

## Opening Address

by

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The need to guide the tourism process and moreover to ensure sustainable development has become a current issue for protected areas worldwide. The UNO has declared the year 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism and the International Year of Mountains. Within the Convention on Biological Diversity guidelines on “Biological Diversity and Tourism” are prepared and the European Union at present deals with the chances and possible impacts of tourism on the Natura 2000 sites.

Tourism is one of the world’s fastest growing industries and its global impacts are immense and highly complex. Given that a high percentage of tourism involves visits to naturally and culturally distinguished sites, there are clearly major opportunities for investing in the maintenance of biological resources.

In Austria the situation is less problematic as far as protected areas like national parks, nature parks or protected landscapes are concerned. About one quarter of the total Austrian surface is protected according to the various categories of site protection. Among these categories the five national parks hold a special position since they have to meet the criteria of the World Conservation Union IUCN and are managed by park administrations. They attract an increasingly large number of visitors and serve as a major educational place. There is free access to the parks and therefore no charge of entrance fees, a situation most common also in many other European parks. Due to this fact there hardly exist any standardized data on visitor numbers, visitor expectations, motivation or behaviour.

Managing tourism in a sustainable way however requires both a long-term perspective and careful consideration of the many ways in which touristic activities and environment interrelate. What is needed is a systematic approach and a tool kit for planning in order to provide the necessary resources for visitor management. Therefore it is important to provide standardized data and collect them as early as possible.

This conference contributes to extend the knowledge of different methods and techniques for visitor monitoring, plus offers an excellent chance for exchanging experience and expertise. For the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management, being in charge of the Austrian national parks, a very good reason to support the event!



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