

Winter visitors' acceptance of the visitor management concept of the Gesäuse National Park

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Summary

One main challenge of protected area management is to combine nature protection and the provision of recreational opportunities for area visitors. In the Gesäuse National Park in Styria/Austria, one valley is very renowned for alpine ski touring, and the number of ski mountaineers is increasing year by year. Some of the alpine ski routes overlap with good habitats for grouse. Following the foundation of the National Park in 2002, a winter visitor management concept was developed for this area. Based on a habitat mapping of black grouse and capercaillie, two routes for alpine ski touring were relocated in coordination with local stakeholders. Focusing on positive visitor management measures, information, signposting and on-site rangers were used for implementing the concept. To evaluate the winter visitor management concept, mail-back questionnaires were distributed among alpine skiers. Results of the survey show that the management concept is known by 41% of the respondents and more than 70% of them see it as a useful management strategy. The acceptance of the visitor management concept is higher if visitors do not come from the National Park region.

Keywords

Ski touring, grouse, human-wildlife conflict, visitor management, national park.

Aims of this study

National Parks accredited by the IUCN (category II) focus on both, nature protection and the provision of nature-based recreational possibilities (IUCN 1994). Visitor management measures have to be implemented to guarantee that fauna, flora and habitats are not disturbed and deteriorated due to recreational use.

Within the Gesäuse National Park, some areas are very intensively used for alpine ski touring. As areas that are well-suited for alpine ski touring are often at the same time good habitats for grouse and capercaillie, a habitat mapping of the relevant areas was undertaken (GRÜNSCHACHNER-BERGER & PFEIFER 2005). Results of this study showed that especially two ski routes within the valley of Johnsbach overlap with important habitats for grouse and capercaillie; consequently a visitor management concept was developed and accomplished. Two ski routes were relocated in order to bypass the sensitive habitats of black grouse and capercaillie. This shift of the routes was coordinated with local stakeholders, such as the land owner, the alpine associations, mountain guides, and the locals.

The visitor management concept mainly focuses on the so-called positive or indirect visitor management measures, i.e. signposting, information and voluntariness. Observations by rangers showed that the "new" alpine skiing routes were accepted by a great part of the users, but, nevertheless, some ski mountaineers were not willing to accept them. Therefore, the National Park administration decided to undertake a visitor monitoring of the ski mountaineers, using a mail-back questionnaire to get further information about the knowledge about and the acceptance of the visitor management measures.

The Gesäuse National Park is the most recent of the Austrian National Parks and, with an area of about 11,000 hectares, the third largest. It is situated in the north of Styria. Its landscape is characterised by rock, woodland and water. One small village, Johnsbach in Gesäuse, is well known for alpine ski touring since a long time, and the mountains around Johnsbach are intensively used by ski mountaineers in winter (www.nationalpark.co.at).

Methods

To gather information on winter visitors to the Gesäuse National Park as well as on their acceptance of the visitor management concept, a visitor survey was undertaken from December 2007 till March 2008. On weekends and holidays, mail-back questionnaires were distributed on parked cars at the main parking places in Johnsbach. These parking lots are at the same time the main starting points for the most relevant alpine ski routes of the area. In total 550 questionnaires were returned, resulting in a response rate of 25.8%. The questionnaire dealt with the following topics: visitor structure (e.g. socio-demographic data), visit-related data (e.g. means of arriving to the area, route taken), visitor motivations (ranging on a scale from 1=very important to 5=not important at all), attitudes toward ski touring, acceptance of visitor management measures, indicators of satisfaction, quality of recreation experience, and crowding perceptions. Data analysis was conducted with the statistical programme SPSS using descriptive and multivariate statistics.

The survey was conducted in winter 2007/2008 and will be repeated each five years to be able to observe developments in winter recreational use in the Gesäuse as well as the acceptance of the visitor management.

Results

About 75% of the respondents were male; the main group size was two. Male visitors were older than women (46.5 years compared to 41 years). Almost all visitors arrived by car. The winter visitors are mainly day visitors, coming from Upper and Lower Austria and Styria; only 7% were locals. Nearly all respondents went alpine ski touring, only a few went snow shoe walking or sledgeing. The top three visiting motivations were "nature experience" (mean 1.2), "relaxing, recreation, quietness" (mean 1.5) and "sport experience" (mean 1.9). In general, winter visitors were (very) satisfied (95% of the interviewees) with the Gesäuse in general, as well with their tour on the day of the survey (ARNBERGER et al. 2008).

The ski mountaineers carried out 20 tours in winter on average, and 4.8 of these tours were conducted in the Gesäuse; this means that each 4th ski tour of the interviewees took place in the Gesäuse. Nearly three fourth of the respondents believed that recreational activities, such as ski touring or hiking, should not be managed more intensively than they have already been managed.

About 40% of the ski mountaineers were aware of the winter visitor management concept for the National Park, and close to 70% see it as a positive strategy. Most of the proponents of the concept are not coming from the National Park region. Those not seeing any necessity for visitor management in this area were mainly concerned about the loss of freedom regarding their outdoor recreational activities. Nevertheless, only 11% perceived any restrictions of their recreational opportunities due to the established measures of the National Park; even 36% experienced no constraints at all. Visitors who were not aware of the negative influences of alpine ski touring on nature can be characterised as more elderly, male locals, who carry out more tours per year in general and in the Gesäuse and see no need for a visitor management. In contrast, visitors who were aware of the negative influence of alpine ski touring on nature, do shorter (holiday) trips in the Gesäuse, do less ski tours per year in general, are higher educated, were more satisfied with their visit to the Gesäuse, and think that the visitor management concept is something positive.

Discussion

Following the results from the questionnaire – affirmed by the experiences of on-site rangers patrolling along the ski routes – the following conclusions can be derived:

The winter visitor management concept is known by only 40% of the ski mountaineers. Therefore, the National Park has to better inform its visitors about this concept and the reasons for it. Ski touring guide books, web sites and presentations for organised ski touring groups should inform the National Park visitors as early as possible.

Nevertheless, 70% of the interviewees experience the visitor management as a positive strategy. This is supported by the observations of the on-site rangers: most of the (foreign) visitors do accept the relocated ski routes and follow the signposts.

Locals and skiers visiting the Gesäuse very often, are the more critical users of the ski routes. They see the visitor management concept more critically than foreign visitors. One important task in this context will be an intensified awareness rising campaign within the National Park region.

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Zoologisch-Botanische Datenbank/Zoological-Botanical Database

Digitale Literatur/Digital Literature

Zeitschrift/Journal: [Nationalpark Hohe Tauern - Conference Volume](#)

Jahr/Year: 2009

Band/Volume: [4](#)

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