

Quality Standards for nature-based tourism in Protected Areas in the Alps

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Abstract

Nature-based tourism can be regarded as a form of sustainable tourism referring particularly to nature and protected areas. Its basic condition in terms of a strong sustainability is to make a relevant contribution to a sustainable protected area management while preserving the natural resources. The configuration of nature-based tourism in protected areas can be supported by quality standards. Therefore by means of expert interviews ten action fields of nature-based tourism are defined. Based on this and an alpine-wide written survey of actors around nature-based tourism a set of quality standards of nature-based tourism is developed. A high quality nature-based tourism in protected areas has to be developed, configured and implemented in the framework of the destination management. It has to be integrated in the underlying strategy as well as in the concrete scopes of duties of the destination. Thereby the protected area managers, the single service providers and further actors have to be included, and the quality standards have to be considered in all phases of the management cycle.

Keywords

alpine tourism, nature-based tourism, protected area, sustainability, destination, Alpine Convention

Introduction

The alpine-wide dimension of the touristic collaboration with protected areas has a long tradition, be it on destination level, in politics or in research. Since 1991 the alpine convention serves as a productive basis for the promotion of sustainable development in the alpine regions. With this an overall perspective of sustainability and cooperation is opposed to the partially hard competition between the alpine destinations. This contribution on hand for an alpine wide, nature-based tourism is to be seen within this tradition (see CIPRA 1985; CIPRA 2001; HASSLACHER 2000; HAMMER & SIEGRIST 2008).

Nature-based tourism can be regarded as a form of sustainable tourism referring particularly to nature and protected areas. Its definition comprises a responsible stay in natural areas and cultural landscapes which are close to nature. Nature-based tourism develops out of regional requirements and the participation of the involved actors. The environment as well as the social, cultural and economic circumstances shall be respected and protected, promoted and financed in a sustainable way. The visitor is enabled to experience nature and culture with all his senses. The active sensitization for the needs of nature, environment, protected areas and the region is an important component of nature-based tourism (SECO 2002; BAUMGARTNER 2003; SIEGRIST 2006; SIEGRIST et al. 2007; NEWSOME et al. 2009; FREDMAN & TYRVÄINEN 2010; RÜTTER-FISCHBACHER et al. 2011).

Nature-based tourism possesses a spatial dimension (orientation on nature and landscape) and a normative dimension (reference to sustainability). It is not only about a sole section of tourism in the sense of a specific touristic product. In fact nature-based tourism comprises the whole spectrum of the touristic service chain, from the ecological high quality accommodation and provisions, the environmentally friendly touristic offer and the sustainable mobility to the professional information and marketing (SIEGRIST & STREMLow 2009; FREDMAN & TYRVÄINEN 2010).

Fundamental precondition for nature-based tourism is the existence of nature and landscape as a protected area (first nature) in a fair amount and high quality as well as the availability of touristic structures and infrastructures (second nature). Of central importance is also the participation of the locals, the protected area managers, the touristic service providers and further relevant actors. The demand for nature-based tourism in the alpine countries is considerable and growing by trend. Yet it cannot be allocated to a single guest segment. A "nature-based guest" in the narrow sense cannot be identified (SCHNIDER 2009; FRIEDL et al. 2005; FORSTER & SIEGRIST 2009).

Though in the single alpine countries accordant initiatives have been taken, to date there exist no alpine wide quality standards for nature-based tourism. Yet for the alpine destinations with its manifold forms and specifications, for its touristic service providers and for the protected areas managers such standards would bring an additional use. The paper on hand concentrates on the following research questions:

- Which are adequate action fields and which quality standards apply for the nature-based tourism?
- And based upon this: How can the nature-based tourism be integrated ideally in the management of alpine destinations and protected areas?

Methods

For the examination of the research questions a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods was chosen: literature- and document analysis, qualitative expert interviews and a representative quantitative survey.

The first task was the clarification of the definition, the delimitation and the characteristics of nature-based tourism in the alpine space as well as a first draft of alpine wide quality standards. To structure the action fields ten guideline-based expert interviews with actors of nature-based tourism (touristic stakeholders, researchers, protected area managers, NGOs, public and private departments) in the alpine countries Germany, France, Italy, Austria, Switzerland and Slovenia were taken. The interviews took place between September 2011 and January 2012, the content and results of the interviews are recorded in interview-notes.

Based on the results of the basic research and the expert interviews currently a representative written survey concerning nature-based tourism is carried out with touristic actors and further relevant stakeholders in the whole alpine space. Therewith the quality standards of nature-based tourism in the protected areas can be further specified. In the advanced course of the project they are going to be validated by stakeholder involvement with actors out of the practice and with pilot destinations.

Results

Nature-based tourism and touristic destinations in the alps

In the alpine protected area destinations the nature-based tourism has a great significance. Destinations are spatial entities that are clearly delimited outwards and consist of different touristic service providers and other actors (like protected area managers) that are linked with each other and outwards by complex relations and networks. Destinations focus on a certain touristic demand and are in relationship to the different environmental spheres (economic, physical, political and social). For this reason they agitate within the limits of sustainable and non-sustainable action. The higher the share of the existing natural basic factors, the higher the possible share of nature-based tourism offers. The smaller the share of natural basic factors (e.g. in cities), the smaller is the potential of nature-based tourism (cp. BIEGER 2004; LUNDBERG & FREDMAN 2011).

The destination management organization (DMO) as the main agency responsible for the comprehensive and cooperative functions in tourism possesses a scope to design its action fields more or less nature-based. A framework for that is the character of the relevant key markets and their affinity for nature-based tourism. The DMO is responsible for planning, creation of touristic offers and marketing. It faces the challenge to create a comprehensive nature-based touristic offer within the framework of the (sustainable) overall touristic product together with the service providers.

However the nature-based tourism until now is in many cases only beared by single service providers within the destination or even outside the destination (e.g. single tour operators), but not by the destination itself. Yet a high quality nature-based tourism in protected areas can only prevail if it gets its adequate significance within the destination management. The nature-based tourism is to be included in the underlying strategy as well as in the concrete scopes of the destination, but also of the protected area. Thereby the single service providers and further actors have to be included and to be sensitized for the nature-based tourism (cp. BIEGER 2004; LUNDBERG & FREDMAN 2011; WILLIAMS & PONSFORD 2009).

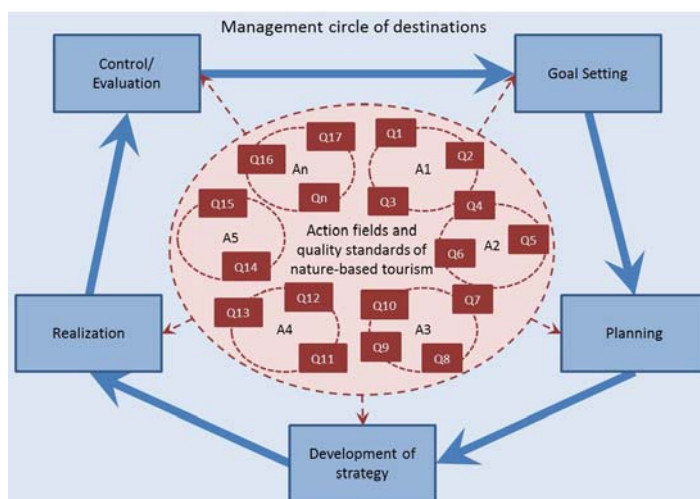


Figure 1: Quality standards (Q) of nature-based tourism and its action fields (A) in the management circle of the destination. (Source: own design).

Alpine wide quality standards for nature-based tourism

Normative standards are common in the quality management of the service economy and nature management. Standards are meant to be consistent and generally acknowledged directives for the organization and execution of a service or a protected area. Quality refers to a state of systems, in this case the subsystem nature-based tourism in the framework of the overall system tourism (ULRICH & WAXENBERGER 2002).

Quality standards of nature-based tourism constitute a normative basis for the management of destinations and protected areas. They illustrate to the management how the nature-based tourism in destinations and protected areas can be designed and further developed and which requirements should be fulfilled. Figure 1 shows how the quality standards should be considered in all phases of the management circle of the destination. The quality standards (Q) are allocated to one of multiple action fields (A).

Which are from the requested experts points of view the most important quality features for a nature-based tourism in the alps? For an interim answer of this question ten action fields can be differentiated:

- *Action field „activities“*: The nature-based design and practice of activities in nature-based tourism depends on the intensity of utilization, the adequate carrying capacity of the recreational space, the kind of activity and the individual behavior of the people searching for recreation. Examples for standards are the balanced allocation of different nature sport activities in an area or the interdiction of motor sports in natural areas.
- *Action field “development of touristic offers and infrastructure”*: The quality in the development of offers in nature-based tourism depends on the environmental sustainability of the offers respectively infrastructures. Further important are the authenticity and the originality, the nature experience quality and the orientation on target groups. Quality standards are e.g. the authentic geographical reference or the special features of the touristic offer.
- *Action field “information, environmental education, sensitization”*: Component of a nature-based tourism are professional information and educational offers regarding nature, culture and ecology. Thereby guests are sensitized for nature and enabled to independent nature experience. Examples for quality standards are the orientation on target groups of the information offers or the considering of contemporary requirements on offers of environmental education.
- *Action field “Protection and maintenance of sensible areas”*: The existence of an attractive natural and cultural landscape and a special flora and fauna is the major basis of nature-based tourism. At the same time nature-based tourism has to consider protected areas and to contribute to the protection and maintenance of nature and landscape. Quality standards are e.g. the professional integration of destination management and management of protected areas, or the financing of protected areas through the tourism.
- *Action field “accommodation and provisions”*: A high environmental quality of accommodation and provisions and their promotion by the destination is of high importance for the quality of nature-based tourism. Original, authentic hotels and products typical for the region increase the holiday experience of the guests. Quality standards are related to the architectural quality of guest houses or the high share of provisions typical for the region.
- *Action field “mobility”*: Important for the nature-based tourism are the development and implementation of sustainable tourism traffic in the destination as well as options for the mobility of guests by human power. Quality standards comprise e.g. the arrival by public transport or the slow traffic within the destination.
- *Action field “regional added value”*: The nature-based tourism promotes the regional economic cycles and contributes to the added value in the destination. Quality standards apply e.g. to the number of full-time or part-time positions generated by the nature-based tourism.
- *Action field “Support within the destination”*: The support by the stakeholders in the destination, the cooperation of various partners and the broad participation of the locals are an important success factor of nature-based tourism. Quality standards are e.g. the acceptance of the population to nature-based offers and nature protection or the number of successful cooperation.
- *Action field “positioning and marketing”*: Based on the touristic overall concept the profile, the positioning and the communication of nature-based tourism have a fundamental importance. The professional and long-term marketing is indispensable. Quality standards refer e.g. to the significance of nature-based tourism in the destination strategy or to the financial means which are used for the communication of nature-based offers.
- *Action field “further education”*: A good and well-addressed further education of the service providers and other actors of nature-based tourism pose a great challenge. This applies touristic aspects as well as nature and environmental protection. Quality standards concern e.g. the number of further educational offers respectively its participants.

Discussion and Conclusion

By reason of the findings of the expert interviews we have defined ten action fields of nature-based tourism in protected areas. Based on this and with help of an alpine wide written survey of actors of nature-based tourism currently a set of quality standards is elaborated.

Convertible quality standards need a definition of nature-based tourism as precise as possible. A central challenge thereby is the selective delimitation of nature-based and not nature-based forms of tourism. But just this task for the following reasons builds some difficulties:

- Not all nature-related touristic activities, e.g. in the field of outdoor recreation, are environmentally sustainable.
- Whole destinations in most cases cannot be called “nature-based”, as they also include service providers and offers that pursue other goals.

- The success of nature-based tourism depends on the partly contradictory guests' preferences – the “typical” nature-based guest does not exist.
- A part of nature-based tourism includes several other touristic fields like mobility and accommodation that makes the delimitation still more difficult.
- Nature-based tourism cannot always be delimited spatially, because it does not concentrate only on protected areas and can also take place e.g. in the catchment area of touristic centers.
- In the different alpine countries partly diverse conceptions of nature-based tourism, protected areas and its significance exist.

Against this background it is necessary to define certain elements of the definition of nature-based tourism at first from a normative point of view. Furthermore it is important to adjust the therefrom deduced quality standards with participatory methods with the relevant actors. Likewise it is reasonable to test the effectiveness of the quality standards by means of pilot regions. Thereby the question has to be responded which actor groups have a special importance in this process and how the quality standards can explicitly be integrated in the quality management systems of the destination and the protected area.

The future of nature-based tourism in the alps depends not only on its professional and consequent implementation within the destination. At least as important for a nature-based tourism perspective is the further development of the general social framework conditions. Basically two dimensions seem to be significant: first of all the future social demand for “nature” and therewith for nature-oriented touristic offers. Second the general perspective of sustainability against the background of a further shortage of the worldwide resources. It will be crucial for the future of a nature-based and sustainable tourism if it succeeds to move to – however nature-based - scenarios of sustainability in a socio-political and economical way in sufficient time.

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