

Towards Quality Rural Tourism in Alpine Recreational Areas in Europe: Integrated Quality Management of Rural Tourist Destinations & Presentation of a Case Study in Bregenzerwald, Austria

Ulrike Mast

Geographer, Government of the State of Vorarlberg, 6901 Bregenz, Austria,
Email: ulrike.mast@vlg.gv.at

Abstract: The rural recreation areas of Europe provide a wide variety of experiences and attractions for the visitor. Domestic and international visitor flows mostly from conurbations are turning to countryside destinations for holidays in increasing numbers. There are changes in the length and type of visits sought and there is a rapid growth in alternative recreational outdoor activities world wide and thus the alpine rural areas have to be ever more competitive and have to concentrate on sustainable development. At the same time there is an increasing need to be sensitive to both the positive and negative impacts of tourism on the economy, the environment and the local communities. Integrated quality management is an approach to focus on quality by putting suitable management in place, to ensure that visitors have a special experience, meeting or exceeding their expectations while maximising the benefit to the destination and while managing visitor flows. This approach is explored here and the main issues that are discussed, are based on a case study in the Bregenzerwald, Vorarlberg.

INTRODUCTION

Rural areas need to offer new prospects over conurbations in Europe if they are not to be left behind in this era of increasing globalisation and specialisation. There are regional developing programmes encompassing a wealth of individual measures geared to develop the strengths of the region and to reinforce the creation of added value through organised measures relating to a local supply network such as co-ordinated marketing activities. At the same time, the aim is to increase awareness of the value of the natural and human resources of a region.

In the interest of sustainable tourism, the regional measures in rural tourist destinations are based on a bottom-up form of development, on promoting a balanced sense of community through solidarity and a willingness to co-operate. The feeling of involvement is to be encouraged by a new local awareness, open groundwork and a network approach. The coherent alignment of different activities towards common goals will achieve both ecological and economic results.

Therefore improving quality management in rural tourist destinations is an essential requirement in satisfying the needs of tourists, in enhancing the competitiveness of the tourism industry and in ensuring balances and sustainable tourism development. The case study with the title "Raumkultur und Tourismus" which roughly translates as the "natural and cultural heritage of the region and the impacts of tourism" is situated in the rural and mountain region of the Bregenzerwald, Vorarlberg, providing us with new ideas showing an opportunity for a sustainable

economical development of rural and border regions.

RURAL TOURISM AND INTEGRATED QUALITY MANAGEMENT

Rural tourism is not a new phenomenon, however in recent years the market has become more sophisticated and discriminating. There has been an increasing interest in tourism as a valuable vehicle for much needed diversification of the rural economy. Rural areas often have small scale and widely dispersed enterprises, communities and administrative structures. The relationship between tourism, agriculture and other sectors in the local rural economy is increasingly important because many different players are involved. Natural resources, cultural traditions, transport services and a wide range of tourism enterprises have an influence on the visitor's experience and in turn are affected by tourism impact. For this reason an integrated quality management approach to tourism is very relevant in rural areas.

It is accepted that quality management should be applicable to a broad range of types of rural areas where the nature of tourism is dictated by the type of location, resource and market (Groier, 1993). Rural tourist destinations may broadly be defined as areas which are separately identified and promoted to tourists as places to visit, where enjoyment of the countryside and countryside related activities are a primary motive. Examples of different types of rural tourist destinations are illustrated by the case study in the Bregenzerwald, Austria and include the following:

- Traditional, popular destinations near sizeable urban areas receiving a high proportion of day visitors. There are priorities to improve the environment, update the infrastructure, manage visitor pressure, address transport issues and convert day trips to overnight stays.
- Traditional holiday areas with a significant quantity of visitor accommodation and infrastructure, seeking to upgrade the offer and reduce environmental impact. Working with enterprises on physical improvements, planning controls and more sustainable forms of tourism is required.
- Protected areas seeking to manage tourism as well as environment and local economy in an integrated way. Key issues include inter-sectional integration and visitor management.
- Rural areas where a significant part of the product is characterised by small historic towns and villages and a rich historic, architectural, cultural or industrial heritage interspersed in the countryside. Opportunities improve with linking sites and communities, preserving buildings and creating quality branded accommodation and other facilities.
- Remote areas with appeal based on wildlife and wilderness with particular issues of accessibility, environmental protection and development of ecotourism.
- Rich agricultural areas where farming provides much of the visitor appeal. Priority is given to providing quality farm based accommodation related to local produce and gastronomy.
- Mountain or forest locations with some established rural tourism but seeking to diversify and strengthen their offer. The main priority is to establish or co-ordinate better quality accommodation, to actify recreation centres and heritage themes.

Destinations pursuing integrated quality management should think carefully about the visitors they are able and wish to attract as their target market segments. They should consider how different market segments relate to their own strategic objectives such as income per head or off-season visiting. Selection has to be based on a realistic assessment of the destination's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT-analysis). The aim should be to seek and meet the particular expectations and quality requirements of the segments they select (Berndt et al., 1988). Segments can be based e.g. on a range of characteristics such as age, family structure, income, interests, home location and mobility. Examples of some broad segments and how they relate to rural destinations are given below:

- Visitors on day trips from home: This segment is very important and increasing in many rural areas close to towns. Quality of infrastructure, traffic management, attractions and well managed countryside access are key issues.
- Short holiday takers: In much of rural Europe the length of holidays taken in the countryside has been decreasing. This has affected viability especially in less accessible areas.
- Families: The popularity of rural tourism for families tends to vary. Families have traditionally provided by far the largest market for farm accommodation. However, families are becoming more quality as well as price conscious, demanding good facilities and the right balance between fun and safety. The segment can be divided by the age of the children. Families with very young children tend to enjoy rural areas but have special needs in the facilities and experiences offered.
- Senior citizens: Rural destinations are popular amongst older age groups. They enjoy rural traditions and tranquillity, but they are also becoming more health and activity conscious. In general higher standards of comfort are sought by this segment.
- People with special interests: There has been a significant increase in participating in countryside recreation, notable cycling and walking, often as the main purpose of a visit. It is also possible to target those with a declared interest in gastronomy, local heritage and other rural themes.
- Educational and other groups: A number of rural areas have been very active in providing programmes based on rural themes including agriculture, conservation and heritage for group visits, ranging from schools to senior groups. Such groups are easy to target and communicate with but have particular quality requirements in handling and guiding.
- People with disabilities: Compared with urban areas and coastal resorts, rural destinations have paid less attention to provide facilities for visitors with disabilities. Providing disabled people with accessible countryside recreation in small rural enterprises is an important challenge for quality management.

In recent years some important factors have led to an increase in the number of identifiable rural tourist destinations and enterprises in Europe. Declining of agricultural incomes and changes to agricultural support systems put pressure on farmers and rural dwellers to diversify their activities (Ortner, 1996). A lot of work is newly organised by rural development agencies, supported by EU structural funds. There is an increasing awareness of a duty to provide access and the opportunity to benefit from tourism involved with environmental management and cultural heritage.

Over the same time the market for rural tourism has changed showing a different picture that highlights the need for quality management. Individual rural tourist destinations need to become more competitive to attract and hold on to business. Unlike cities and resorts, rural areas tend to be

rather diffuse. Most local rural authorities have limited financial and staff resources for the management of tourism. It is important for them that management activities remain simple and practical.

BASIC CONCEPTS OF INTEGRATED QUALITY MANAGEMENT OF RURAL TOURIST DESTINATIONS

The concept of integrated quality management (IQM) emerged in business management theory in the 1980s (Bodzenta et al., 1985, Chaloupek et al., 1993, Nowotny et al., 1994, Zimmermann, 1995). It is a way of meeting objectives of organisations by improving the experience of the customer of the product or service provided. It is concerned with effective use of resources and the level of participation and satisfaction of the people in the organisations. Integrated quality management should not be seen as a route to instant success, but it should lead to the following key benefits upon which success can be built.

This means that more local awareness and support is necessary for tourism in the area amongst local people and across all rural sectors. Whereas there is a need for better co-ordination between local tourism enterprises and greater support for the management and marketing of the destination. A set of rural tourism products which can be promoted with confidence and an improved image of the destination which is real and not based on false expectations are important. Further key benefits are an increased customer satisfaction with more repeat visits and recommendations and a better knowledge of the economic, social and environmental impacts of tourism. Accordingly the individual elements of a strategy based on quality standards must be founded on a thorough understanding of the customer's requirements.

Total quality management systems are a common feature in the approach developed for specific tourist service providers (tour operators, travel agents, hotels, restaurants). However, as far as the tourist is concerned, the satisfaction derived from staying at a destination does not only depend on the experience of a specific tourist service, but also on more general factors, such as hospitality, safety and security, sanitation and hygiene, traffic and visitor management. A large number of elements have an impact on the tourist's perception of a destination and in consequence on the tourist's willingness to come again and to recommend the destination to potential visitors.

The success of a destination in terms of customer satisfaction is a function of several interdependent components. This underscores the need for the use of strategic and integrated planning of tourist destinations together with the selective use of specific measures addressing integrated quality management and controlling of the destination. The reference framework given by the

European Commission (April 1995, July 1998) for analysing good practice in integrated quality management and presentation of tourist destinations is as follows: Integrated quality management should take into account and have a favourable impact on the activities of tourism professionals, tourists, the local population and the environment (i.e. the natural, cultural and man-made assets of the destination). The IQM strategy implemented at the destinations must fulfil the requirements of tourists as one of its major considerations.

Sustainable tourism development is a concept that is widely accepted at an international level (Parasuraman, 1985, Weiermair, 1997) and in most tourist destinations. It is about keeping a balance between the needs of the visitor, the environment and the host community for current as well as future generations. Therefore a tourist destination manager typically has two main objectives, namely to increase local income and employment through tourism and to ensure that the environment and quality of life of the local people is not damaged or even enhanced by tourism. IQM can meet both these objectives by improving visitor satisfaction, and by monitoring and managing impacts on the local environment and economy. There are two important key elements of the IQM approach. On the one hand it means focusing on visitors, improving the quality of what is provided for them and satisfying their needs and influencing their activities so they come back again or recommend the destination to others. On the other hand one should concentrate on involving local people and local tourism enterprises in the management of the destination as participants and as customers of the management process.

It is helpful to think about how visitors experience a destination as a sequence of influences over space and time, from initial planning, during the stay to departure and post visit reflections. This is sometimes referred to as the Tourism Value Chain (Figure 1). In IQM the quality of each link in the chain should be of concern.

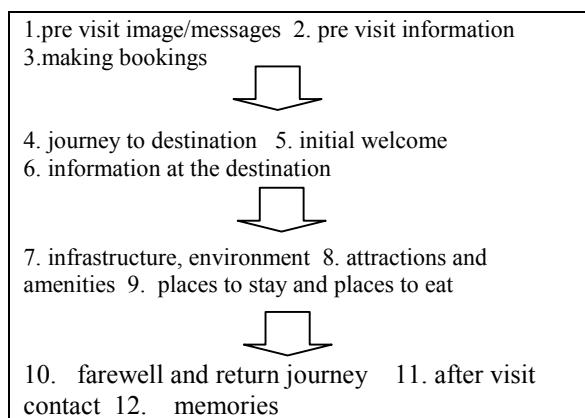


Figure 1: The Tourism Value Chain by Parasuraman (1985)

Quality management is partly about meeting or exceeding visitors' expectations by setting the right standards, meeting them and communicating them

effectively. Some theories of quality by Kano (1984) refer to mandatory standards and attractive standards. In setting quality standards for facilities and services at a destination it can be helpful to think of different levels of visitor needs that should be met in practice and communication through good information.

Very important are mandatory requirements such as safety and hygiene. Failure to meet them may cause a destination to fail completely, but meeting them does not really add to its competitive edge. Many rural accommodation enterprises are small, often family run businesses with little professional training. Special attention needs to be given to the range of accommodation, the level of facilities and the quality of service and how the establishment reflects the rural qualities of the destination.

Scaleable requirements such as the number of attractions at a destination should be analysed. These may influence a visitor's decision to choose the destination. Rural areas typically have many small attractions and events often reflecting the heritage of the area and environment. Quality management involves linking these experiences and promoting them creatively.

Attractive requirements - these are more subjective factors such as style of facilities and treatment by the host; This means that a destination should be well organised and should know what it wants to achieve through tourism while concentrating on all aspects of the visitor's experience and the impact on local people and the environment.

To pursue IQM successfully, a number of structures and actions should be strengthened or - where necessary - put in place. These are summarised below and aspects particularly relevant to rural areas are identified.

- Working together to establish a strategy (initiating the process, leadership and partnership structures, involvement of the local community and local tourism business); This process requires the co-operation of all affected parties in the area as a whole. There should be a clear and well communicated strategy, based on analysis and consultation to improve quality. Initial motives for pursuing quality will vary between different types of rural areas. Whatever the trigger, it should be followed up by getting the main players together and ensuring an integrated and comprehensive approach.
- Delivering quality at all stages of the visitor's experience (marketing and communication, welcome, orientation and information, accommodation, local produce and gastronomy, attractions and events, countryside recreation, environment and infrastructure); as well as requiring specific facilities and services, visitors expect the countryside to be a

pleasant place to relax, easy to reach and to get around with appropriate shops and other services and an attractive and clean environment. There is a rapid growth in demand for countryside outdoor recreation such as walking and cycling, a common phenomena not only across the whole of Europe. In turn, visitors should be encouraged to behave with respect towards the area.

- Installing effective quality management and monitoring processes (understanding visitors' needs and ensuring they are met, setting, checking and communicating standards, working with people in training workshops and improving quality, monitoring impact on the local economy, community and environment);

There should be a strong effort to manage tourism in the destination with a recognisable lead agency providing co-ordination for all main organisations whose activities influence tourism. The IQM process requires that a range of motivated people are involved (Denman et al., 1999). A key requirement is to have structures in place for the regular involvement of local tourism businesses enabling them to work together for the destination as a whole, especially in rural areas where co-ordination often is lacking. There should be a clear strategy in the local community, based on analysis and consultation which is widely recognised in the destination. There are often strong interrelationships between the needs of the visitor, the environment and the local people in a community. These should be recognised and priority should be given to actions which bring mutual benefit.

CASE STUDY: BREGENZERWALD, AUSTRIA

The case study in Bregenzerwald, Austria is the result of a project carried out for the European Commission (Tourism Directorate) under the leadership of Ecotrans network by the contractor The Tourism Company (UK) in association with Futour (Germany) and other partners in Austria (Denman et al., 1999) since 1998. The case studies were identified from leads provided by a range of European bodies and national organisations responsible for tourism in the states comprising the European Economic Area (European Commission, 1999). Approximately 100 leads were followed up, leading to the preparation of a long list of 38 destinations containing initial details of their activities relevant to integrated quality management. A final short list of 15 areas was chosen to reflect a wide spread of types of geographical locations and tourism initiatives. The case study in the Bregenzerwald is part of these chosen ones reflecting a wide spread of types of rural tourism regions.



Figure 2: Location of Vorarlberg, Austria

What was the primary motive for Austria to join this programme? Improving quality in rural tourist destinations is an essential requirement in satisfying tourists' needs, in enhancing the competitiveness and in ensuring sustainable tourism development. The case study in Bregenzerwald (1999-2002) fits perfectly in the final list of the European Commission. It is co-ordinated by the government of the State of Vorarlberg.

The Bregenzerwald area (Figure 2) is situated in the far west of Austria, next Lake Constance, and covers 580 km² with a population of just 30,000. It is a region of mountains and valleys, Alpine pastures and forests. Agriculture is dominant; with 40 % of employment in the farm sector and small food producing enterprises (Figure 3). Traditional milk and cheese production is prevalent in the area and shapes the lush, green landscape, with 42,500 tonnes of silage-free milk and 4,260 tonnes of mountain cheese ("Bergkaese") and Emmentaler cheese produced each year.



Figure 3: Bregenzerwald, Schroecken, alpine peasantry and tourism

Bregenzerwald has a well-established rural tourism sector with 15,000 beds accommodating 1.5 million visitors. 60% come in summer, mainly for walking, and 40 % in winter, for a mixture of cross-country and Alpine skiing. Many also come simply to enjoy an unspoilt rural area with beautiful

villages and traditional wooden architecture and excellent accommodation (Figure 4). Tourism is very important in the local economy, with around half the workforce employed in the service sector (Liechtenberger, 1984).

Since 1991 tourism has been stagnating; agriculture on ageing family farms is in decline, and there is an overriding sense of competition between small enterprises (Liechtenberger, 1978). It was decided that the only way forward was through a joint strategy between agriculture and tourism, driven by co-operation between young tourism entrepreneurs and young farmers. Based on this philosophy, the initiative "Natur und Leben (nature and life) Bregenzerwald" was established. The strategy is to build up the image of the area for tourism, agriculture and related rural products under a common identity of "nature and life" with the following objectives:

- To increase the use of local agricultural products, thereby strengthening the viability of farms;
- To make people aware of the critical role of the farmer as creator and custodian of the cultural and tourism landscape;
- To build networks between producers, processors and sellers for marketing, motivation and training;
- To encourage direct consumption of local produce, reducing the costs and pollution of transportation, and ensuring a fresh quality experience for all consumers including visitors;

In 1995 when Austria became a member of the EU the financial position of the small agricultural enterprises was weakened, but on the other hand brought access to funds of the EU (Anon. 1997). This underlined the need for the "Natur und Leben" initiative and enabled it to be more effective through well funded projects. New tourism guidelines are being elaborated for the Bregenzerwald area. Forty representatives have been working on this, and an exhibition has been shown in the local communities. Target markets have been clearly defined in Austria, Europe (Germany, Benelux, Italy) and overseas.

Although the strategy contains no specific quality charter, its aims are to improve the quality of life of local people as well as of services and products for visitors in order to maintain the high quality of landscape and nature. It builds on and conveys to visitors the philosophy and spirit of the local people, summed up in the regional proverb "honour the old and welcome the new, but to your native roots be true". Traditionally tourism was the responsibility of the Bregenzerwald Tourism Association founded in 1904. In 1997 a joint professional body "Tourismus Bregenzerwald" was established by bringing together all 22 communities of the region, doubling the budget and appointing two managers. This has considerably strengthened the ability to deliver quality.

This tourism structure works effectively in parallel with the development organisation “Regionalentwicklung Bregenzerwald” created under a programme which is responsible for new funding and training initiatives. A bottom-up approach has been adopted, keeping the local population very well informed. Two special newspapers have played an important role here. The new funding and professional approach of “Tourismus Bregenzerwald” has strengthened the quality of marketing and the materials used, including internet access via the Austrian information system (TIS), CD information and more effective direct mail.

Projected images of the Bregenzerwald area emphasise the fine scenery, the greenness, the warmth of the community and the high quality of local produce. Action has been taken to strengthen the product in reality to meet these images, developing joint products between tourism and agriculture to meet the strategic objectives of “Natur und Leben”.

A great deal of effort over three years has been focused on an integrated themed rural project the “Bregenzerwald Cheese Route”. This embraces all the elements of “Natur und Leben” and is based on strict quality criteria. It provides a unique selling proposition for the region linked to its established image, a range of events and places to visit, special products to buy and a greater profile for the restaurants of the region, based on cheese in the local gastronomy. Underpinning the viability of dairy farmers helps them to maintain the rich green landscape which is the main attraction for visitors in the area.

Members pay a fee to a marketing organisation which has generated a considerable amount of press coverage and organised numerous events such as cheese tasting, cheese markets, parties, special games for children involving cheese etc. There is an individual web site for the route, too (www.bregenzerwald.at). Local agricultural produce is promoted to visitors in a number of ways - regular culinary weeks with local products are held by restaurants and annual tasting and selling exhibitions are organised. There is a standardised sales point or boutique (“Bauernkasten”) for agricultural products placed in catering and accommodation establishments and a branded “Bauernfruehstueck” is available (farmer’s breakfast) at accommodation establishments using local agricultural products.

Joint training workshops between tourism enterprises and food producers have fostered a greater understanding of the needs of both types of enterprises and of their clients. Courses include practical marketing and management skills as well as catering including cooking with cheese. For the cheese route project quality criteria have been



Figure 4: Bregenzerwald, Schwarzenberg, old inn “Hirschen”

worked out within the individual branches. The quality criteria having been identified include offering a minimum of five cheese specialities, development of special menus involving cheese, naming the individual producers on the menus, and participating in special training both for chefs and waiters.

Participants who meet the specified criteria are awarded the “Cheese Route” label. A further incentive which strengthens inter-sector recognition is the innovation prize for agriculture awarded by the association of young chefs. Initiatives have concentrated on improvements in enterprise performance to increase the level of local income, generate employment and support the maintenance of the landscape. Two initiatives help tourism enterprises to be environmentally sensitive:

- “Oeko-log” is a manual developed by a team of hotel managers full of practical hints for energy saving and waste prevention etc. and including a computer-based energy control system.
- “Oekoprofit” is a programme of training workshops and advice, based on the manual leading to better ecological practice and economic benefits for a group of enterprises.

These award winning schemes have provided a foundation for the application of the Austrian eco-label in the area.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

An important result is that the quality of tourism in the area has constantly been improved and creates a sustainable income in comparison with most rural destinations in Austria. There has been an innovative input for rural local produce. The range of cheese types has risen from six up to thirty as a result of the cheese route and many new cheese dishes have been created. Turnover in dairy shops increased by over 20 % in the first year, and they have been able to achieve far higher prices by selling directly to visitors. In 1999 over 150 cheese events were held, attracting some 90,000 visitors. These results were successfully presented at the

world exhibition EXPO 2000 in Hannover (Maetzler, 2000).

The Bregenzerwald area has demonstrated the positive partnership that can be formed between tourism, agriculture and local food production linked to ecological principles. The new professional tourism structure working in parallel with the development agency creates a sound basis for the future. Working together and taking small steady steps towards quality has proved to be right for this area. Success has come through a bottom-up networking approach with regular meetings and training workshops supported by enthusiastic professionals.

CONCLUSION

Integrated quality management (IQM) should be understood as an appropriate strategy to improve the quality of the development of sustainable tourism in rural and nature-based destinations by increasing both supply and demand satisfaction. Tourism and recreation go together and both depend on the quality of the natural and cultural environment for their success. One key success factor proved by a case study in the Bregenzerwald area in Austria is to create a better and authentic image of the destination itself. Therefore it is essential to support innovative management and marketing strategies. The long-term success of a destination in terms of the satisfaction of the tourist has an important impact on the tourist's willingness to come again. Furthermore, IQM has positive side-effects on the tourism professionals, the local population and the environment.

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