

Whatsalp – A hiking study on protected area tourism across the Alps

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The “whatsalp Vienna – Nice 2017” project

How has the image of the Alps changed over the decades? What traces are left behind in the landscape by people and natural events? Between June and September 2017, a group of Alpine experts hiked from Vienna to Nice under the name “whatsalp”. Along their journey on foot, they examined the current state of and changes in Alpine regions, documented developments across the landscape and in society, and discussed future scenarios with local actors (Siegrist, Baumgartner, Spiess 2017). An important aim of whatsalp was to compare the present situation with that of 1992. At that time, several group members of the 2017 project had undertaken a similar walk, under the name “TransALPedes”, along approximately the same route (Siegrist et al. 1993). In this paper we focus on the situation of protected area tourism in great protected areas of the Alps.

Investigated large protected area and research question

Large protected areas are predominantly located close to nature, and sometimes interspersed with pockets of land featuring new forms of wilderness. We visited twenty-five parks and spoke to their managers, who instructed us in how to take care when traversing the Alpine landscape (see fig. 1). As hikers, we were invited to explore great protected areas of the categories national park, nature park, wilderness area, UNESCO biosphere reserve and UNESCO world heritage area. We held discussions with their representatives.

The following research questions were at the center:

- What are the most important current challenges of the large protected area?
- What are the objectives of large protected areas in the area of protected area tourism?
- How is the cooperation with local and regional tourism?
- What problems and what future prospects exist and how is this dealt with?

Protected area tourism means a close-to-nature form of tourism, which essentially takes place in the perimeter of the large protected area and takes into account the criteria of nature-based tourism (Siegrist, Ketterer Bonnelame 2017).

Results

First of all, it should be noted that the investigated large protected areas sometimes differ greatly in their basic as well as their touristic character. The spectrum ranges from the hardly managed nature park in Italy, to the large UNESCO World Heritage site in the Dolomites, and to the national park with its strictly protected core zone. Some large protected areas are directly confronted with the consequences of mass tourism (e.g. ski resorts, well-known natural attractions), while others only have extensive tourism. Since 1992 there were founded a relevant number of new large protected areas in the Alps.

However, the investigated large protected areas have some key challenges in common such as declining financial support from the state, the difficult acceptance of nature conservation among the local population and the growing demands of the leisure society in the context of

changing trends. Depending on the country, however, these challenges vary: While e.g. the national parks in Austria and the large protected areas in Switzerland continue to have sufficient financial resources, it is more difficult for nature parks in Austria and the large protected areas in France and Italy.

In the field of nature-based tourism, the goals set by the large protected areas since 1992 are becoming more important, but are still very different. They range from the explicit exclusion of tourism such as in the wilderness area of Dürrenstein to active tourism strategies including product development and marketing as in the Austrian and French nature parks. National parks are usually less involved in tourism and delegate this field of action to others, partly organizations especially created for this purpose or to the regional tourism associations. In contrast, most nature parks actively set goals in nature-based tourism.

The cooperation between the individual large protected areas and tourism is very different. It ranges from joint information and management offices to strictly separate structures. In particular national parks, which focus on conservation and non-development targets, tend to seek the distance to tourism. For example, in the case of the national parks visited, tourism is by no means located in protected area management. However, we note that the relevance of tourism has increased in all large protected areas including the national parks visited in recent years.

For the future, most of the investigated large protected areas are confronted with manifold problems. Changing social attitudes and new leisure trends are the most important causes for this. Thus, the social trend towards nature leads to a large popularity of the large protected areas among tourists. At the same time, the boom in outdoor sports is causing increasing problems. These include impacts on nature by to some extent new leisure activities as well as conflicts between the individual activities.

In order to tackle these problems, large protected areas develop a variety of strategies and solutions regardless of their category. These include sensitization and information for visitors, a good development of offers and visitor guidance with measures to influence recreational activities in terms of their spatial, temporal and quantitative distribution and their behaviour (Arnberger 2013).

Discussion

An alpine crossing on foot as a traveling research is certainly an unconventional research method. Nevertheless, this has a long tradition in geography and landscape planning (Siegrist, Baumgartner, Spiess 2017). Due to the slowness of the movement in the landscape, many observations can be made even off the beaten track, which are not possible with only internet and literature research. The talks and discussions with the responsible persons belong to the field of qualitative methods of participatory observation. In addition written survey with quantitative evaluation carried out across the large protected areas, it is thus possible to deal more specifically with the locally resulting questions. By visiting large protected areas of different countries and categories a general overview was possible, and also a comparison with the results of the crossing in 1992. Limits of the chosen approach lie in the lack of representativeness of the statements, since not all large alpine protected areas could be covered and not everywhere the same topics were in the focus due to the situation-related approach. All in all, the qualitative approach of several months of research on foot has proved very successful and delivered rich results.

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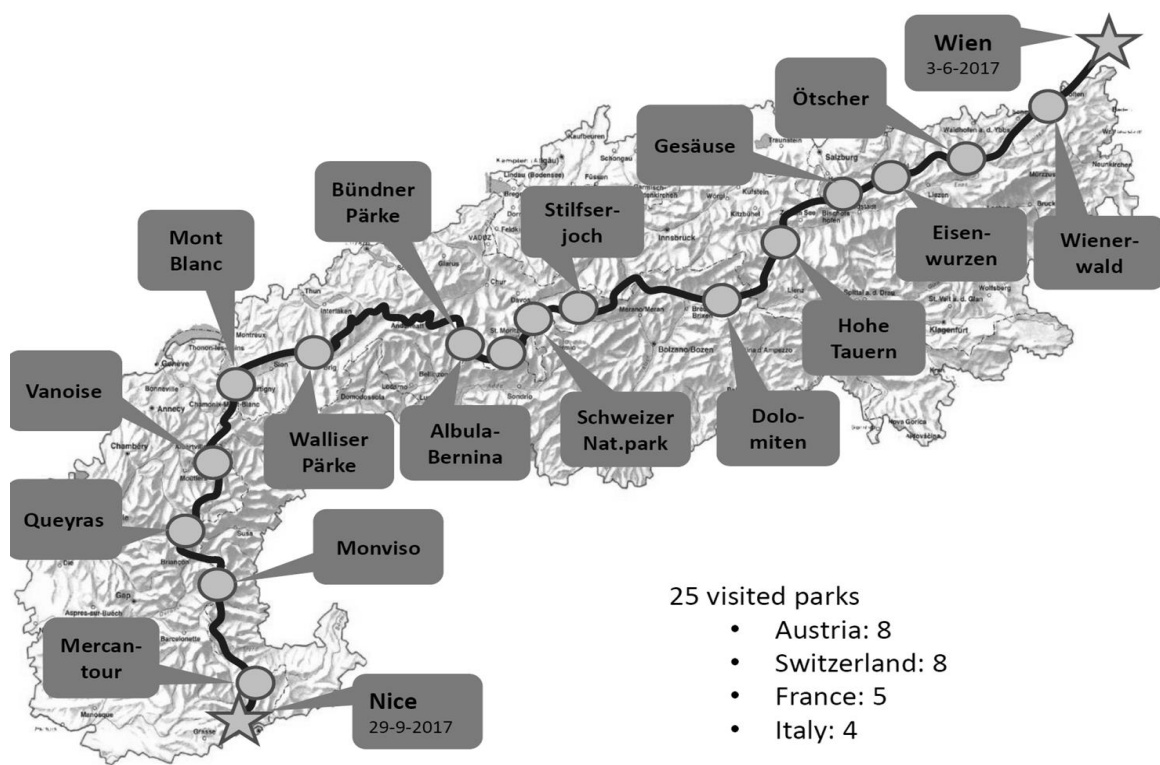


Figure 1: Alpine parks visited by whatsalp