

Economic effects of tourism in the Souss-Massa-National Park, Morocco

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Introduction

National parks in Morocco have existed since 1942 when the Toubkal National Park in the High Atlas was inaugurated. Today, there are ten national parks which represent such diverse landscapes as the Atlas Mountains (Toubkal, Haut-Atlas Oriental, Ifrane, Tazekka), the Atlantic coast (Souss-Massa, Khenifiss) or the arid desert (Iriqui) (CHMBM 2009). Despite this long tradition of national parks in Morocco, most of them lack sufficient funding and management structures, and it is only recently that they are more and more considered as tools for sustainable development, especially through the promotion of nature-based tourism (Billand 1996).

However, data on socioeconomic issues, including visitation numbers, is scarce. On this account, a pilot study on the economic effects of tourism in the Souss-Massa National Park was conducted. This study, funded by the German Technical Cooperation, is based on a methodology that has already been applied in nine German national and nature parks, which means that results from different survey areas are comparable internationally (e.g. Job et al. 2005, 2009).

Case Study

The Souss-Massa National Park is facing considerable pressure from (mass) tourism development and population growth due to its spatial proximity to the resort town of Agadir. The latter is dominated by Fordist mass tourism, which focuses on economies of scale by marketing highly standardized products to large numbers of indifferent customers, e.g. the classic "3S" (sun, sand, sea) beach vacation (Ioannides & Debbage 1998, Torres 2002).

Under these circumstances, the pilot study in the Souss-Massa National Park essentially focused on the following issue: to what extent does tourism in the national park contribute to the regional economy? Answering this question should enable the High Commission for Water, Forestry and Desertification Control, in charge of protected area management, to promote nature protection among local, regional and national stakeholders, relying on hard economic facts.

Methodology

Seven census points were selected in cooperation with the park management to coincide with the main access points to the park so as to record park visitation. Twenty census days were chosen to reflect variations in visitation by season and the day of the week. Between May 2007 and March 2008, a total of 3,790 face-to-face interviews were conducted, of which 2,450 were short interviews in which the place and duration of the stay, visitor type (day-tripper vs. overnight visitor, local vs. external visitor), accommodation type and classification and the organization of the trip (self-organized vs. package tour) were recorded. The remaining 1,340 long interviews focused on the structure and size of tourist expenditure by economic sectors (the basis for calculating the regional income deriving from visitor spending), the affinity with the national park, and socio-demographic data. Additionally, visitors were counted on every census day and at every census point. The total number of visitors per year was extrapolated using adjustment factors for the season (high season/low season/Ramadan) and the day of the week (weekday/weekend, holiday) (Mayer et al., 2009).

These values were adjusted with the share of visitors for whom the existence of the national park was the primary reason to visit the Souss-Massa area, as one can argue that other visitors'

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expenditures might have occurred in the region anyway. The share of visitors with high national park affinity was defined as the percentage of tourists that answered affirmatively to a determined sequence of questions (Fig.1)

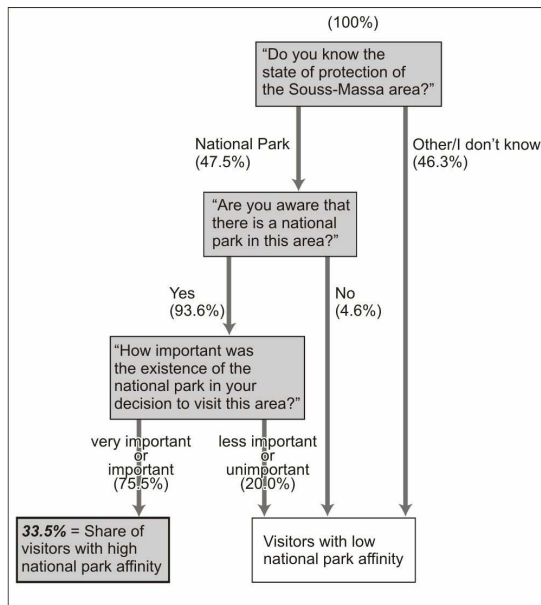


Figure 1: Decision tree to determine the share of visitors with high national park affinity.

Results

The Souss-Massa National Park is visited by 300,000 tourists annually. The seasonality is comparable to overnight stays at hotels in Agadir, which underlines the importance of this resort town, not at least as a starting point for excursions to nearby attractions such as the Souss-Massa National Park (Fig. 2). The latter creates economic effects of approximately EUR 1.2 million annually if only expenses from visitors with high national park affinity are taken into account.

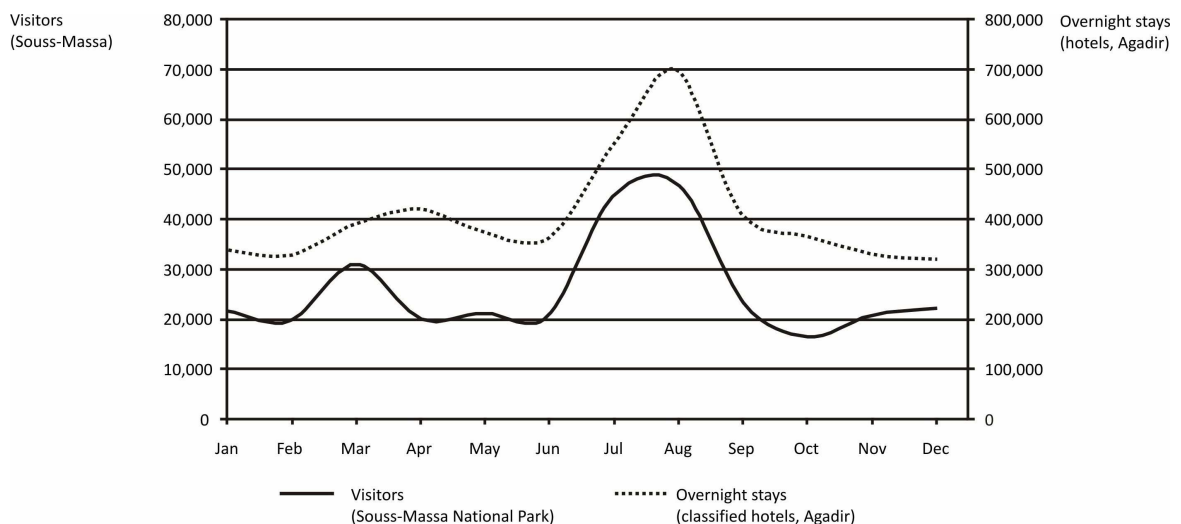


Figure 2: Visitation in the Souss-Massa National Park (2007/08) and number of overnight stays in classified hotels in Agadir (2006) (sources: own research; MTAES, 2007).

The majority of all visitors, however, mainly visit the park as an add-on to a standard beach vacation and can be classified as somewhat indifferent to nature protection. Less than half of the visitors know that they are in a national park, and only one third represents visitors with high national park affinity. That said, those environmentally conscious tourists tend to have higher expenditures and are therefore an interesting market segment which is, until now, not adequately

valorized. By contrast, existing plans for the development of hard tourism infrastructure within the park's boundaries might put Souss-Massa's ecotourism potential at risk (Job et al., 2008).

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