

Key Success Factors for Nature-Based Tourism in Protected Areas of the Alps

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Introduction

The role of parks in regional development varies widely across the Alps. In some regions, parks have truly become catalysts for economic development, while in others they struggle to make a substantial contribution (see Hammer 2003, 205). When discussing economic benefits created by protected areas, tourism is clearly one of the main branches where these benefits are being generated. Against this backdrop, the survey SUSTOURPARK gathers first-hand information from Alpine park managers and tourism representatives on successful park tourism.

Methods

A pool of 78 relevant park managers and tourism representatives from Austrian, French, German, Italian, and Swiss protected areas was identified in cooperation with the Alpine Network of Protected Areas. These experts on park management and tourism in protected areas were then asked to participate in a two-round online-Delphi-survey. While the comparably small number of 27 returns does not allow representative conclusions, the survey succeeded in identifying important goals and framework conditions of park management schemes, trends and needs of park tourism, park-related management tools, and critical factors for success as perceived by experts working in the field.

Results

In the eyes of park managers, the most important goals of park management in the Alps are currently and in the future the promotion of nature-based

tourism, environmental education, and the promotion of sustainable regional development (see figure 1). Traditional core objectives of protected areas such as habitat and species protection are rated as being of secondary importance, which is due to the perception that these goals are safeguarded under current circumstances.

In the future, the experts consider scenic landscape, good accommodation facilities at fair prices, guest-houses featuring regional products and good service to be crucial factors in visitors' decision making processes. In the context of a much voiced call for upgrading tourism facilities in the Alpine region, it is interesting to note that participants of the survey considered park tourism to be mostly directed towards simple and middle standard accommodations.

Park representatives are calling on the tourism industry to actively develop products that are tailored to the specific needs of certain target groups. Protected areas, in their eyes, need to be incorporated even more into the regional chain of tourist services and experiences.

However, one still needs to keep in mind that successful tourism in protected areas is not so much defined by increasing visitor arrivals as by ecological and socio-cultural impact mitigation. The quality of the visitor experience thus remains the only unique selling proposition for protected areas in a competitive tourism market, while aiming at price competitiveness would jeopardize their ecological and sociocultural basis.

For implementing these park objectives and resolving conflicts between conservation and tourism, managers have a variety of instruments at their

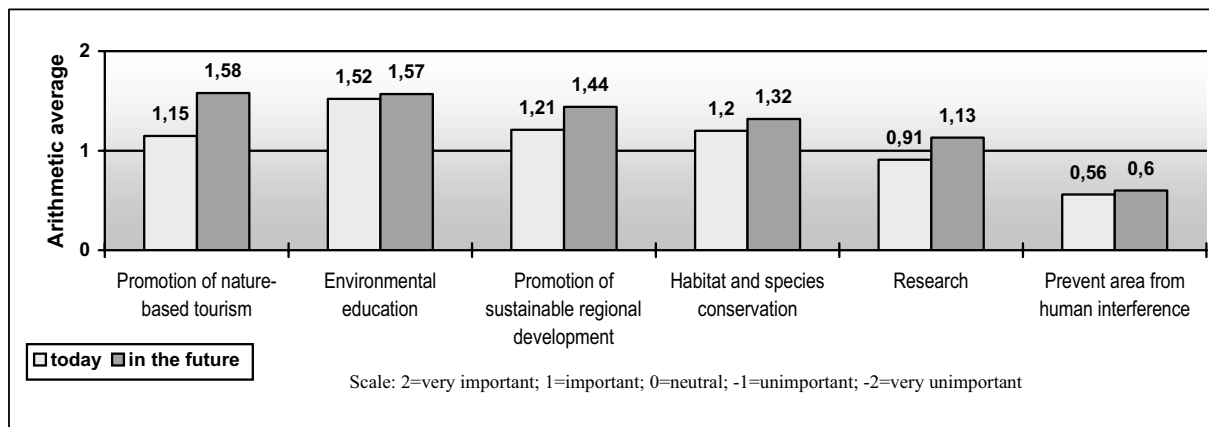


Figure 1: Current and future objectives of protected area management.

disposal, ranging from 'soft' tools such as environmental information, cooperative agreements between interest groups and economic incentives to 'hard' tools such as management of visitor flows and legal restrictions and regulations. In general, park managers opted for a mixed approach with an emphasis on 'soft' instruments, while still acknowledging the usefulness of top-down-instruments for certain conflict areas.

On a regional scale, one single park manager obviously is not capable of covering all aspects of park management in-depth. Therefore, the role of park management in regional governance needs to be interpreted as a platform for exchange of conservation expertise and experience (see Mose & Weixlbaumer 2003, 88). In view of international cooperation and exchange of experience, networks like the Alpine Network of Protected Areas or those affiliated with EU-programs such as INTERREG or LEADER seem to be firmly established and well used; more than 70% of park managers claim to have benefited from one of these networks.

Five success factors for regional cooperation between park management, other stakeholders and the public have been identified, including:

- participation and representativeness,
- open-mindedness of key actors,
- balance of top-down- and bottom-up-processes,
- cooperation of different interest groups in joint projects,
- and the establishment of a park supervisory board involving a broad range of local stakeholders.

SUSTOURPARK shows that park managers of the Alpine region are very well aware of the contribution to regional development that is being expected from their protected areas. In the future, park and tourism authorities will need to combine efforts to be able to tap the full potential of these protected areas. For the parks, this means to appropriately address problems of visitor impacts and to support tourism stakeholders in creating nature-based activities and packages. For the regional tourism industry, it means to increasingly incorporate protected areas in their range of offers. Due to their positive image and high profile among park representatives, transnational networks pose potential platforms for mutual exchange and capacity building.

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