

111 Mountain huts as observatories of tourism transition

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In the face of the cumulative effects of climate and societal changes, mountain touristic development is currently experiencing a strong adaptive injunction of mountain tourism destinations. Alpine tourism development model based on seasonal snow resources and winter sports resorts is subject to uncertainties and weaknesses that brought it to a tipping point (Bourdeau, 2007; Clivaz & al., 2015). These call into question existing economic balances, territorial dynamics and mountain policies. In this tipping phenomenon, climate change acts as an amplifier and accelerator of structural contradictions, especially as its multiple effects combine themselves with societal, socio-cultural and technological changes. In this context, tourism is faced with a major transitional challenge having both spatial and temporal characteristics. This structural redefinition of the foundations of mountain tourism suffers from a major lack of knowledge on the governance and visitor flows of "less-developed" mountain areas. What is at stake is a transition trajectory based on a territorial rebalancing between "less-developed mountain areas" and "developed mountain areas", which appears particularly strategic on the scale of the Swiss and French Alps.

In this presentation we will present a French-Swiss research project called "Mountain huts as observatories of the tourism transition. The repositioning of less-developed mountain areas and their related professions in the French-Swiss Alps" (HutObsTour). Started in April 2021, this 4-year project is funded by the French National Research Agency and the Swiss National Science Agency. Conducted jointly by the Lausanne University and the Grenoble Alpes University, it focused on the mountain huts and the related professions (hut keepers, mountain guides, mountain leaders) as privileged markers, both in terms of infrastructure (huts) and culture (professions) to tackle and observe the changes and adaptations of the mountain tourism transition in the Alps. At the interface between valley and high mountain, huts play a nodal role in the tourist flows of less-

developed mountain areas, while the creative capacity of the professional activities of accommodation (hut keepers) and supervision (mountain leaders and guides) that they generate is stimulated by the effects of uncertainty and crisis.

The objectives of the project are based on research needs identified by two previous programs, whose major results will be briefly presented in order to understand how the refuge can be an observatory of tourism transition:

1. Refuges Sentinelles (Mountain huts as sentinel) program (France), co-led by the Labex ITEM and the Ecrins National Park since 2016, aims to develop an experimental system for observing changes in high mountain, based on mountain huts as places for measuring, observing, working and exchanging information between the natural and social sciences (<http://refuges-sentinelles.org/>).
2. The seed funding project "Les refuges comme observatoires de la transition récréative en haute montagne" (Mountain huts as observatories of the recreational transition in high mountain), funded by the Interdisciplinary Centre for Mountain Research in Switzerland in 2019. It helped us to build the ground for the HutObsTour project through a state of the art and an in-depth dialogue with the local stakeholders in Switzerland (Obin et al., 2020).

Based on the results of these two previous projects, the main objectives of the HutObsTour project are:

- The development of a better knowledge (characterisation, measurement, typologies, modelling) of tourist dispersion and polarisation – outside the perimeters of resorts – which are inherent to centrifugal practices of which huts are nodal points;
- The documentation of creative actions (Joas, 2008; Bourdeau, 2019), defined as the range of new

initiatives and professional practices that contribute to innovation by transforming cultures and professional activities;

- The identification of socio-technical locks-in (Geels, 2002), which undermine the capacity for adaptation and transition of mountain tourism professions, sectors and territories, as well as the levers for "unlocking" them: inclusion of environmental and safety issues, adaptive behaviour of professional practitioners and operators at the tourist destination level, etc.;

- The study of the governance processes taking place in mountain tourism which affect the regulation and training of mountain professionals, the management of mountain huts, the access to less-developed mountain areas and the question of tourist flows, the interactions and impacts on biodiversity, the conflicts over land use and the various ways of dealing with the environment.

In order to reach these objectives, three work packages were defined and will be presented:

1. The implementation of an experimental observation system appropriate to the spatial and temporal dispersion of tourist flows in less-developed mountain areas: inventory of the methodologies, techniques available to observe and measure visitor flows in natural and recreational areas, and

exploitation of user-generated content compiled on social networks and community platforms (GPS tracks, marked summits and routes, posted photographs) ;

2. The study of the transformation of the missions and cultures of mountain professions: examination of the processes by which mountain-related tourism professions (keepers, guides and leaders) are changing and reorganizing themselves in the light of changing climatic and societal conditions;
3. The analyze of the structuring role of mountain huts in the governance of less-developed mountain areas and in the diversification of tourism: how mountain huts are changing in order to welcome new clientele and to adapt to the evolving expectations of visitors, for example in terms of the place occupied by technology, of the relationship with comfort, and of community life, and how "off-resort" governance works – a blind spot in studies carried out on mountain tourism so far.

This presentation will also come back on the methodology used for the three work packages.

References

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