

Effective park tourism planning – nature, actors, institutions

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The creation of protected areas in European peripheral regions is often connected with the hope of prosperous tourism development. Plassmann (2002) is even wondering whether protection can be called a form of development. Indeed, in the last 20-30 years, larger protected areas have been often considered to be regional management instruments that should serve nature protection and, at the same time, regional development (Hammer 2003). In protected areas the usage of the core zone is usually restricted to tourism as a non consumptive type of usage. So, regional development is mostly seen economically linked to tourism (Vogt & Job 2003).

Tourism, however, is usually not a panacea. This applies to park tourism as well. Job et al. (2009) show that the regional economic effects of park tourism in German national and nature parks should not be overestimated. The contribution of park tourism to the regional gross domestic product ranges from 0.3% (Eifel National Park, Kellerwald-Edersee National Park) to up to 10.7% (Lower Saxony Wadden Sea National Park). The oldest German national park, the Bavarian Forest National Park, accounts for only 2.9% of the regional gross domestic product.

The reasons for this are manifold. To put it provocatively, the importance of nature for tourism development is often overrated. An “intact nature” or “beautiful landscape”, characterising many protected areas, is insufficient to successfully develop tourism. So, much work has to be done if park tourism planning should focus on regional development, and if it doesn't limit itself to the management of visitors.

The present abstract is an argument statement and suggests two concepts as an initial position for an economically effective planning: first, a concept regarding the competitiveness of park tourism, and second, an heuristic directing the focus of planning and research on actors and institutions. In doing so, the paper picks up central ideas deriving from an empirical analysis of a trekking tourism project in a peripheral rural region, the Grande Traversata delle Alpi (GTA) in the Piedmont Alps (Northern Italy) (Vogt 2008), and transfers them to park tourism.

The first concept is based upon literature regarding the competitive positioning of tourism destinations (cf. e.g. Crouch & Ritchie 1999). The competitiveness of tourism projects is influenced by a large variety of factors. Factors based on a macro level can not be influenced within a specific region and have to be taken as given: the general tourism market situation (characterized by globalisation and global competition); the demand (in form of tourism trends, e.g. generally growing pretensions of tourists); the global environment (global developments such as the economic restructuring of the past years or the financial crisis); intervening variables (costs and price level, respectively, safety regarding criminality, natural disasters); the legal framework (e.g. laws regarding nature protection and protected areas); subsidies (e.g. for the development of a park planning authority and the tourism valorisation of park resources); and partly by accessibility.

Factors based on the micro and meso level which can be altered in a region are: partly accessibility; tourism attractions (natural and cultural landscape, history, material and immaterial culture); the tourism ‘hardware’ (facilities created for tourism) and ‘software’ (immaterial offers); the regional environment (the regional infrastructure and suprastructure); the service providers and

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tourism firms; regional institutions (formal and informal ruling systems); and the management and marketing of the destination.

Following an inductive research process, guideline-based interviews with actors from the field of regional and tourism politics on different scales in Piedmont, and with GTA-accommodation providers, showed the necessity to explain the state of competitive factors by focussing upon the actors and institutions forming them. So, I adopted a heuristic of Scharpf (1997) from political sciences, and enhanced it in a tourism setting. Based upon this heuristic, I was able to explain the more decisive drivers of GTA's competitive position: the logics of actions of local, regional and supra-regional actors, the institutions and spatial structures - all influencing directly and indirectly the perceived and "consumed" tourism products and, linked to this, the competitiveness of the GTA and the impact on the regional economy (Vogt 2008).

This heuristic, oriented on actors and institutions, in connection with the first concept, should also suit park tourism settings and be in a position to explain the effectiveness of park tourism planning in terms of park tourism competitiveness. Based upon two hypothetical situations – a national park in a region with a long tourism tradition and a national park in the periphery – typical actor constellations and institutions are demonstrated. The understanding of the processes of actions that lead to specific states of competitiveness might serve to augment effectiveness of planning efforts.

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