

The Pfyng-Finges Park (Valais/Switzerland): What Repercussions on the Regional Economy?

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Introduction

Following the emergence of several park projects at the end of the 1990s, the Swiss Government has assigned the Swiss Agency for the Environment, Forests and Landscape (SAEFL) to prepare a revision of the Federal nature and landscape protection law to enable the creation of different types of parks (national park, regional nature park, peri-urban nature park). For the SAEFL, "the regional nature park is a development tool for regions, and especially for rural areas" (Oppizzi 2003, 5). It is especially by the means of the development of tourism that one hopes to improve the economy of these areas. The study by Siegrist et al. (2002) on the potential of nature tourism shows indeed that Swiss tourists who stay in their country demand protected areas in their holiday region. The intention to enhance the value of regions with high quality natural or cultural heritage for tourism is also due to the fact that on an international level, ecotourism is a constantly growing market (Arnberger & al. 2002, Epler Wood 2002, Eagles 1999).

Does the creation of a regional nature park really contribute anything from the point of view of the regional economy? Even if the Pfyng-Finges park was created recently, we propose to analyse it in order to see what the current economic repercussions of this park are and what the future challenges are.

Presentation of the Pfyng-Finges park

Pfyng-Finges is crossed by the wild Rhone River and comprises pine groves, ponds, hills and an alluvial zone. The combination of natural and cul-

tural values and the Mediterranean climatic conditions of the Pfyng-Finges region constitute the ideal basis for the development of nature tourism, which aims at conserving the landscapes and the richness of fauna and flora.

In March 2000, the "Pfyng-Finges Association" was founded. Its members are the administrative bodies concerned (municipalities, socio-economic regions, canton), tourist offices, environmental associations, various private persons and public institutions. The objective of this association is the creation of a nature park and the development of innovative tourist activities in the fields of nature and culture. Concretely, various activities were set up these last five years (exposures, accompanied excursions, hiking paths, catering, etc.)

The Pfyng-Finges park: good for the regional economy?

To answer this question a survey by questionnaire was performed out in the summer 2004 on the visitors of Pfyng-Finges (Clivaz & Richard 2006). This survey shows that a great part of the current visitors are people of the area using this territory for their leisure activities (walking, jogging, bicycle, etc.). Thus, these people come several tens of times per year to Pfyng-Finges to practise these activities. Only a quarter of the questioned visitors live in a distance of more than 80 km of Pfyng-Finges.

As one could expect it, Pfyng-Finges is especially frequented during the weekend. For 71% of the visitors, Pfyng-Finges constitutes the principal goal of their transit. In regard to behav-

tour in the site, 15% of the visitors do not follow the marked out paths, which can involve a disturbance of fauna and flora. Nevertheless, these same paths constitute, along with information on fauna and flora and the communication of the rules to be respected on the site, the most important elements for the questioned visitors. The visitors also wish more directional and didactic signs, more places for picnicing as well as a better maintenance of the infrastructure (paths, ponds, etc.).

Approximately half of the questioned visitors do not make any expenditure on the site of Finges. 85% of the visitors who spent something spent less than 30 Swiss Francs. To finish this short overview of the results of the survey, we can mention that three-quarters of the visitors reject the idea to have to pay to enter the Pfyng-Finges Park. The visitors who do agree with this idea are ready to pay on average 5,4 Swiss Francs.

Conclusion

The survey carried out by the visitors of the park of Pfyng-Finges shows that the direct economic impacts remain still relatively limited today. Three factors can explain this result. Firstly, the tourist offer of Pfyng-Finges still remains unknown to many potential visitors (excursionists and tourists). Secondly, at the moment Pfyng-Finges only offers a limited range of tourist products and services for the visitors who do not have many opportunities to spend their money. Thirdly, a great part of the current visitors are people of the area practicing leisure activities that generate almost no economic repercussions.

In this context, the challenges will be in the future to improve marketing and to develop the tourist offer in order to increase the repercussions of the park on the regional economy. Various projects under development, like the inauguration in 2007 of the park interpretation centre, let us think that these challenges should be taken up.

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