60 Protected area labels as brands in tourism: insights from Germany

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Protected areas (PAs) are often major tourist attractions, notably in peripheral regions. Officially awarded designations, e.g. "national park", have been described as being important brands that can create unique selling propositions (USP) for destinations, distinguishing them from similar, but unlabeled landscapes (Arnegger, 2014). The PA label is seen as a guarantee for quality and authentic nature experiences. Officially designated PAs represent a scarce resource since official (national or international) labels are not easily, if at all, transferable and imitable (Hannemann & Job, 2003). It is often argued that certain designations, especially national parks and world heritage sites, have a superior brand identity compared to other, less-known labels such as biosphere reserves or nature parks (Reinius & Fredman, 2007; Job et al., 2005; Nolte, 2004). However, this argument appears to be based to a large degree on specific case studies and on-site surveys rather than on systematic image assessments of PA categories.

The present study addresses this research gap by evaluating the strengths of different PA categories as brands in tourism in a representative panel study for the German context. We focus on the three major large-scale PA categories as defined by the German Federal Law on Nature Conservation (BNatSchG): (a) national parks, (b) biosphere reserves and (c) nature parks ("Naturparke"), all of which can play, according to their legal mandate, important roles for tourism. In total there are 16 national parks, 18 biosphere reserves and 103 nature parks in Germany (BfN, 2021). In addition, we included the international (natural) UNESCO World Heritage category in the assessment. Currently there are three natural UNESCO World Heritage sites in Germany (UNESCO, 2021).

Generally, images in tourism contexts are formed through an individual's subjective interpretation of associations, thus consisting of cognitive, affective and conative (behavioral) dimensions which are hierarchically interrelated (Gartner, 1994, Eisenstein, 2018). The hierarchical order reflects the customer journey from awareness to behavioral intentions and is also referred to as marketing funnel (Morgan et al., 2012). Thus, we assessed the respondents' knowledge of and attitude toward different PA categories, as well as intentions to visit. In addition, respondents were asked about previous visits to the different PA categories. A quota sample (N=3,192) was recruited based on demographic and geographic criteria allowing for a representative survey for the German-speaking population. The survey was conducted in November 2020.

Results show differences between the individual categories of PAs: when asked in an open-ended question about PA categories they are familiar with, respondents most frequently mentioned nature conservation areas ("Naturschutzgebiete" - NSG). This finding is not surprising given that NSGs are ubiquitous in Germany (there are nearly 9,000 NSG) and important for many people's everyday outdoor recreation activities. However, they are generally small-scale (about 60% of NSG are less than 50 ha in size) and do not play major roles as tourist attractions or even destinations. In terms of unsupported awareness, NSGs are followed by the three large-scale PA categories mentioned above. Focusing just on these three types within this open question, a clear ranking can be seen: national parks are mentioned almost twice as often as nature parks and even three times as often as biosphere reserves. Additionally, natural World Heritage sites appear as a category in their own right, although comparatively few people mention them – suggesting they are not (yet) clearly present in the mindsets of German (potential) tourists.

When asked about the aided awareness of four PA categories in a multiple-choice question national parks were again the most well-known label, known to 78.6% of all respondents. They were followed by nature parks (64.6%), World Heritage

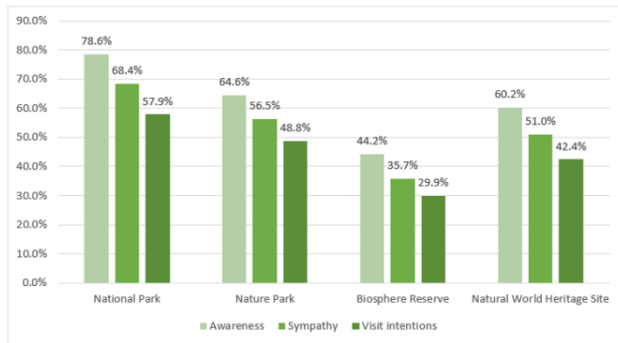sites (60.2%) and biosphere reserves (44.2%) (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Cognitive (awareness), affective (attitude/sympathy) and behavioral (visit intentions) image dimensions of PA labels in Germany (2020).

Notably, conversion rates across the marketing funnel do not differ much across the four PA categories: between 80.8% and 87.4% of respondents who know a given PA category also state that they hold a positive attitude toward this PA label. Furthermore, between 83.1% and 86.5% of all respondents holding positive attitudes state that they will "probably" or "definitely" visit a PA of this category over the next three years.

Several conclusions can be drawn based on these results: as often stated in the literature, national parks represent the strongest brand among PA categories in Germany. This finding is hardly surprising given national parks' well-established image as PAs that guarantee rare and authentic wilderness experiences. However, it is remarkable that nature parks, which are numerous in Germany and could thus be expected not to be associated with genuine regional USP, are more popular than UNESCO World Heritage sites and biosphere reserves. The latter represent the least-known category; their explicit mission of providing pilot sites for sustainable development could make them, in theory, a suitable model for sustainable tourism promotion. However, biosphere reserves as PA category are also relatively young and thus not yet as well-known as national parks or nature parks; furthermore, they often have diverse regional development objectives, e.g. sustainable agriculture, among which tourism may only play a supporting role (Job et al., 2019).

Thus, the brand strengths of different PA labels do differ. However, these differences can be explained to a large degree by differences in awareness levels: respondents who know a specific PA label are also very likely to hold positive attitudes toward it, and to indicate visit intentions. Tourism marketing efforts under the central umbrella brand "National Natural Landscapes", as well as by PA managers and destination management organizations, should focus more strongly on awareness raising for the roles and key values of different PA categories.

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