**Star Wars on Skellig Michael: A force for good or evil?** *Sept 10, 2015*

Lucasfilm using Skellig Michael to shoot scenes for the film has caused controversy, with environmental groups concerned it could damage the island’s fragile environment and threaten its bird population, despite the obvious tourist benefits. **Heather Humphreys**, Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, and **Justin Byrne** a council member of An Taisce, argue the pros and cons.

**GOOD:** Filming is a boon for Irish film industry and tourism, says **Heather Humphreys.**

Skellig Michael is undoubtedly one of Ireland’s most stunning landscapes. The world famous island has captured the imagination of monks, locals, artists and visitors for centuries. So when it caught the attention of one of the world’s biggest film production companies, I was faced with a challenge: Could we find a way to facilitate a limited amount of filming which could have untold benefits for the Irish film and tourist industries, while being absolutely satisfied that the environment and wildlife on this incredible island were fully protected?

Last summer I travelled to Skellig Michael while Lucasfilm was shooting scenes for the next **Star Wars**film, due to be released later this year. I saw first-hand how the stringent ecological controls being enforced by my department were working. Confident of our success last year, I’ve agreed to let the production company come back for limited filming this month, which is expected to last between two and four days.

The National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and the National Monuments Service are both sub-sections of my department. Just like last year, we will have experts on site for the duration of filming to ensure all of the ecological and environmental conditions we have stipulated are being adhered to. They will have the authority to shout ‘stop’ if they have any concerns. And if you think they might be shy about using that power, trust me; I saw them do it last year.

The value of attracting a major film production company like Lucasfilm to shoot scenes in Ireland for what is expected to be the biggest global movie hit of 2015 is hard to quantify. The Irish TV and film sector is worth about €550m to the economy, supporting roughly 6,000 jobs. When international film produc-ers come here, they hire local crews and help create spin-off support jobs. Attracting a heavyweight like Lucasfilm will have untold benefits for our reputation as a world-class film location.

There are, of course, obvious benefits for tourism too. When the Star Wars film is released later this year, the incredible scenery of Skellig Michael will be brought to a huge global audience. Tourism chiefs believe this could help to bring hundreds of thousands of extra tourists to Ireland. According to the Irish Film Board, one in five tourists says their decision to come to Ireland was influenced by film.

Of course I understand people have concerns about the fragile environment of Skellig Michael. It’s a Unesco World Heritage Site, a National Monument, and Special Protection Area for birdlife. That means it is subject to a range of legislative protections under Irish and EU law and I have a statutory obligation to protect the island. It’s an obligation I take very seriously. Any suggestion that I am not fully complying with my obligations is completely inaccurate.

There have been some other inaccuracies doing the rounds in recent weeks. First of all, taxpayers won’t be footing the bill. Costs incurred will be recouped from Lucasfilm, just as they were last year. The number of helicopter flights will be limited. The areas on the island where the filming actually takes place will also be restricted; mostly the crew will be filming on the same trails walked by tourists every day.

Speaking of tourists, up to 180 visitors are permitted on the island on any given day. In contrast, during the shoot the maximum number of people on the island is expected to be around 100 at peak times, and all their activities will be under strict supervision.

It’s also untrue to say this decision was taken overnight. Experts from my department have been dealing with Lucasfilm for months, and I wouldn’t have consented to anything without being happy that the firm is going to stick to our strict conditions.

We’re taking a range of other precautions to ensure the important birdlife on the island is not threatened. As the filming is taking place in September, most of the breeding species, such as the iconic puffin, will have already left the island. There will be some breeding species left, but they are nocturnal birds, so we are ensuring no filming takes place at night. Concerns were also expressed about rats getting on to the island. We will have very strict protocols in place to avoid that happening; all equipment will be wrapped and boats will be checked before they leave Portmagee and again before anything is unloaded onto the island.

As a minister with a wide-ranging portfolio, I often have to balance what could be seen as competing priorities. This country’s unique heritage and our growing film industry are two very different elements of my brief about which I feel hugely passionate. When it comes to Skellig Michael and **Star Wars**, it’s not about pitting one priority against another. It’s about striking the right balance. I am satisfied we are striking that balance by safeguarding the unique environment of Skellig Michael, while allowing some of Ireland’s finest scenery to feature in the biggest blockbuster of 2015.

Filmmaking can work in harmony with the natural environment, providing the right checks and balances are in place. We have those safeguards in place on Skellig Michael, and Ireland and the southern region will reap the benefits.

*Heather Humphreys is the arts, heritage, and Gaeltacht minister.*

1. **Summarize the key points in the argument FOR allowing filming on Skellig Michael.**

**EVIL:** Skellig Michael isn’t just a backdrop but a vital ecosystem that we need to protect, says Justin Byrne

If you are making a movie, the magic of the Hollywood is so strong that it can literally move mountains. Hollywood’s magic dust can even rub off on the little people in the back rooms. Actually, it doesn’t really rub off on people; producers spread it about liberally.

A meeting here, a phonecall there and you can be made to feel you are an indispensable part of the production. Soon enough, you start to think like Hollywood, you have to get the shot, the location, the feeling. It’s so important that you would move heaven and earth to push things along. Knock down a set, rebuild it, paint in a bit of scenery, Red tape is for the penpushers in city hall. The Hollywood way is to do it and let someone else figure out the details. Who will know anyway?

This works great on the second reel but not so well in real life. Places like Skellig Michael are not the back lot of some studio, they are very fragile and precious ecosystems and that is why we have rules to protect them. We limit access to Skellig Michael precisely because it is beautiful and sensitive.

We stop tourists from climbing its walls because it is fragile and we restrict access to the nesting birds because they are protected under the law. We have a minister, Heather Humphreys, whose job is supposed to be to protect our heritage.

I think she has failed in this. Perhaps she has been seduced by Hollywood. She signed a consent for filming at literally the 11th hour. An Taisce was notified about it at 3.10am. In my experience; when a minister signs off on something in the middle of the night it usually costs us a lot.

It takes a special type of access to talk to a minister and her people in the small hours.

If someone wants to film on the island there are protocols in place to ensure that the island is protected. However, the protocols only work if they are followed and if effective. The effects of something as potentially intrusive as filming have to be assessed.

Public consultation should be part of the considerations. When things are carried out in secret, the decision and the assessment are not published, and boats and equipment are lined up on the pier in Portmagee and it’s not even clear if permission was granted — it is shocking to experience.

You can’t help now but wonder what corners were cut, and what compromises were made and even if the odd arm was twisted. If there was nothing to hide, why has it all been so secret and continues to be?

It is tempting to think that the island has been there for millions of years and that a little bit of filming won’t make it crumble into the sea. It won’t, but Skellig Michael isn’t just a rock, it is a living vibrant ecosystem that only exists now because it is so protected. The reason that puffins and storm petrels and manx shearwaters inhabit it is just because it is remote and protected.

Visitors aren’t allowed to disturb them or impact the monastic remains. A sensitive balance needs to be maintained which allows a small amount of human activity and the wildlife sufficient isolation to safely live, breed and thrive. To someone who has been seduced by Hollywood magic — the protections in place for Skellig Michael are at best a delay and worst a barrier. Hollywood, and our politicians, don’t do delays when there are schedules to meet or votes to be chased.

There is such inertia in a film project that it is almost impossible to do anything other than keep it on track. It is virtually impossible for any one person to slow down or stop it. Making a film is not the same as allowing a few tourists on the island. Films require lots of equipment and people, and they require support, food and toilets and a generator, lights and helicopters.

Directors and producers are used to getting their own way. Cameras and lights require space and if there isn’t space available or if a shot is blocked, the request to ‘temporarily’ dismantle a wall or structure or impact something will be made.

When you have 180 people, including international superstars on the island, light is fading and the weather is changing, it takes a very strong person to say “no” to what seems like a simple request. I pity the ecologist tasked with protecting Skellig Michael during the filming.

A film set, it is very different from behind the camera. There are miles and miles of cables, scaffolding, rigs and a bewildering array of seemingly essential people. There has to be tents for the make-up and wardrobe, shelter for the equipment, changing rooms, somewhere for the actors to wait in, catering and toilets for the army of people.

It is no simple act to evaluate if all of this might have an effect on the island and its ecology and the fragile steps, walls and cells and eroded precipices. I have little faith in politician’s assurances or film-makers assurances that it will be alright on the night. It rarely is.

The next Star Wars film is already in production and Hollywood will quickly move on to another location but will we be left with a pile of movie dust for Skellig Michael? *Justin Byrne is a council member of An Taisce, The National Trust for Ireland*

1. **Summarize the argument AGAINST allowing filming on Skellig Michael.**
2. **If you were Minister of the Arts and Hertiage and had to decide, would you allow filming or not? Explain why or why not.**
3. **What was your favorite part of Star Wars the film or seeing it as a senior team and why?**

# The Skellig Michael site after the removal of Lucasfilm’s tents and equipment. Photograph: An TaisceStar Wars filming causes two ‘incidents’ on Skellig Michael

## **Lucasfilm’s use of Unesco world heritage site had ‘no long-term impact’, report says**

Tue, Oct 20, 2015, 14:48 [**Sorcha Pollak**](http://www.irishtimes.com/profile/sorcha-pollak-7.2721533)

The Skellig Michael site after the removal of Lucasfilm’s tents and equipment. Photograph: An Taisce

A report into the Star Wars filming on Skellig Michael in early September has found that Lucasfilm’s presence had “no adverse impact on seabirds, their habitats or other biodiversity on the island”, despite two “minor incidents” which occurred during filming.

The assessment report, which was compiled by experts from the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and the [National Monuments Service](http://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_organisation=National%20Monuments%20Service&article=true)(NMS), with input from the Office of Public Works (OPW), said the film crew’s presence over three days at the [Unesco](http://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_organisation=Unesco&article=true) world heritage site had “no implication for the outstanding universal value of the World Heritage property and no impact on the national monument”.

However, the report reveals two incidents took place during filming that caused minor damage to the site.

A Lucasfilm crew member reportedly snagged their jacket on the edge of a stone in the entrance to the Upper Monks’ Garden, causing damage.

The report found the same section of stone had been displaced by a visitor to the island in mid-June and the opening was “immediately propped and repaired by OPW masons”.

A second incident occurred when a “small amount of diluted water-based paint” spilled on rocks adjacent to the Wailing Woman.

The report confirms that “highly absorbent spill pads” were used to mop up the spill and clean water was also applied to the area.

It also said that nests were not compromised in any way.

Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht [Heather Humphreys](http://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_person=Heather%20Humphreys&article=true), who published the report on Monday, said experts supervising the shoot, the cast and the crew had taken an “extremely thorough approach” to ensure the strict conditions for filming laid down by the department were fully adhered to.

“The two minor incidents reported were dealt with immediately, and will have no long-term impact whatsoever and no ecological consequence,” said Ms Humphreys.

“The reality is that the filming posed no greater challenge to the island than the 180 people who visit it every day during tourist season.”

**Impact on birds**

Dr [Stephen Newton](http://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_person=Stephen%20Newton&article=true) from Birdwatch [Ireland](http://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_location=Ireland&article=true) said that, despite assurances that there was no impact on seabirds, the shooting took place during breeding season.

He said the nests of storm petrel and manx shearwater seabirds on the island would have been filled with eggs and the birds’ young in early September, adding that the optimum time for filming would have been between November and March, outside of breeding time.

“I get worried when they say there was no impact, we can’t see what’s happening to their eggs or young,” said Dr Newton, adding that storm petrel nests are hidden in monastery walls and under steps.

“The impact of this sort of work, which had gone on for two years, is long-term. [Disney](http://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_company=Disney&article=true) film company should be funding the long-term monitoring of the island.”

Dr Newton said he would welcome a more open discussion regarding filming on the island, saying the consultation “was all very cloak and dagger”.

A spokeswoman for the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht responded that Birdwatch Ireland was given the opportunity the week before consent was issued to send a representative to the island during filming. She said Birdwatch Ireland turned down the offer.

The filming was supervised at all times by experts from the NPWS, the OPW and the NMS, under strict environmental and ecological restrictions, according to the report.

The report also found all 16 protection measures set out under the consent granted for filming were fully adhered to by Lucasfilm.

A letter published in The Irish Times in September signed by 12 Irish writers and a photographer criticised Ms Humphreys for negotiating the Star Wars project without consulting the Office of Public Works (OPW), the manager of the Unesco site.

The writers’ letter called on the Taoiseach and the Minister for Arts to guarantee that heritage sites will, in future, be managed in an “open, transparent and accountable” manner, with “respect and responsibility”.

# Star Wars: Habitats directive ‘breached’ on Skellig Michael

## **Birdwatch Ireland says lack of third-party consent for filming a ‘missed opportunity’** Thu, Dec 17, 2015[**Lorna Siggins**](http://www.irishtimes.com/profile/lorna-siggins-7.2323745)

The Irish Film Board facilitated use of Skellig Michael - a Unesco world heritage site - for Star Wars: The Force Awakens in 2014 and 2015. File photograph: David Sleator/The Irish Times

 Birdwatch [Ireland](http://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_location=Ireland&article=true) has said it will be pursuing changes to a “legal loophole” under which Minister for Arts [Heather Humphreys](http://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_person=Heather%20Humphreys&article=true) approved use of Skellig Michael as a set for [Disney](http://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_company=Disney&article=true) Lucasfilm without requiring third party consent.

The non-governmental organisation (NGO) says Ms Humphreys made her decision under a “significantly flawed” environmental assessment procedure which was in breach of the EU Habitats Directive. The assessment of potential impacts upon Skellig Michael bird populations which informed the Minister’s decision was “not compliant with Article 6 (3) of the EU Habitats Directive”, it says.

Birdwatch Ireland head of policy Siobhán Egan said the consent granted by Ms Humphreys was a “missed opportunity to put in place appropriate management, monitoring and decision-making processes for important sites such as Skellig Michael and the larger Special Protection Area (SPA)”. “This is not about blocking or obstructing use of such sites, but about ensuring that all protections are in place, with adequate consultation,”she stressed. “Skellig Michael has provided a test case for this.”

**World heritage site:** The Irish Film Board facilitated use of Skellig Michael - a [Unesco](http://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_organisation=Unesco&article=true) world heritage site - for Star Wars: The Force Awakens in 2014 and 2015. Several archaeologists, along with a number of writers and artists, expressed concerns about the archaeological impact on the monastery, while Birdwatch Ireland was specifically concerned about a nesting and breeding site for several internationally important species.

Birdwatch Ireland senior conservation officer for seabirds Dr [Steven Newton](http://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_person=Steven%20Newton&article=true) questioned why filming in July 2014 had been permitted during the nesting season.

During one reconnaissance helicopter flight in advance of initial filming last year, kittiwake chicks in nests on a ledge below were swept into the sea by the downdraught and devoured by gulls, and this resulted in further flights being curtailed.

**Avoiding breeding season:** To avoid the main breeding season, further filming this year on Skellig Michael was scheduled for September, but when storm petrels and shearwaters were still on the island. Ms Egan explained that storm petrels are particularly sensitive as they only return from hunting to feed young under cover of darkness to avoid predators. However, the NGO was given “no opportunity for consultation on the application prior the decision to grant consent”, she said. “No documentation on the proposal was available and [there was] no opportunity for consultation on same prior to decision-making,”she said.

Ms Humphreys referred the filming application to State bodies, including the Office of Public Works (OPW) and National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS).

**Departmental supervision:** The conditions for filming included supervision by representatives from her department, OPW and NPWS Environmental Scientists, with costs covered by the film company - but no overall fee for use of the location.

In a subsequent report, two incidents, described as “minor”, were recorded, including “disturbance” to stonework at the entrance to the Upper Monk’s Garden and a paint spill at the “Wailing Woman” natural rock formation.

The [Department of Arts](http://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_organisation=Department%20of%20Arts&article=true), [Heritage and the Gaeltacht](http://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_organisation=Heritage%20and%20the%20Gaeltacht&article=true) said Birdwatch Ireland was invited to send a representative during the film shoot, but “declined”. However, Ms Egan said that “while we appreciate the opportunity to be on the island for monitoring purposes during filming, this doesn’t address the lack of proper assessment of impacts prior to consent being granted”.

**Minister:** A spokeswoman for Ms Humphreys said on Wednesday that it was “completely inaccurate to suggest that the minister/department breached the Habitats Directive”.

“All proper legal procedures were followed,”she said.” The Minister takes her obligations under the EU Habitats Directive extremely seriously. The European Commission was informed about the filming and took no issue with how the matter was handled.”

1. **What NEGATIVE impacts on Skellig Michael does the article cite?**
2. **What POSITIVE impacts on Ireland or humans can you think of?**
3. **Is the potential damage worth the benefits? You’re the Minister of the Arts -- would you allow filming there? Why/Why not?**