred landscape even though they live near the sea. The rest of the respondents travelled mostly from within the County of Waterford with only 3 respondents travelling from Kilkenny County (Appendices i and ii).

A number of themes were used in the semi-structured interviews, which yielded extensive responses. Due to the amount of data collected. This report has focused on the following themes:

- What draws people to the landscape
- Emotions of being in the landscape and connecting with it
- The relationship with nature experienced in the landscape
- The concerns and fears about the landscape

What draws people to the landscape

When respondents were asked about why they felt drawn to the sea, many said that they spent time at the beach as a child and had happy memories of this time.

A large number of respondents discuss how they are drawn to the beauty of the landscape, the '*stunning scenery'* and this was a draw for both types of landscape. However, there were far more descriptions when discussing the sea compared to the mountains. The majority of respondents who favoured the mountains talk about the '*sense of space'* and the *'wildness'*, the latter also being used to describe the sea. However when respondents described their draw to the sea they also discuss '*how the sea is always changing', 'it is never the same water', 'changing environment', 'the different colours each time I come here'.* It therefore seems that one of the attractions to the seascape is that it is a constantly changing landscape, such as *how the light reflects off the water*,' *the colours of the sea are always different'* and how

it can be so different depending on the conditions. For example the '*drama of the waves crashing on the rocks (beach).*

Although it was accepted that the mountains do change with different seasons, time of day and weather conditions, the range of differences were not as widely discussed. However the remoteness of the mountains was mentioned more than in relation to the sea. Perhaps this is because the seascape is more accessible and there are often people present?

When encountering both types of landscape respondents also discussed the sky mentioning about the clouds, the colours of the sky and its vastness.

Emotions of being in the landscape and connecting with it

In terms of the emotions felt by people when in, on or beside the sea a number of the respondents talked about their '*sense of calm'* the feeling of being '*immersed in the water'* the '*relaxation felt when listening to the sounds of the waves and its 'soothing quality', 'when I swim I just relax completely'.*

However there is a gratitude felt by a number of the respondents when being in the sea as they recognise the privilege of being able to experience this seascape. The feelings discussed are often related to having a spiritual connection with the sea, whereby many discuss the feelings of being '*immersed in the water becoming one with the landscape, a part of the landscape', 'the sea being another layer of my being'.* One respondent equated being in the sea as '*freedom*'.

> *'I almost want to run to the water when I arrive and then the cold shot makes me forget everything else going on in my life and makes me present and in the moment, appreciating the sensations in my hands and feet. This gives me recognition of the world and how important it is. It is the one time I feel at one with nature and completely comfortable.'*

This '*being one with nature*' and '*feeling free'* were phrases often used by respondents when describing their feelings of being in the seascape, but this phrase was also used to describe being in the mountains. Similarly to being in the seascape, being in the mountains also elicited feelings of relaxation and calmness as well as '*unburdening*, *escapism and disconnecting from modern living'.*

For some, the conquering of these landscapes was a factor, where the sheer physical exertion of climbing a mountain or swimming or kayaking or paddle boarding, a distance in the sea was an attraction to spending time in both landscapes. As discussed above, the remoteness of the landscape and the meditative act of walking or swimming, were also discussed.

A number of the respondents discuss the enjoyment of reaching the peak of the mountain or top of the slope and *taking in the view*, *the awe*, and the '*vastness of the mountains'*.

The relationship with nature experienced in the landscape

For both landscapes, the relationship with nature centres on an appreciation of the beauty of the landscape. Although not explicitly aware of the ecology (apart from a small number of the respondents), the majority of respondents recognise that the ecology of the landscape is a contributing factor to its beauty. The variety of colours created by the plants, the lichen, the different birds etc. In particular, a number of respondents discuss the pleasure of seeing different species in the landscape, which although different for each of the landscapes, still creates a sense of wonder when uncommon or rare species are seen such as, orchids on the sand dunes at Tramore, deer stag in the mountains, rare birds on the Back Strand, seals, dolphins and whales in the sea. As a result of this relationship with nature, and as discussed above, there is desire to protect these landscapes that was felt by the majority of respondents interviewed.

The concerns and fears about the landscape

As both landscapes have an element of danger, discussions were had about the excitement of exploring caves and walking precarious paths. The thrill of swimming, but having fear of what may be in the sea with you. The thrill and excitement as well as the fear was discussed more by people who favoured being in the mountains compared to the sea and for many it was the '*thrill of getting to the top to see the view*', that whilst dangerous, '*was exhilarating*'. Many mountain walkers also mentioned being '*humbled*' by the landscape and in '*awe*' of it.

The concerns about conserving these landscapes was also discussed at length, whereby some were worried about the litter left in both landscapes and the pollution of the sea. In relation to the mountains, one climber/skier was concerned about the disappearing glaciers and changing climate. A number of mountain walkers were concerned about the impact of increasing footfall in the mountains and the impact that this would have on the ecology, such as the fragile bog ecosystems. There was an appreciation of the ecology by almost all of the respondents and many talked about how people are now more educated about human impact on the environment.

In terms of the seascape, a number of respondents also discussed the water quality being a major concern and one respondent mentioned about how there were pleased to see that the water quality had increased in Tramore and that the beach now had its blue flag status.

A number of the respondents who favoured the mountainscape or both the seascape and mountascape equally, discussed the role of water in the mountainscape and one walker sent in photographs that all contained water

5.0 Concluding themes

Based on the findings of the research discussed in this report, there were a number of emerging themes that can be related to the academic literature.

There is certainly a draw to both of the landscapes investigated and as stated earlier, if we were able to interview more participants who were drawn to the mountains, then the relationships with this landscape could have been explored more thoroughly. It was easier to reach participants who were drawn to the seascape as we both live in Tramore and have stronger connections with sea related activities. Nonetheless, the results still yielded some very interesting accounts for both landscapes.

There is a strong draw to both landscapes and some people have a tendency to prefer one over the other, some of which can be related to their experiences as children. However does the draw to this landscape derive from something deeper such as a response to '*deep genetic memory of man's optimal environment*'(Wilson, 1984, p111-2) where the shoreline and the sea provides us with food? Similarly the majority of respondents who favoured the mountainscape spent time there in their youth. Wilson (1984) suggests that we may be attracted to the mountains as they provide vantage points from which to see predators.

Almost all of the respondents, discussed their feelings in relation to the landscape and these related to positive mental well-being involved with disconnecting with the worries of everyday life with the use of words such as '*relaxation', 'soothing', 'freedom', 'unburdening', 'escapism'.* Some of this can be related to the spiritual feelings conjured when in beautiful landscapes coupled with the respondents appreciation of nature. There is much research published on healing landscapes and as discussed by Ulrich (1991) there is a calming effect of being in certain landscapes.

Many of the respondents discussed the wildness of both landscapes and the opportunity to '*get away'* from it all giving them a chance to '*switch off and disconnect'*, as an important draw to both landscapes. For some this could also be related to the happiness experienced with the release of dopamine from physical activity, however it appears that the same emotions are not felt when physical activities take place in more human made locations, such as swimming in an indoor pool, which suggests that there is a complex relationship between both the spiritual connection with the environment as well as the physicality of the activities carried out within it. Whether this is part of our evolutionary development as suggested by Fromm (1973) and Wilson (1984) or a deeper more complex relationship has yet to be explored in this research.

There was also discussion about the thrill of '*conquering these landscapes*' such as the scaling of the peaks and the dangers associated with walking on precarious paths. This was certainly the feelings experienced by early explorers conquering the Alps where the delightful terror was an attraction (Schamer, 1995). Similarly there

was also an element of thrill when partaking in activities in or on the sea, in particular with swimming, where a number of respondents talk about their fears of the unpredictable environment and what other animals may be in the water with them.

To conclude, it has emerged that there is scope for more research on this topic and what draws people to certain landscapes appears to be associated with a variety of factors that are similar for both the landscapes which are in summary:

- Associations with childhood memories
- Mental well-being of being in the landscape
- Spiritual connection with the landscape
- Appreciation of the aesthetics of the landscape
- Appreciation of the naturalness and the ecology of the landscape
- The thrill of partaking in activities within the landscape.



Finally, my own thoughts as I think of the seascape…I am thinking of the anticipation of the feeling of the water on my skin, enjoying the first shock of the cold water as my body enters it and then the switching off of my mind as I begin to swim. The blue green water and the choppy waves; the call of a seagull overhead and the colours of the cliffs as I swim past. When I stop somewhere out away from everyone, in the middle of Tramore bay, I look up at the sky and take in the beauty of the environment around me. As I write this I feel the emotions of my own

connection to the landscape bubbling up inside me and the sense of peace that the thought of this landscape elicit.

6.0 The next stage in the research journey

The interviews yielded a wealth of rich data that has not been fully analysed here and the majority of this report is based on my interpretations of the data collected (Jane Russell-O'Connor). Méabh and I hope to expand on this report and develop the analysis more thoroughly in particular on landscape justice and accessibility to the chosen landscapes, with a view to publishing in the Landscape Research Journal and presenting at the National Landscape Forum 2023 in Mount Congreve, County Waterford in September 2023. In addition we wish to use the remaining funding to print the respondent photographs and hold an exhibition on South East Technological University (SETU) complete with key quotes from the interviews to make the research more accessible to the general public and interested parties.

Themes not explored, but in the research where, custodial role with landscape, barriers associated with access to landscape, types of activities undertaken and their frequency and conversations and dialogue with others in the landscape.

7.0 Budget

Total €2000.00

Item Description	**Cost**
Go Pro Camera	€643.34
Transcription of recordings by research assistant	€910.00 €100.55
Travel	€110.64
Total expenditure	**-€1764.53**
Remainder	**€235.47**

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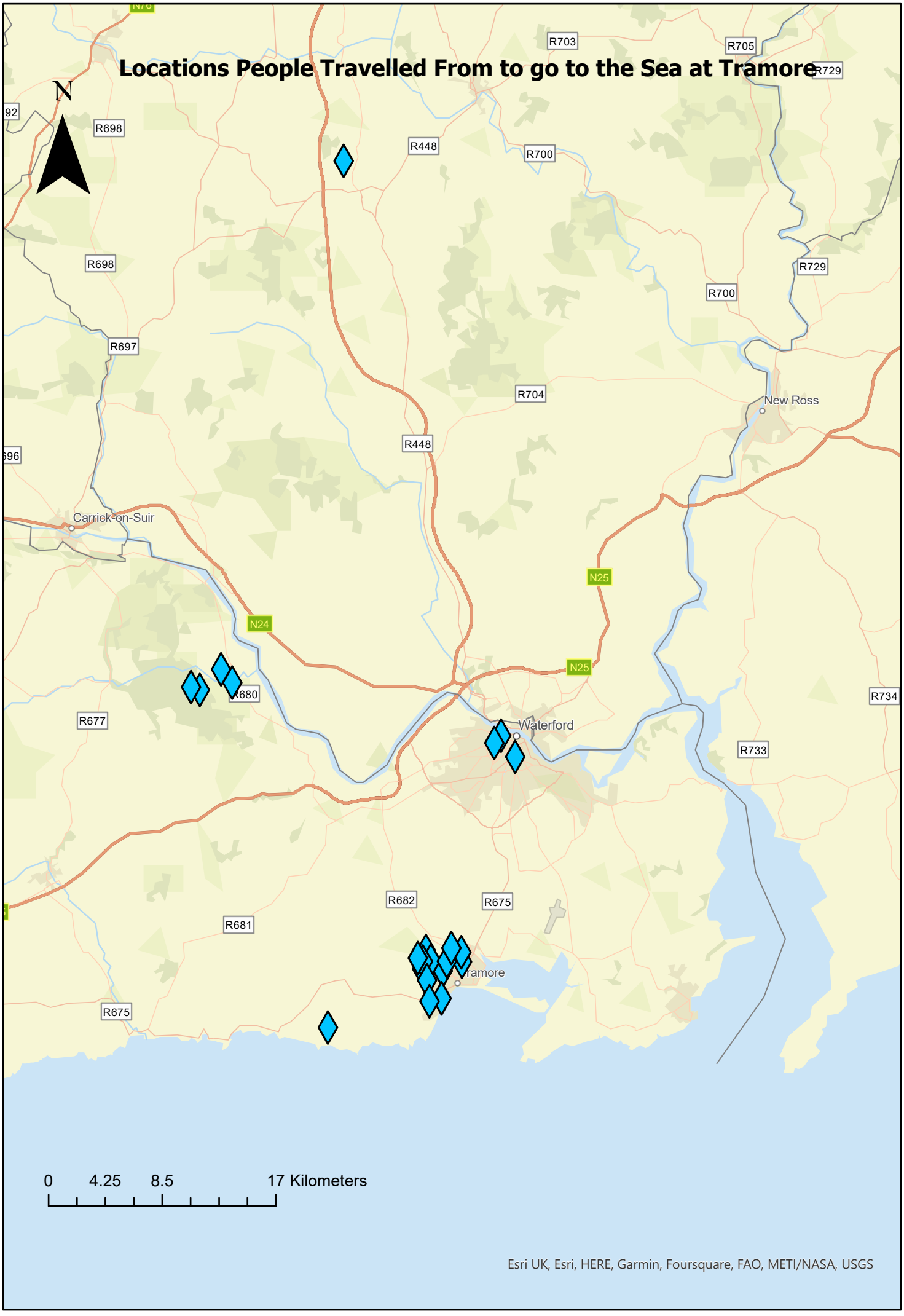
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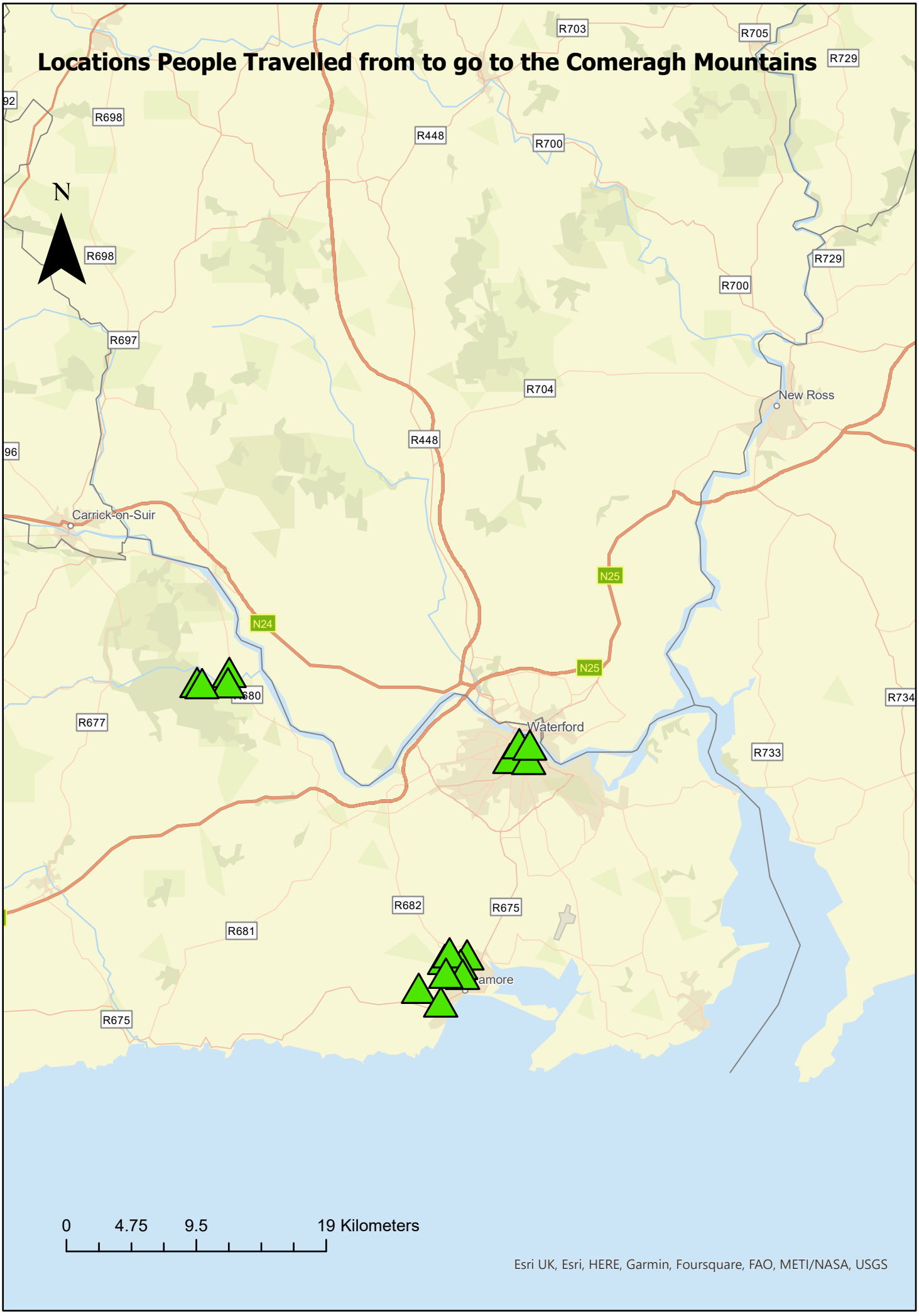
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Appendix i


Locations People Travelled From to go to the Sea at Tramore
N
R703
R705
R729
R698
R448
R700
R697
R704
New Ross
Carrick-on-Suir
N25
N24
R680
R677
Waterford
R733
R734
R682
R675
R681
Tramore
0
4.25
8.5
17 Kilometers
Esri UK, Esri, HERE, Garmin, Foursquare, FAO, METI/NASA, USGS

Appendix ii


Locations People Travelled from to go to the Comeragh Mountains
N
R703
R705
R729
R698
R448
R700
R697
R704
New Ross
Carrick-on-Suir
N25
N24
R680
R677
Waterford
R733
R734
R682
R675
R681
0
4.75
9.5
19 Kilometers
Esri UK, Esri, HERE, Garmin, Foursquare, FAO, METI/NASA, USGS