

Destination choice in alpine summer tourism: heterogeneity of preferences and the role of protected areas

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Summary

Several place specific studies indicate that protected areas are one important attraction for tourists (e.g. JOB et al. 2005, BRAU & CAO 2005), but no such research has been undertaken with tourists and potential tourists in the areas of origin. So this study aims to assess how various categories of protection influence the choice of a summer tourism destination in the Alps. In a stated choice survey, respondents had to make repeated choices between two hypothetical alpine destinations which were disguised as web sites with changing characteristics and landscape features. To account for heterogeneity a latent class segmentation has been applied. Results show that the preferences for protected areas vary between the segments. National Parks are a significant attraction factor for one segment of 31% of the respondents. Also expectations, profile, and socio-demographic characteristics, past travel behaviour, and reaction on possible effects of climate change are assessed for this segment. The findings of this study will provide additional insights for managers of protected areas on interested visitors segments and on suitable marketing strategies.

Keywords

Protected areas, destination choice, Alps, discrete choice experiment

Aims of the study

Throughout the Alps, natural integrity and the outstanding landscape beauty are key elements of the tourism product, and influence the choice of destinations. Several place specific studies indicate that protected areas are one important attraction for tourists (e.g. JOB et al. 2005, BRAU & CAO 2005). However, no such research has been undertaken with tourists and potential tourists in the areas of origin. The goal of this study is to assess how various categories of protection influence the choice of a summer tourism destination in the Alps. Firstly, it is assumed that protected areas have an influence on the destination choice in the Alps. Secondly, it is assumed that the importance varies for different protection categories and different segments.

Methods

The study is based on an online representative random sample of German tourists, who constitute the major source of visitors to Austria during summer (Statistik Austria 2007). An online survey, investigating the choice for summer vacations in the Alps was conducted in February and March 2008 with an online panel. The survey consisted of 34 questions for respondents with interest in the Alps, and reduced to 24 questions for non-alpine interested persons. With a return rate of 54% a total of 1,153 completed questionnaires were obtained.

The core element of the survey was a stated choice survey in which respondents had to make repeated choices between two hypothetical alpine destinations. To make the choice task more realistic, the alternatives were disguised as web sites with changing characteristics and landscape features (see Fig. 1). Attributes described various alpine landscapes in images, various types of protected areas, different village sizes and various activity and cultural offers.

For the analysis Latent Gold Choice 4.0 (VERMUNT & MAGIDSON 2005) was used, which produces a regular multinomial logit model, as well as a latent class segmentation (TRAIN 2002, BOXALL & ADAMOWICZ 2002). Latent classes are characterized by maximizing homogeneity within classes and maximizing differences between classes and will be described below.

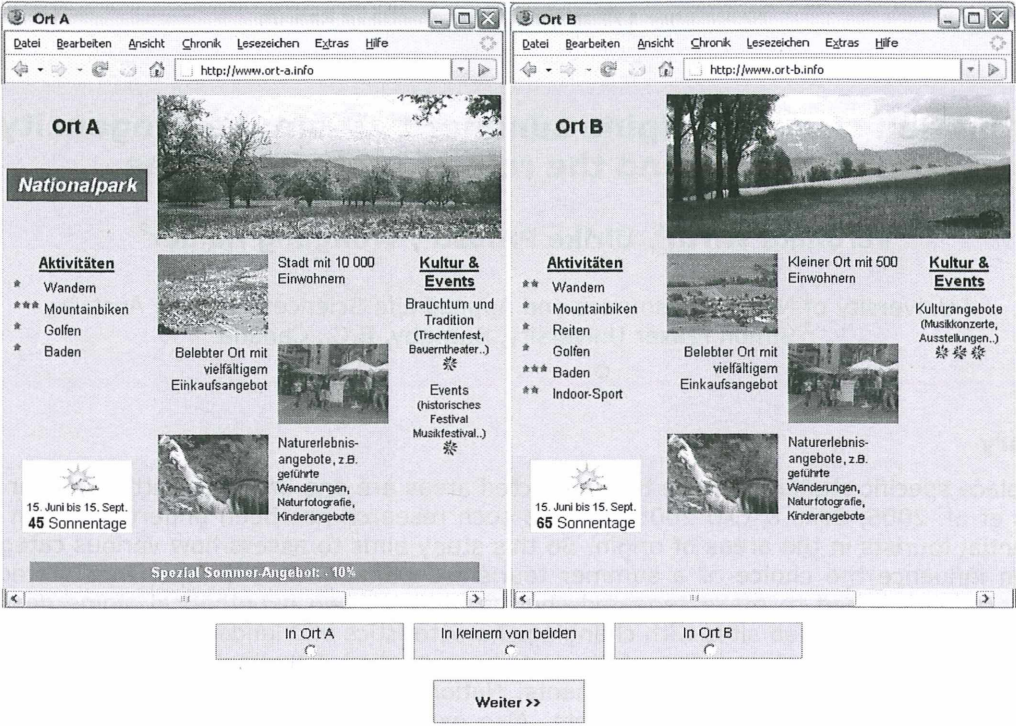


Figure 2: Design of one choice set

Results

In a rating task of motivations, the most important items for spending summer holidays in the Alps were “resting and relaxing” and “experiencing nature and landscape”. Protected areas were also rated among the 10 most important attributes and offers of an alpine destination.

In the choice experiment all characteristics and offers of the destination are evaluated at once, and only the protection category National Parks had a positive significant influence in the destination choice for one segment.

To account for heterogeneity, three segments have been identified by latent class segmentation:

- Social and activity oriented tourists (55%),
- Nature oriented tourists (31%) and
- Relaxing oriented tourists (14%).

The parameter estimates for each of the activity related variables are presented in Fig. 2-5, where the y-axis shows the part-worth utility and the x-axis the characteristics of the respective attribute.

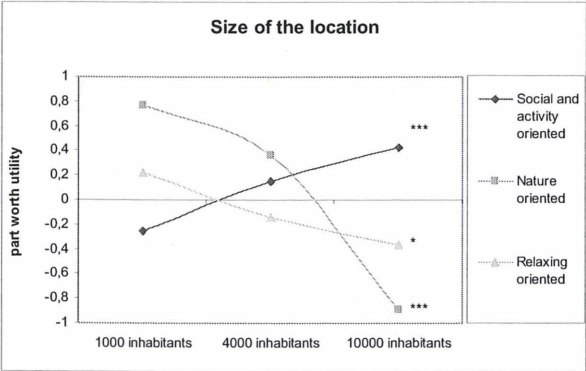


Figure 3: Part worth utility of the size of the location in the destination choice in the Alps (n=1006), ***p<0,001,** p<0,01, * p<0,05

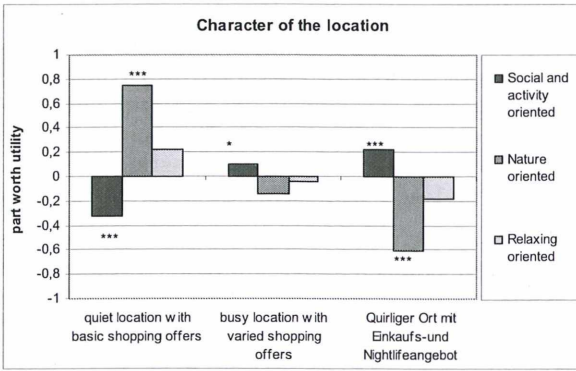


Figure 3: Part worth utility of the character of the location in the destination choice in the Alps (n=1006), ***p<0,001,** p<0,01, * p<0,05

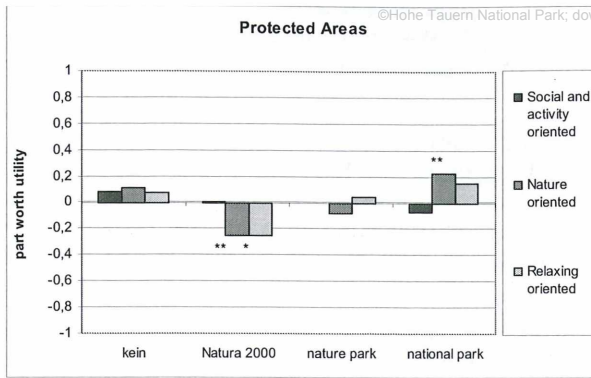


Figure 4: Part worth utility of the protection status in the destination choice in the Alps (n=1006), ***p<0,001,** p<0,01, * p<0,05



Figure 5: Part worth utility of the nature experience offers in the destination choice in the Alps (n=1006), ***p<0,001,** p<0,01, * p<0,05

The random sample of German tourists shows large heterogeneity in their preferences for a summer holiday destination in the Alps. Especially preferences for size and character of the holiday location point in opposite directions for the different segments.

The group of social and activity oriented tourists is the youngest segment. Members of this segment prefer location with larger size and animation (see Fig. 2 and 3). Protected areas are not relevant for them, but nature experience offers are attractive.

The relaxing oriented tourists are composed of mostly older tourists. This group prefers smaller and quieter locations. Protected areas and nature experience offers are not relevant; the category "Natura 2000" actually evokes a negative influence.

In the segment of nature oriented tourists a positive influence of national parks can be observed. This group constitutes the oldest segment. For members of this group it is important to experience nature, solitude, regional characteristics and cuisine. They have above average knowledge of protected areas, and a special interest the Alps. They prefer smaller and more quiet locations, and destination communities with 10,000 inhabitants are clearly rejected. The protection category "National Park" is a significant attraction factor for the segment, however, the category "Natura 2000" has negative influence. Further salient attributes for this segment are sports offers such as hiking and swimming, as well as traditional cultural offers.

These nature oriented tourists show some significant differences with regards to their expectations, profile, and past travel behaviour compared to other segments: Their most important motivational factor is experiencing nature and regional characteristics, while experiencing conviviality and fun is far less important. This group uses significantly more frequently regional information and booking options. Four and five star hotels are less preferred, whereas accommodation on farms are more preferred. They also significantly prefer destinations which offer intact nature and landscape, good quality and fair price of accommodation and gastronomy, hiking and mountaineering opportunities as well as protected areas in the region; other sport options, entertainment and nightlife offers are not important – as confirmed by the DCE. They also have a significant more positive image of protected areas.

Discussion and Outlook

Hypotheses of this study have been confirmed only partly: Regarding the role of protected areas in this destination choice there is a clear difference regarding the status of protection.

National parks proved to be the only relevant protection category in the destination choice for alpine summer holidays. Nature parks turned out to be regarded as indifferent and Natura 2000 sites even as negative.

This study primarily assumed also an influence of nature parks albeit to a lesser degree than national parks as well as potential for the European network "Natura 2000". One probable reason for these findings might be a generally low knowledge about protected areas among the general public, and the categories "Naturschutzgebiet" and "National Park" are known much more widely, while the categories "Nature Park" and "Natura 2000" are known less or hardly known at all. Other studies report also an influence of nature parks on the destination choice (e.g. WEIXLBAUMER et al. 2007; Job et al. 2005); but in contrast to this study these were place specific studies asking visitors of nature parks that had already made their choice of destination and were most probably better informed about the protection status.

The findings of this study go along with results of other studies that report the unclear position of nature parks in the mind of the general public (JOB 2005:82, MEHNEN & MOSE 2007:2) and studies that report merely an influence of national parks on the destination choice (REINIUS & FREDMAN 2007, BUCKLEY 2004).

Of particular importance for management are the significant differences between the segments: for a segment of 31% national parks were a significant attribute in the destination choice. This segment might seem rather large at first glance, as protected area tourism in the Alps is so far rather a niche market. But these finding go along with studies that suggest a market of potentially sensitized tourists for nature and landscape based offers including around a third of the German population (SCHERHORN 1997 quoted by SIEGRIST 2000:110, StFE 2005:66-67).

For marketing and management purposes these results highlight the different expectations and demands of different tourist segments. The group described as "nature oriented tourists" are a suitable target group for tourism in regions with protected areas and include both visitors to the Alps and new visitors that are interested in the Alps. This group prefers an authentic experience with core alpine offers and high quality of the offer.

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