

Alpine-wide quality standards for nature-based tourism

Dominik Siegrist, HSR University of Applied Sciences Rapperswil, Switzerland,
dominik.siegrist@hsr.ch

Lea Ketterer Bonnelame, HSR University of Applied Sciences Rapperswil, Switzerland

Introduction

The alpine-wide dimension of tourism collaboration has a long tradition; be it on a destination level, in politics or in research. Since 1991 the Alpine Convention serves as a guideline for the promotion of sustainable development in the alpine regions. The presented research for an alpine-wide nature-based tourism is to be seen within this tradition (Alpine Convention 2013).

Nature-based tourism in the Alps can be regarded as a form of sustainable tourism. Its definition comprises of a responsible stay in natural areas and cultural landscapes, which are close to nature. Nature-based tourism encompasses the whole spectrum of the tourism service chain from mobility, accommodation and gastronomy, activities to information and marketing. (Seco 2002; Baumgartner 2003; Lundberg, Fredman 2011).

Despite the fact that in some alpine countries suitable initiatives have been taken, no alpine-wide quality standards for nature-based tourism exist. However such standards would benefit alpine destinations, especially the tourism service providers and partners. In this context the paper focuses on the following research questions:

- Which quality standards and criteria can be applied for the development of nature-based tourism in the Alps?
- How can nature-based tourism be integrated in the management of alpine destinations?

Methods

The first step of the research consisted of a literature analysis to clarify the definition, delimitation and characteristics of nature-based tourism and of ten guideline-based expert interviews with actors of nature-based tourism. This resulted in a draft of quality standards for nature-based tourism in the Alps. As the second step a quantitative alpine-wide online-survey on nature-based tourism with actors in tourism and other relevant stakeholders was carried out. Thereby the draft of quality standards was further specified. The validation of quality standards was carried out with an expert workshop and with the application in six case studies in the Alpine Region (holiday regions Engadin Scuol and Val Müstair, Switzerland; national park Gran Paradiso, Italy; nature park region Lechtal-Reutte, Austria; regional nature park Massif des Bauges, France; Solčavsko region, Slovenia and the outdoor provider Faszinatour, Germany).

Results

Nature-based tourism is of great significance in alpine destinations. Until now nature-based tourism in the Alps has only been practiced by individual service providers (e.g. tour operators), but has not been exploited by the destination itself. Nevertheless high quality nature-based tourism can only prevail if it receives adequate significance within the destination management. Thus, nature-based tourism is to be included in the destination strategy. (Bieger 2004;; Lundberg, Fredman 2011).

The results of the expert interviews and the online survey show, that there is a rise in demand for nature-based tourism offers by an increased number of visitors, e.g. scenic hiking trails, attractive mountainbike trails and guided field trips. However, these offers are often not provided in the alpine destinations.

Standards are common in quality management of the service economy and in environmental management (Ulrich, Waxenberger 2002). Quality standards of nature-based tourism constitute a normative basis for the management of destinations. They guide the management on how nature-based tourism in destinations can be shaped, further developed and which requirements should be fulfilled. Figure 1 illustrates how quality standards should be considered in all phases of the management circle of a destination. Each of the ten quality standards (QS) comprises five quality criteria (QC).

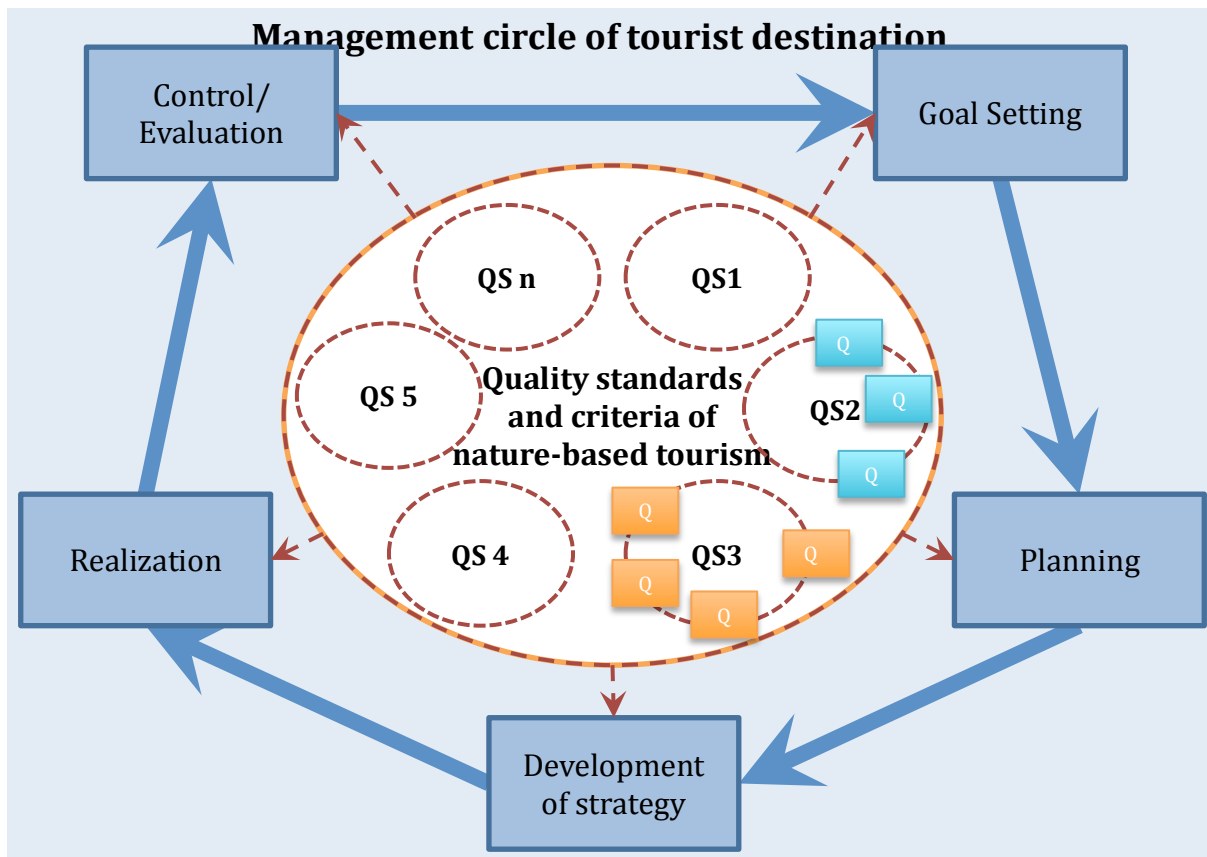


Figure 1: Quality standards (QS) of nature-based tourism and its criteria (QC) in the management circle of a destination.

(Source: own design).

Ten quality standards for nature-based tourism can be differentiated as nature-based destination; pleasant quality of the place with reference to architecture, landscape and space; nature-based development of offers; adapted accommodation and gastronomy; nature-based activities; fostering of slow mobility; protection and enhancement of nature and landscape; information & sensitization; nature-based marketing; promotion of regional added value; quality management, evaluation and research.

Conclusion

Applicable quality standards need a definition of nature-based tourism. In addition, it is important to adjust the deduced quality standards with relevant actors by means of participatory methods. For that matter it is important to analyze which actor groups play the vital role within this process and how quality standards can explicitly be integrated in the management systems of a destination. The set of quality standards compiled within this project can become a useful and practical instrument for stakeholders in alpine destinations to support and promote the further development of nature-based tourism. This can on the one hand result in additional added value and on the other hand nature and landscape values can be preserved.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to kindly thank the Bristol Foundation for providing funding for the project 'NaTourCert'. In addition, we would like to thank the numerous stakeholders and experts who supported us with their expertise within the project.

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