

# Optimizing the quality of experience-oriented nature-based tourism offers: the new evaluation tool “Experience Compass”

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**Abstract** — In the past few years in Switzerland nature-based tourism has been showing a positive and fresh dynamic. New providers and co-operations enter the market with their products. But very often the new initiatives state problems with the quality of their products and are alone not able to design the products in a way that attracts the attention of a broad audience. An authentic design of the offers can contribute significantly to make them more attractive and visible and therefore stimulate the demand on the tourist market. The article here presented deals with the in-depth analysis of potentials regarding the improvement of the quality of experience-oriented nature-based tourism offers. Based on the results of an expert survey the “Experience Compass”, an evaluation tool of experience quality in nature-based tourism, has been developed and verified by means of case studies. With the new tool providers and other actors are enabled to evaluate and improve experience quality of offers in nature-based tourism.

**Index Terms** — Nature-based tourism, experience quality, offer development, evaluation tool, expert survey.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The quality of experience forms an important basis for the success of nature-based tourism [5]. However, despite of an existing wide range of original natural, cultural and landscape values (“first nature”) the derived tourist offers (“second nature”) are not sufficient in terms of experience quality. Many of the nature-based products are missing a specific experience quality. Reasons for this phenomenon are a lack of the necessary knowledge on the side of the providers on one hand and a lack of financial resources on the other. The tourist infrastructure, which is in many cases not appropriate anymore, together with the measures for visitor guidance and management pose a problem. For structural modernization beyond the necessary often the financial means are missing [21].

It has been pointed out on various occasions that experiences are an integral part of

post-modern recreational activities [17], [18], as well as specifically for nature-based tourism [13]. Solely beautiful landscapes are not enough to generate experience-oriented tourist offers [9], [14], [20]. This also refers to nature-based tourism and its principle. It is characteristic for this kind of experience offers that they are set in natural or semi-natural cultural landscapes. Thus the natural and cultural values of the setting form the main basis and must not be derogated in their significance and integrity. Based on these primary values the experience offers shall convey a high degree of authenticity and enable the visitors to actively experience the natural and cultural attractions with all their senses. Offers shall promote the locomotion through ones own strength, improve regional value added and at the same time be considerate of sensitive areas, environment and climate.

The result of this survey is the “Experience Compass”, a tool which supports the evalua-

tion and optimization of experience quality in nature-based tourism. This tool has been developed based on an expert survey and tested by means of different case studies [22]. Core element of the survey has been a series of qualitative semi-structured interviews, which have been conducted with 22 providers of nature-based tourism offers in Switzerland that have been selected according to specific criteria. The survey served to identify specific assessment criteria for experience quality in nature-based tourism and to document good practice examples. The new tool shall enable the providers and other involved actors to evaluate the experience quality on their own by means of an easy to use Excel application.

## 2 RESULTS

The Experience Compass is based upon experience sectors, experience dimensions and the assigned assessment criteria (see fig. 1). The 5 experience sectors are the cornerstones of the assessment system; promising offers should comprise several or all of these sectors. The 17 experience dimensions are understood as different specifications of the experience sectors, which are relevant regarding the evaluation of the offer. The 41 assessment criteria are assigned to the expe-

rience dimensions and represent the actual tool for the evaluation within the Experience Compass (see fig. 2).

### *Experience sector “Attractive and intact landscape” (3 experience dimensions, 10 criteria)*

The presence of attractive and intact landscapes forms the basis for offers in nature-based tourism. Attractive landscapes are characterized by variations of nature and culture; a rich diversity and contrast in terms of natural and cultural elements on a small scale is of great importance. A sustainable nature and landscape management (e.g., measures for protection, maintenance, and valorization of the landscape) shall assure the preservation of the inherent natural beauty [12], [15].

### *Experience sector “Authenticity and peculiarity” (4 experience dimensions, 13 criteria)*

Authentic offers [20] are characterized by a strong reference to the natural, cultural and landscape values as well as to the current conditions of a location or a region. They emphasize the distinctiveness and peculiarity of a location or a region [10]. Authentic offers aim at a close contact with the local population and claim to permeate societal façades and coulisses and show the real social conditions of the visited places. The offer includes elements very peculiar for the location or the region. This also includes production of and marketing for regional products and services.

### *Experience sector “Holistic experience” (3 experience dimensions, 6 criteria)*

In order to allow for intensive and holistic experiences offers should provide “breathing room” in terms of time and space. Slowness, disorganization and flexibility are among the central aspects of nature-based offer rich in experiences. When designing the offer natural, cultural and landscape elements have to be particularly considered. Architectural features should be designed in such a manner that shows an active examination of current conditions; they shall represent a symbiosis of local and foreign elements, of tradition and innovation. The offer enables the visitor

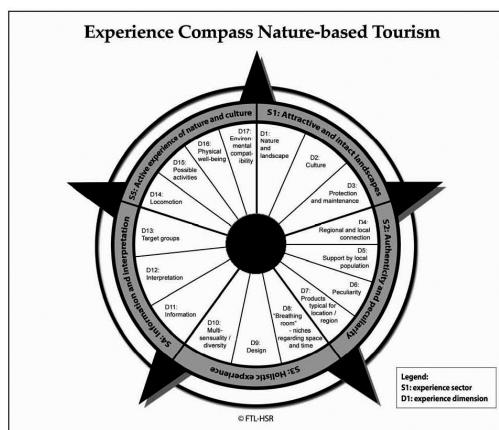


Fig. 1. Experience compass nature-based tourism

to experience with all the senses and allows for various forms of experiences (e.g., active, contemplative and cognitive experiences). The possibility to experience different elements of nature and culture within the same offer in an intensive and direct manner is one of the most significant aspects.

#### *Experience sector "Information and interpretation" (3 experience dimensions, 4 criteria)*

Nature-based tourism offers shall be designed according to the requirements and interests of the visitors. Information regarding particular natural or cultural attractions must be elaborated according to the respective target group and reveal the meanings which are hidden beyond the obvious and directly visible. The visitors shall be supported in interpreting the natural and cultural traces and phenomena in the landscape and put them into a wider context. Professionally designed interpretation does not only help the visitors to gain an understanding of the natural, cultural and landscape elements but also enables visitors to establish an emotional relationship [2], [11].

materials like stone, water, earth, snow and ice is of great importance as well as professionally guided activities like landscape design offers (building of dry-laid stone walls, thinning out of edges of the forest), sculpting courses or music events. The physical well-being while carrying out these activities plays a significant part regarding the quality of the experience. Thus, basic needs like catering and respites must be taken into account. Also requirements regarding safety and security as well as regarding sociability and privacy of the visitors should be considered. Especially in sensitive areas the activities should be carried out in a sustainable and environmentally compatible manner [7].

In order to verify and optimize the new Experience Compass, 31 offers chosen according to specific criteria have been evaluated.

## CONCLUSION

The orientation towards experience is of significant importance in tourism. In today's experience-driven society also visitors in the sector of nature-based tourism are seeking for specific experience offers. However, the character of this kind of offers in nature-based tourism differs from the once in general tourism regarding several aspects:

- The experiences move emotionally, leave a strong impression and appeal to the visitors with regard to their specific needs and desires. They differ from other offers mainly in their authentic character. Moreover, they are mostly active or focused on certain activities respectively.
- Experience offers in nature-based tourism have a high degree of authenticity and are based on the landscape, cultural and historical peculiarities of the location visited. The exchange between local population and visitors is essential.
- Experience offers in nature-based tourism work without excessive emphasizing effects and do not need a consistent chain of experiences. Niches and flexibility in terms of time and space, the unforeseeable and

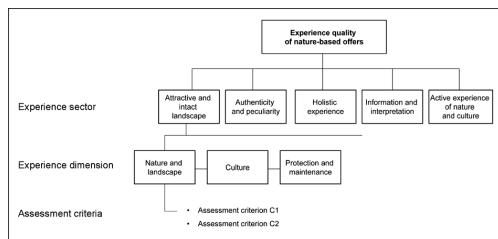


Fig. 2. Experience quality of nature-based offer

#### *Experience sector "Active experience of nature and culture" (4 experience dimensions, 8 criteria)*

The possibility for the visitors to actively appropriate nature and culture is one of the main prerequisites for a high experience quality. Central element is the locomotion through ones own strength (e.g., walking, hiking, rock climbing, snowshoeing). Also the possibility of a creative use of classic natural

- unpredictable are of great importance.
- Experience offers in nature-based tourism have got a more or less distinct ethic component. Therefore information and interpretation are important.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations address the stakeholders of nature-based tourism, the providers of tourist services, the public authorities of state, regions and municipalities, planners and consultants as well as public and private institutions in the fields of nature, landscape and culture.

- The design and development of specific experience offers in nature-based tourism shall be promoted.
- Experience offers in nature-based tourism shall focus on the strength of nature, landscape and culture and shall be elaborated by involving the local population.
- Specific offers of basic and continuing education opportunities regarding experience management in nature-based tourism are needed.
- The establishment of regional enabler networks and local cooperation are of great importance for nature-based tourism.
- Quality management in nature-based tourism shall be assured according to specific criteria.
- Sustainable transport is to be promoted as an independent experience dimension.
- Together with the agricultural sector experience offers which incorporate local products shall be promoted.
- A professional marketing of experience opportunities in nature-based tourism shall be aspired.

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