

# **Managerial implications for the supply of tourism services in protected areas: an empirical analysis of the Italian case.**

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In the literature, protected areas are considered special cases by the tourism industry. Even though the primary function of protected areas is to secure valuable natural resources, they have often promoted tourism fruition which is just as important. This is because tourism is considered a key economic sector for natural areas, both in terms of financing protection and providing opportunities for local people (Dharmaratne et al. 2000, Eagles 2002). The positive and negative effects of tourism and sustainable practices of tourism development have been at the center of the debate for long time and still are paramount (Kaltenborn et al. 2001, Mbilela et al. 2005). From a managerial point of view, the literature has broadly considered the management of environmental issues deriving from the presence of visitors as a key aspect (Eagles et al. 2002). On the other hand, the motivations and behavior of tourists have been studied consistently, recognizing the importance to have a better knowledge of the demand (Font 2000, Reinius & Fredman 2007).

This paper is located in the stream of research of the managerial implications arising from the choice to develop tourism within a protected area, and it adopts a point of view centered on the peculiarities of the management of the park. A specific topic has driven the research, namely the delivery of tourism services as a function of a protected area. The increasing competition in tourism affects protected areas as well as any other destination and leaves no space for improvisation, requiring specific strategies (Dwyer & Kim 2003, Goodwin & Francis 2003, Bremner 2005). However, besides intentions, protected areas are not always able to supply competitive tourism services. Moving from this evidence, the aim of this paper is to understand if this depends on internal factors (namely the management of the park) or external factors. In order to explore this issue, the following aspects are investigated: (a) to understand if when the case of lacking tourism services is given, this has to be ascribed mainly to managerial issues or to a still latent demand; (b) if there is a relation among the typology of protected areas (mainly national vs regional/local parks) and the amount and diversification of tourism services provided; (c) if there are visitor services generally considered as embedded in the social function of a protected area, thus provided for free, or if the choice among free and fee-paid services depends mainly on the strategic choices of the management; and finally, (d) if the contribution of the proceeds of tourism services to the budget of the protected area can reach a significant amount in terms of self-finance

These four issues have been investigated through semi-structured questionnaires submitted to the management of 182 Italian protected areas from 2008 to 2009. The choice of protected areas within the same country allows for the exclusion of differences due to public financing and regulatory framework. The response rate was 41% and questionnaire made it possible to investigate all the aspects mentioned above. The information collected supports the hypothesis that internal factors rather than external factors determine the delivery of competitive tourism services. At the same time, the potential of visitor services for the financing of protected areas emerges quite clearly, as does the need of adopting competitive strategies in order to effectively benefit of tourism development; of course without disregarding the priority of protection.

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