

The Tourists' View on Protected Areas

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Introduction

Due to the high biodiversity of the alpine space there is a high density of protected areas. Over the past few years, large areas of the Alps have been included in the Natura 2000 network. At the same time, the Alps are one of the most important leisure and tourism regions in Europe and tourism is one of the most important economic factors in the region. An instrument to manage the requirements of sensitive species and habitats and tourism use is the Natura 2000 management plan. The Interreg IIIB-Project AlpNaTour investigates how the concerns of recreation and tourism can be integrated in this process. This article focuses on the relevance of Natura 2000 for tourism marketing and branding.

Methods

The study areas AlpNaTour investigates are alpine Natura 2000 sites¹ in Germany, Austria, Italy and Slovenia. This article focuses on Germany and Austria. The German test site "Falkenstein" is located in Allgäu, Bavaria. It is a rather small, sensitive area (987 ha) in one of the most famous alpine destinations in Germany. In peak days during summer there are more than 3,300 visitors in parts of the Natura 2000 site.

The Natura 2000 site "Nordöstliche Randalpen" in Lower Austria is a large area (64,066 ha) including the plateau of "Schneeberg", the easternmost peak of the Alps with 2,000 m of altitude. Sensitive habitats likely to be disturbed are alpine grass-

lands. The area is a typical day trip destination from Vienna mainly in autumn and summer. Standardised personal interviews have been conducted during summer and autumn of 2005, on six days in the "Falkenstein" on seven days in the "Schneeberg" areas. These days included both weekdays and weekends. There were 297 respondents on "Falkenstein" and 134 respondents on "Schneeberg". The refusal rate was low.

Results

Asked for the main reason to visit the respective area the visitors gave "Nature and Landscape" clearly as the most important reason. Asked how important the existence of protected areas is for their destination choice, 48% of the interviewed visitors in the German test site stated that it is very important and 31% that it is rather important. In the Austrian test site for 34% of the interviewed visitors the existence of protected areas is very important and for 32% it is rather important for their destination choice.

The visitors were also asked about their recognition of different categories of protected areas. The best known categories turned out to be "Nature Reserve" ("Naturschutzgebiet"), which was recognized by 92% of the Falkenstein respondents and 89% of the Schneeberg respondents, and "National Park", which was recognized by 88% of the Falkenstein respondents and 90% of the Schneeberg respondents. The visitors were also fairly familiar with the categories "Protected Landscape" ("Landschaftsschutzgebiet") and "Natural Monument" ("Naturdenkmal"). The category "Natura-2000-Site", however, is unknown to the majority of the visitors. For

¹ In this article all protected areas according to the Habitats Directive (Directive 92/43/EEC) and the Birds Directive (Directive 79/409/EEC) are subsumed as Natura-2000-sites.

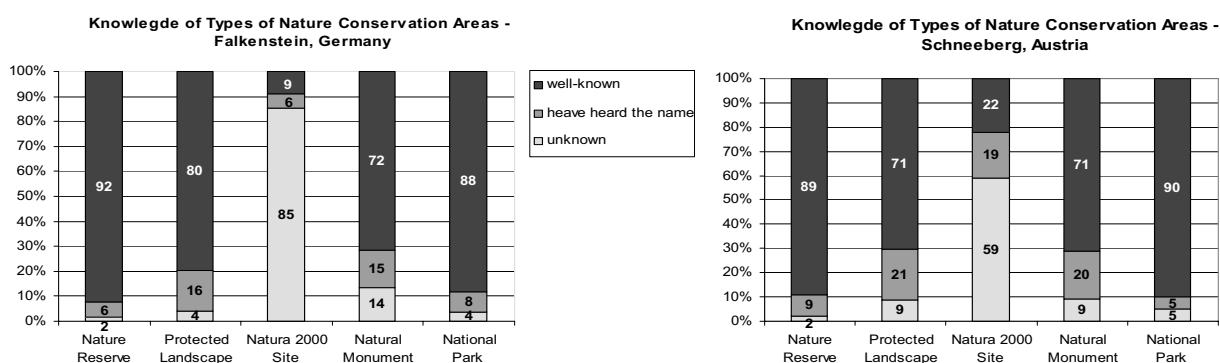


Figure 1: Knowledge of types of nature conservation areas: Falkenstein, Germany (n= 286) and Schneeberg, Austria (n=128).

85% of the respondents in the German test site and for 56% of the respondent in the Austrian test site this category is unknown (see figure 1).

The deficit of knowledge about Natura 2000 by the vast majority of respondents is absolutely striking, and documents a big information deficit among both tourists and local recreation seekers. Also striking is the different degree of familiarity with Natura 2000 in the German and the Austrian test site. The distinction of clientele might explain the higher recognition of Natura 2000 in Austria: visitors of “Schneeberg”, a higher alpine area, seem to be more interested in nature. Also, information policy seems to be better in Austria.

The results of this survey regarding the importance of protected areas in the destination choice correspond with earlier studies by WWF Germany (1999), Lebensministerium (2005), and others which consistently showed the decisive role protected areas played in the decision process.

The results show that at the moment Natura-2000-sites are not suitable as marketing instruments because of the lack of name recognition of tourists and recreation seekers (Pröbstl 2005). But as nature and landscape are very important motives for the destination choice and they are protected by the Natura 2000 network there is potential for improvement. There are even higher potentials for better known protected areas.

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