

Sustainable tourism and large protected areas – analysis models and success criteria of a sustainable tourism management using the example of the Alps

Dominik Siegrist

HSR University of applied sciences, Rapperswil, Switzerland
dominik.siegrist@hsr.ch

Abstract: Within the framework of a sustainable regional development, protected area tourism acquires increasing significance. This applies particularly to peripheral regions, that possess no outlook for economic development. With this background, the question of success criteria for a sustainable tourist management in protected regions was investigated. The example of Austrian nature parks demonstrates, that inadequate cooperation at local level can be an important source of failure. At the same time, a suitable financial framework for successful protected area tourism is especially important.

Key words: Recreational management of large protected areas, management of ecotourism, analysis of best practice, sustainable regional development, Alpine convention

Introduction

Protected area tourism has long been a tradition in the Alpine countries. The founding of the first alpine national parks (1914 Engadine/Switzerland, 1922 Gran Paradiso/Italy, 1935 Stelvio/Italy), goes back to the beginning of the last century. At the moment (February 2004), in the Alps there is a total of 14 national parks with an area of 811'238 hectares with almost 10 million of visitors annually (Job et al. 2003, p. 24). Alongside these, further large area protected regions exist, including numerous nature parks and regional nature parks, as well as an increasing number of UNESCO biosphere reservations and World Heritage Sites. In some alpine countries, the creation of new large area protected regions is planned for the coming years (Siegrist 2002).

The ideals of classical nature protection were foremost at the start of protected area development in the alpine regions. Recently though, protected area tourism has gained increasing importance. With the further development of some protected area categories, for example nature parks, the economic effects due to tourism are attracting considerable attention. In protected area regions, a sustainable tourism matched to the special conditions, is regarded today as a necessary part of a matching regional development. This applies particularly to alpine peripheral regions, that often have no other perspective for economic development. (Mose & Weixlbaumer 2003). Thus the question arises as to the extent of trading-activity and -chances, but also about the limits to the ecotouristic use of protected area regions in the alps. In this connection, the sustainable tourist management in protected area regions will form a central challenge. Thus, beyond

those responsible for parks, others – locally involved – are addressed here, especially tourism. (Hammer 2003).

Objects and methods

The aim of our investigation was primarily to impart the main success- and failure-criteria of sustainable tourist management in the Alps. Local participants from tourism and the parks as well as others responsible at a higher level, would thus be supported in their striving for a sustainable management of the protected areas and their regions.

The following methods are used, among others, during the empirical investigation:

- Expert interviews with representatives from alpine park- and tourism-management.
- Written questioning from those responsible for tourism and protected areas.
- Delphi-analysis with representatives from selected protected area regions.

Monitoring of the practical effects resulting from sustainable development strategies is a complex problem. Without specific knowledge concerning the results of applying the success criteria, it is hardly possible, from a scientific and practical point of view, to obtain a final decision. At the practical level, the problem of measuring the ecological, social and economic effects of a sustainable tourist management has not been solved so far (Baumgartner in press, Arnberger et al. 2004).

Two particular questions arise on the evaluation of touristic sustainability:

1. How should general standards for sustainability in tourism - acceptable to politics and society – be established and the appropriate criteria and threshold values developed?
2. With which indicators should processes and results in the framework of as sustainable tourist development be measured and/or evaluated? Which qualitative or quantitative data-bases are needed here and how can they be made available?

Research has, over the years, made a series of suggestions for the monitoring of tourist sustainability. Those suggestions range from classical top-down methods right through to a joint judgment of sustainability by involving local participants. Where the Alps are concerned, these questions are presently under discussion in the framework of the Alpine convention. It is however open, if and how suitable monitoring method for alpine tourist sustainability can be realized.¹

Results

Nature park tourism in Austria

The existing lack of cooperation between different local participants can be regarded as fundamental factor in the failure of tourism and regional management. (Baumgartner & Röhrer 1998). This is confirmed through failure-source ranking by those locally responsible for nature parks and tourism in Austria (Figure 1).

Figure 2 will show in detail some chosen aspects of the cooperation between tourism and nature parks, based on the example of Austrian nature parks. The

base is related to expert interviews carried out in summer 2003, as well as written questionnaires of key personnel from Austrian nature parks. 14 people representing tourism and 17 people from 17 nature parks in 7 counties were questioned. A number of smaller nature parks, less relevant as regards tourism, took part in the questioning.

Cooperation between tourism and nature parks

When ranking local tourism and nature park protagonists, cooperation was best with communities and regional management, but worst with train- and bus-services. The reciprocal cooperation with the other partner (nature park or tourism) follows in second place after communities/regional management. In third place follows cooperation with Innkeepers, Hotel directors and excursion centres as well as that with farmers. Notable differences occur, between those responsible for tourism and nature parks, regarding quality assessment of reciprocal cooperation with the other partner. This cooperation gained higher estimation from tourism than from the nature parks. Also the cooperation with Innkeepers, Hotel directors and excursion centres was esteemed higher from those in tourism compared with those in nature parks. Just the opposite was the case concerning farmers and with train- and bus-services, where the cooperation with nature park protagonists was regarded as better.

We requested those involved with tourism and nature parks to enter their current and future preferences in a matrix. Accordingly, nature park protagonists showed, in their own estimation of the future development of nature park tourism, a definite

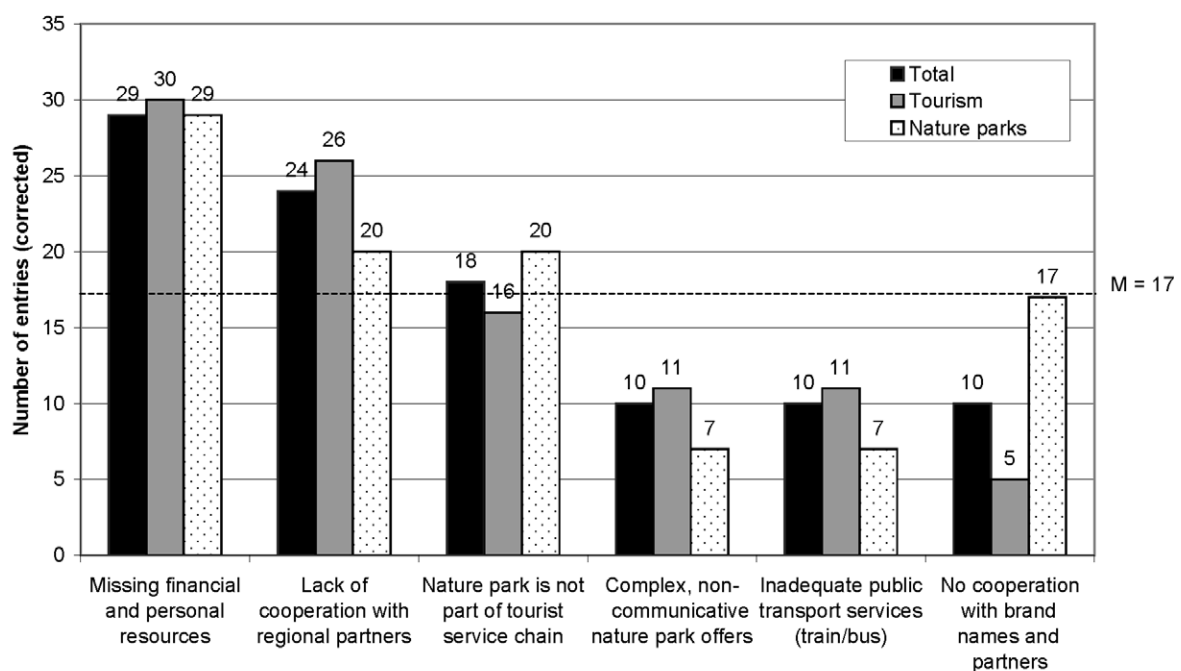


Figure 1. Sources of failure in nature park tourism.

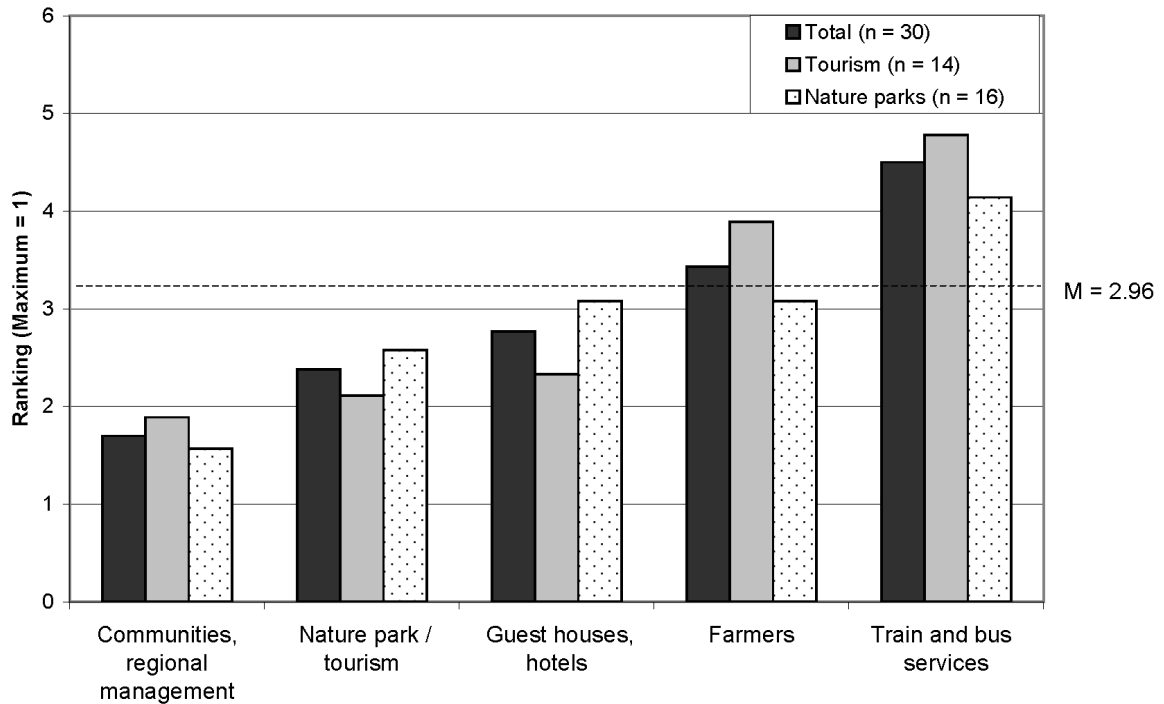


Figure 2. Participants and cooperation in nature park tourism: with which participants does cooperation work best?

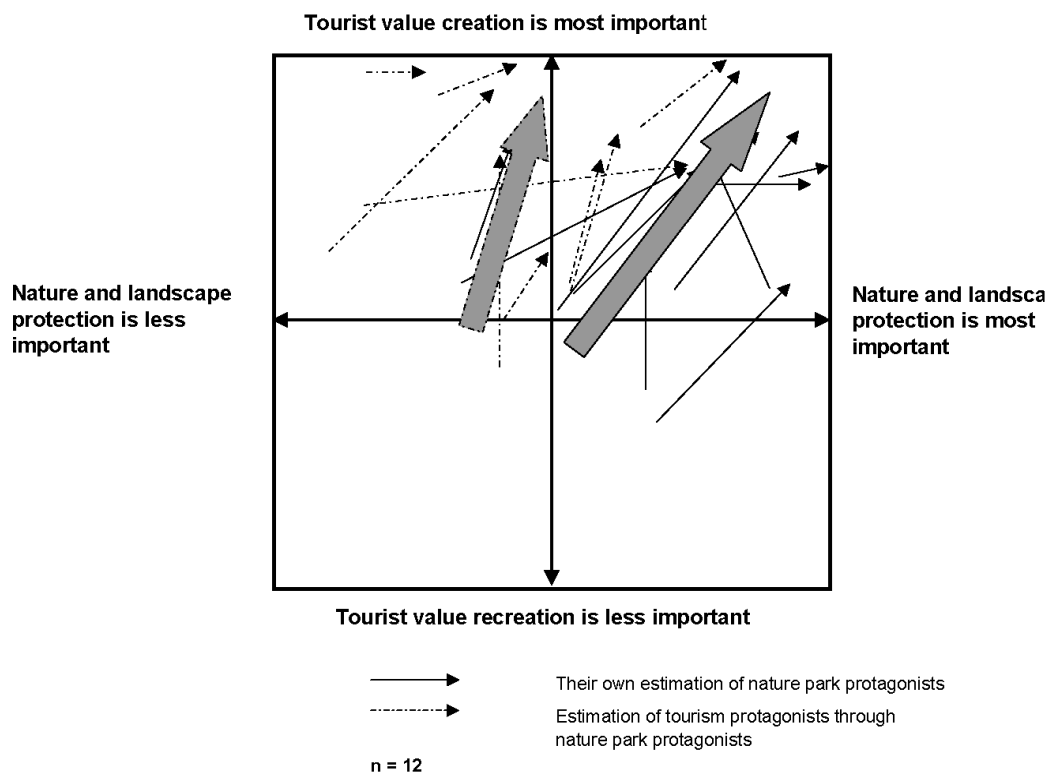


Figure 3. Current state and future development of nature park tourism.

tendency towards an interplay of more nature and landscape protection and enhanced touristic value creation. Nature park protagonists assume misguidedly, that tourist protagonists on the contrary,

show a strong tendency to strive after more touristic value creation. Preferences toward more nature and landscape protection are assumed to be lower with tourism supporters (Figure 3).

Tourism protagonists also showed, in their own estimation of the future development of nature park tourism, a clear preference towards an interplay of more nature and landscape protection with more touristic value creation. They suppose, misguidedly, that those involved with nature parks on the contrary, show a strong tendency to more nature- and landscape-protection, with a reduced preference for further touristic value creation.

The biggest differences in these reciprocal estimations, lay in the fact that the nature park protagonists weigh the touristic value creation as such, as a definitely stronger objective than tourist supporters themselves assume. Conversely, tourist protagonists prefer nature and landscape protection considerably more than nature park supporters credit them with.

Points of commonality and areas of cooperation

Those involved with tourism regard the most important link between nature parks and tourism as the collective involvement in financial advancement programs. Conversely, the nature park protagonists put the collective marketing for nature park tourism in the foreground. Those responsible for tourism also place collective marketing, for the future, in the foreground (Figure 4). The office community between nature parks and tourism, forming an important link today will however, lose significance in future for those involved with tourism, in favour of a collective business management. Conversely, nature park protagonists will tend to side more in future with the office community.

Those involved in tourism regard the most important field of cooperation with the nature parks as that of guestcare/information (Figure 5). In contrast, for nature park protagonists, the area of cooperation of greater significance is developing offers/advertising. Other fields of cooperation like tourism concept development, footpath upkeep/visitor management or the development of touristic quality were rated as much less important. Considerable differences in the interpretation between the two factions exist regarding tourism concept development and footpath upkeep/visitor management. Those involved with tourism regard this field of cooperation highly. Nature park protagonists however, prefer the field of environmental awareness/sensibility.

Success criteria and framework conditions

The protagonists of tourism note that by far the most important success criteria of nature park tourism are a consistently marketing strategy plus the recreation-guide to the nature park offerings. For those responsible involved with nature parks is the consideration of regional strengths the most significant success factor of nature park tourism in contrast, followed by the adventure guided offerings of nature parks (Figure 6).

Further notable success criteria were a child/family-friendly ambient as well as current information on nature, culture and the region. Reduced rates for nature park attractions and limited recreation zones were not seen as important success factors. Both tourism and nature park protagonists noted

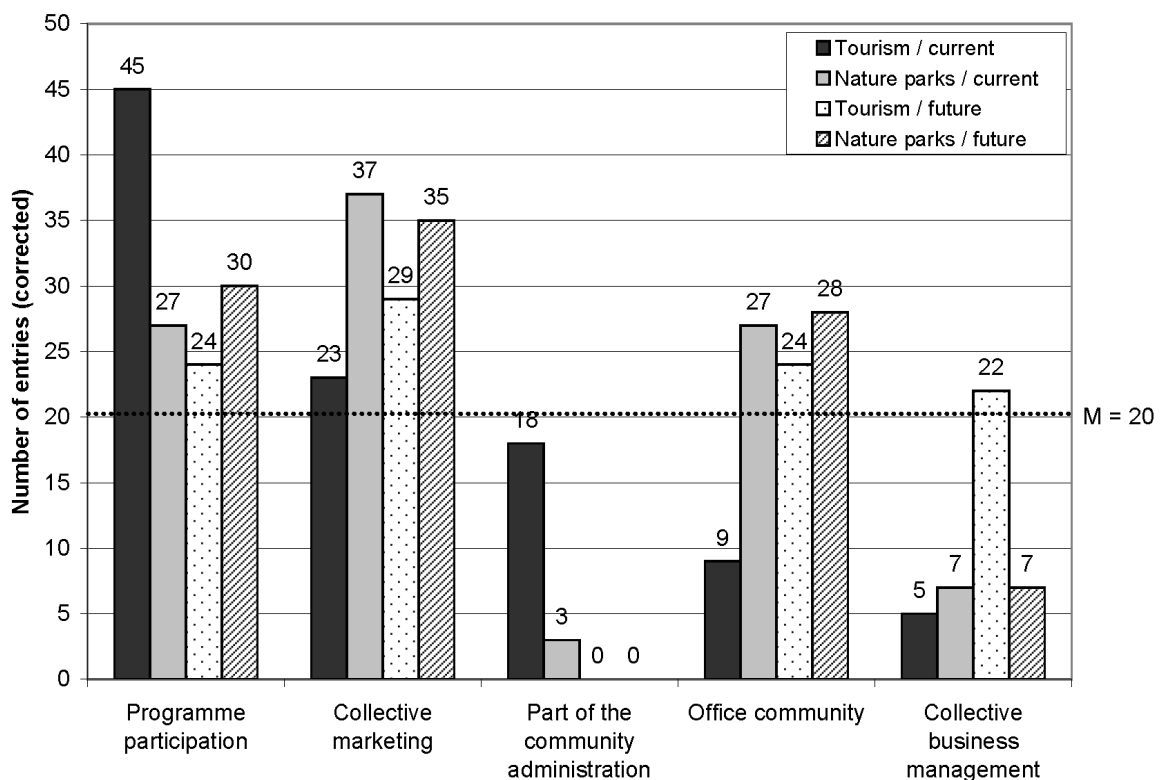


Figure 4. Important links between nature parks and tourism.

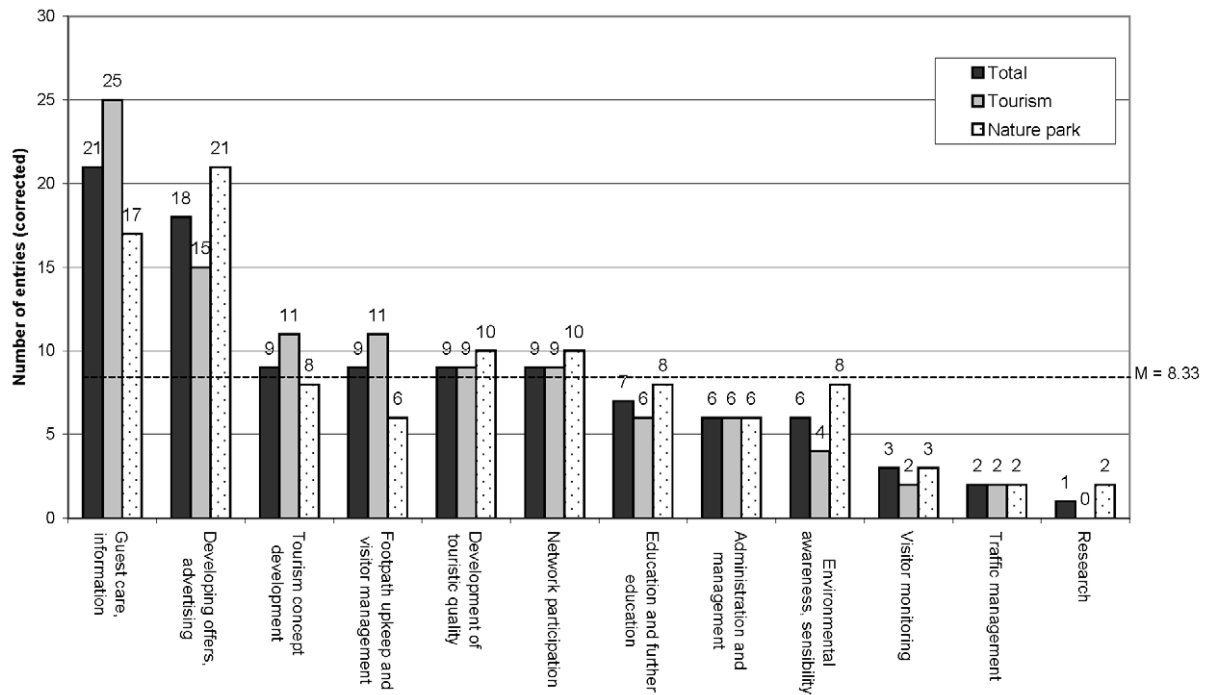


Figure 5. Main fields of cooperation between tourism and nature parks.

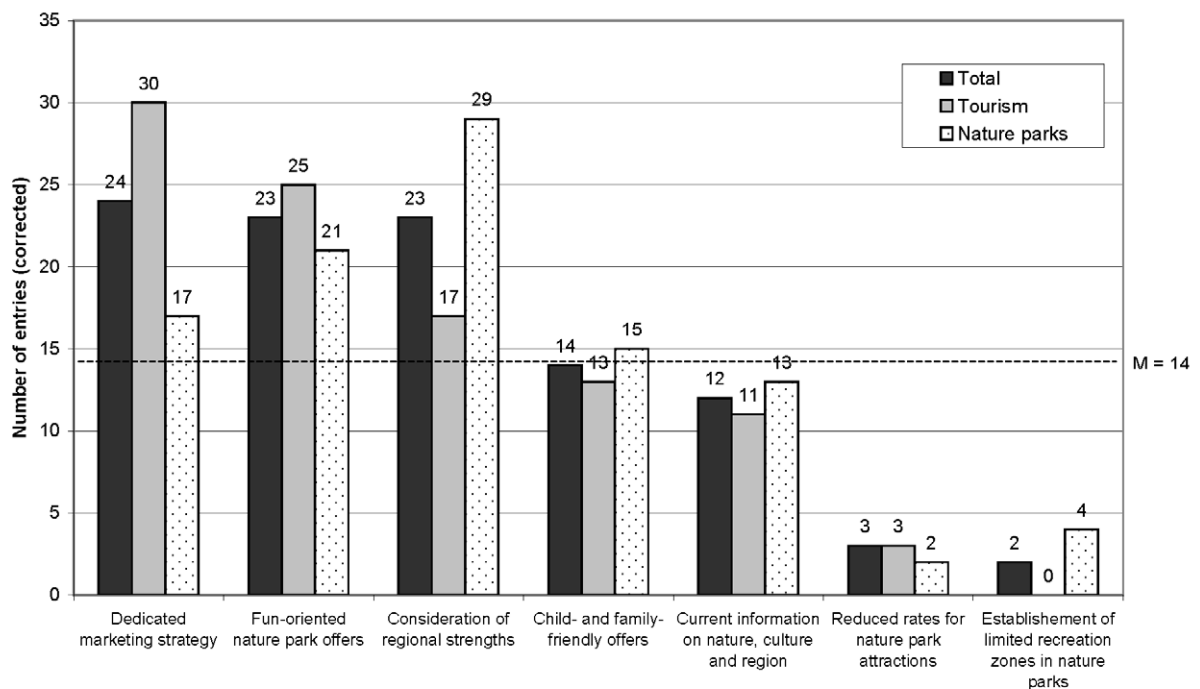


Figure 6. Success factors of nature park tourism.

the major failure criterion of nature park tourism – apart from the lack of local cooperation already mentioned, lay overwhelmingly in missing financial and personal resources.

The possibilities and chances, realizeable in the framework of increased cooperation between tourism and nature parks, depend strongly on institutional framework conditions. Most nature park protagonists

and the majority of those involved with tourism would favour better financial framework conditions for nature park tourism (Figure 7). However this does not imply a lack of interest in the ecotourism market, but a clear interest in financial advancement through public authorities. In addition, particularly protagonists of tourism would wish for an increased acceptance for innovation by residents in nature park regions.

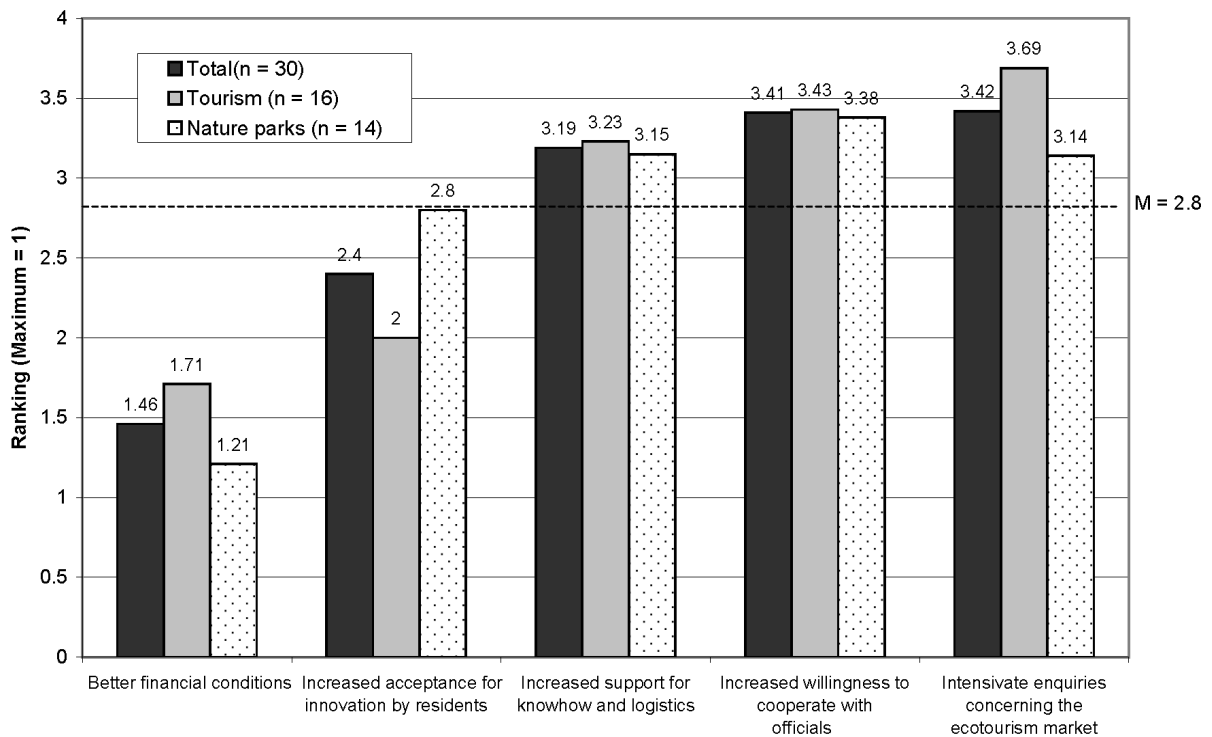


Figure 7. Desired framework for nature park tourism.

Discussion

Ecotourism acquires, through its specific regional features, a differing importance depending on the class of protected area. Nature park tourism acquires a central function for regional development in the Austrian nature parks; from the viewpoint of local participants it clearly ranks above the demands of nature and landscape protection. This points, on the one hand, to the importance of large protected regions as instrumental in regional development. On the other hand, this also points directly to the problem complex of nature and landscape protection in relation to nature parks. (Verband... 2003).

The aims of nature park tourism are caught in the strained matrix between touristic value creation and nature and landscape protection. In their self-esteem, nature park protagonists and those engaged in tourism, lie quite near each other. In contrast, they lie in their mutual misguidedness wide apart. This discrepancy underlines the need for better communications, a requirement still necessary to correct the mutually wrong impressions between the parties. From these results, a collective working potential from nature parks and tourism can be derived for a sustainable regional development.

Important links between nature parks and tourism lie, from the viewpoint of local participants, in collective marketing. More precisely in coordinated forms of offer-development, distribution and information about nature park tourist offers. This could be supported through institutionalised forms of cooperation (office communities, collective business

management) and secured financially through the common participation in programs.

The agreement between local protagonists of tourism and nature parks, concerning the success criteria of nature park tourism, would appear to be strongest where a collective contribution to regional value creation is expected. This agreement lies particularly in collective marketing strategies when developing experience-oriented nature park offers, but allowing for the particular regional strengths. In order that the extent of trading-activity and -chances outlined can be fully utilized, suitable institutional frameworks are needed. Precisely that need for better financial framework conditions – expressed by those locally responsible for tourism and nature parks – points to an existing deficit.

Conclusion

Should important success criteria be taken into account, broad protected area regions could represent a considerable tourist factor. In this function they can fulfill a notable contribution to a sustainable development in fringe areas with poor infrastructure. However, one must not expect an economic wonder from ecotourism, as the capacity of sensitive regions is limited. If one does not accept the reckless destruction of nature and landscapes, this special form of tourism must always exist in certain quantitative limits. (Leuthold 2001).

The professional tourist and protected area management in park regions constitutes an important success factor. An important failure criteria occurs

through insufficient cooperation, especially between tourism and nature parks. Often a sizeable potential exists, as with the improvement of regional operations, as shown by the example of the Austrian nature parks. The coordinated interplay of various planning and touristic management methods also belongs there.

Together with the local success and failure criteria, it should not be forgotten that appropriate institutional and financial framework conditions form important factors for a sustainable protected area tourism. Last but not least, a sustainable regional management needs a suitable form of sustainability monitoring. Only so can the results of the various development strategies with respect to sustainability be obtained – and from these the conclusions for future strategies can be derived.

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¹ <http://www.abis.int>