

# Financing of nature protection through nature-based tourism – the case of the European Alps

**Susanne Gessner**, HSR University of Applied Sciences Rapperswil, Switzerland, susanne.gessner@hsr.ch;  
**Dominik Siegrist**, HSR University of Applied Sciences Rapperswil, Switzerland

## Introduction

The European Alps constitute one of the world's most intensive tourism regions. Alpine tourism is strongly anchored within the alpine societies and of high economic importance. At the same time the Alps comprise a variety of great and very sensitive natural resources (e.g. great mountain landscapes, old cultural landscapes, sensitive flora and fauna). Those natural values build the basis for a predominant part of the alpine touristic product, which consists for a large share of nature sports and nature tourism offers. As those resources are increasingly being destroyed on behalf of building new touristic and other infrastructure, there is need to make alpine tourism more sustainable in order to secure its basic resources (Hammer & Siegrist 2008).

In this context 'nature-based tourism' becomes of increasing importance within the alpine space. Nature-based tourism is a form of sustainable tourism related to nature, which means a responsible stay in natural areas and cultural landscapes close to nature. Visitors are enabled to experience nature and culture in an active way and by using all senses. Nature and landscape as well as the social circumstances are respected, sustainably protected and financed, and a contribution to regional added value is made. The organization and realization of nature-based tourism is developed out of the regional requirements (Siegrist & Gessner 2012).

As sound and attractive nature and landscape build the basis for nature-based tourism in the alpine regions, nature-based tourism itself should contribute to the protection of the natural values. Next to a contribution by means of creating ecologically sound touristic offers and sensitization, there is additionally a need for a direct contribution in a financial way.

Worldwide, various mechanisms exist of how tourism in general and nature-based tourism in particular can contribute to finance nature and landscape protection. This includes entry and usage fees, fees or concessions for tourism services, various taxes as well as voluntary contributions (see figure 1). The financial contribution for these mechanisms comes from either various touristic stakeholders like tour operators or destinations, or from guests themselves, and goes either directly to touristic regions or protected areas, or to a central pool (mostly the government or a protected area organization) in order to be – sometimes only partly – further allocated. (Dickhut 2009, Kuenzi & McNeely 2008, WWF 2009)

## Methods

In the context of our research about nature-based tourism in the Alps, one core issue is the financing of nature protection by nature-based tourism. Next to the analysis of literature and documents, a series of guideline-based interviews with

various experts of nature-based tourism and nature protection in the alpine space are carried out. Central element of the research is an alpine wide online-survey. It examines, next to other aspects, the importance of nature-based tourism to play an active role in the financing of nature protection, and the evaluation of various financing mechanisms in the alpine context.

## Results

The examination of the financing mechanisms and their applicability within the Alps confirms that such financing mechanisms still receive little attention in the touristic practice. The protection of nature as a public good without a market price is still mainly financed by governmental institutions as well as private non-touristic organizations. The contribution of tourism itself to the financing of nature protection is very small. Whereas most case studies are situated in development countries in Africa and Asia and are strongly linked to protected areas, only few case studies exist regarding financial contribution of tourism within the alpine space and even central Europe (e.g. a nature tax in the black forest in Germany or the cultivation of a vineyard in the Swiss Valais by an incorporation which is mainly financed and actively supported by guests (Bieling 2009, WWF 2009).

The evaluation of the financing mechanisms and case studies allows several conclusions concerning the requirements towards the financing of nature protection by nature-based tourism (see figure 1):

- The applicability of the mechanisms in the Alps depends on a broad range of framework conditions, which are regionally different. Factors like the social development, the specific political situation and the significance of the various stakeholders in a certain region might promote or hinder the application of a financing instrument.
- Challenges might also be the lack of public and private funds, legal and institutional obstacles or the opposition against additional fees for nature which is seen as a public good and is in some opinion already paid for by tax payers.
- In order to apply a mechanism, also risks should be considered; for example the government might recall its funding if alternative funding arises, or regions might feel more pressured of competition by elevated fees.
- Success factors might be the integration of relevant stakeholders, the characteristics of fees (amount, way of imposition, application of funds, control mechanisms) and the combination of established and new funds.

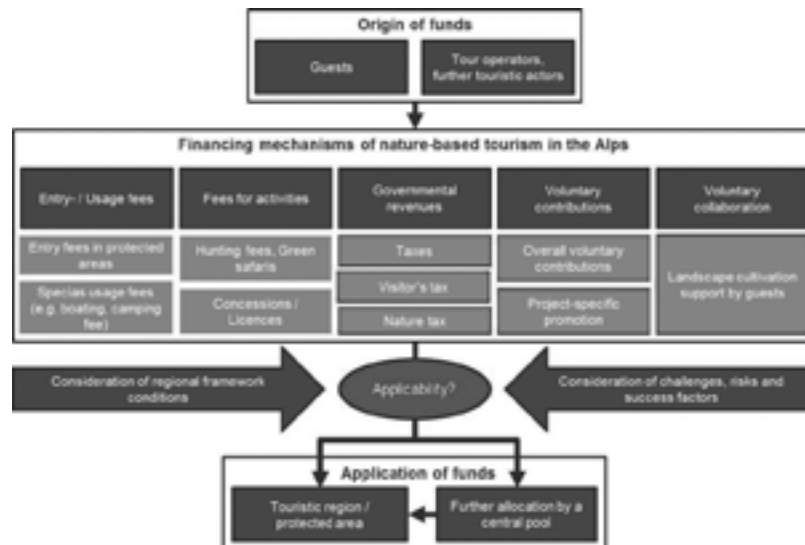


Figure 1. Financial contribution mechanisms of nature-based tourism to nature protection in the Alps (most relevant mechanisms are framed in red); Source: own illustration

According to these requirements and the special framework conditions in the Alps, certain mechanisms are supposed to be of special relevance: These are governmental revenues like hotel or visitors' taxes, voluntary contributions of tour operators or guests for financing natural areas or concrete projects, as well as the voluntary collaboration of guests in concrete nature protection projects as an indirect contribution. Entrance or usage fees for natural goods might have to deal with large acceptance issues.

First results of the online-survey show that a strong majority of the requested stakeholders (fully) approves the question that nature-based tourism should make a financial contribution to the protection of nature and landscape. Considering the various mechanisms, governmental revenues, charges for non-sustainable offers or commercial activities of protected areas are rated most appropriate for the alpine space. However, the role of these findings regarding adequate financing mechanisms in the alpine space considering its specific framework conditions has to be analysed.

## Conclusion

The research shows that there are various options for a direct financial contribution of nature-based tourism to na-

ture protection in the Alps. Yet they still receive little attention and face some challenges that mainly arise from particular political and institutional circumstances and the special tradition of tourism in the alpine context. In order to get a better understanding of the applicability of the various financing options, more detailed research is needed to bring together the worldwide experiences, to analyse them regarding framework conditions, strengths/weaknesses, success factors and the applicability to the alpine regions. Therefore, the various mechanisms might also be discussed and tested by means of selected pilot regions within the Alps. Based on this research, the focus should be on increased sensitization of actors involved and the illustration of concrete possibilities for actions.

## Acknowledgments

The authors wish to kindly thank the Bristol Foundation for providing funding for the project 'NaTourCert'. We further want to thank the numerous stakeholders and experts who support us with their expertise within the project.

Bieling, C. (2009). Landschaftserhaltung durch Tourismus – Chance oder Utopie? *Natur und Landschaft* 84/8: 361–365.  
 Buckley, R. (2009). *Ecotourism. Principles and practices*. Oxfordshire.  
 Dickhut, H. (2009). Tourismus und Schutz der Biodiversität – Möglichkeiten von Reiseveranstaltern zur freiwilligen Finanzierung von Schutzgebieten in Entwicklungsländern. In: Engels, Barbara (Hg.). *Nachhaltiger und naturverträglicher Tourismus. Naturschutz und Biologische Vielfalt* 79, S. 213–228.  
 Hammer, T. & Siegrist, D. (2008). Protected Areas in the Alps – The Success Factors of Sustainable Tourism and the Challenge for Regional Policy. In: *GAIA* 17/S1 (2008): 152–160.

Kuenzi, Caroline; McNeely, Jeff (2008). Nature-based tourism. In: Renn, Ortwin; Walker, Katherine D. (Hg.). *Global risk governance. Concept and practice using the IRGC framework*. Chapter 8  
 WWF (2009). *Guide to conservation finance. Sustainable financing for the planet*. Washington  
 Siegrist, D. & Gessner, S. (2012). Quality standards for nature-based tourism in alpine destinations. *Advances in Destination Management at the University of St-Gall*, June 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup>, 2012 (forthcoming).