Protected Areas in the Alps
The Success Factors of Nature-Based Tourism and the Challenge for Regional Policy

In remote areas in the Alps, tourism is often an important factor for regional development. Only nature-based tourism can ensure continued attraction to such regions for tourists. Regional policy should therefore support protected areas, especially integrated ones such as biosphere reserves, and their cooperation with tourism.

Abstract
In the rural periphery of the Alpine region nature-based tourism in protected areas can considerably contribute to regional development. In order to create positive effects for sustainable regional development, certain conditions have to be met. Based on a comprehensive two-stage Delphi survey of 27 experienced actors in protected areas and the neighboring tourism associations in the Alpine region, 14 success factors in the following three categories could be identified: 1. general conditions of protected area tourism, 2. cooperation between the actors involved, and 3. design of tourism services and products. The success factors, and accordingly the nature-based tourism in protected areas, can and must be promoted by regional politics in order to achieve positive effects for regional development. This includes, among other things, the appreciation of protected areas as well as the adaptation of the respective regional policy instruments.

Keywords
Alps, nature-based tourism, protected areas and regional policy, protected area tourism, success factors of nature-based tourism

A Challenge – Integrating Nature Conservation and Tourism
Since the discovery and large-scale development of the Alps by explorers and travelers in the 19th and 20th centuries, tourist demand for Alpine landscapes has been growing. At least since the 20th century, nature conservation and tourism are mutually dependent: tourism and with it a significant portion of the Alpine population depend particularly on natural and landscape attractions; nature conservation and landscape development1 in turn depend on economic activities and land uses that interfere little or not at all with nature. Several developments have endangered this coexistence:

Change in agricultural structures and markets. The development of intensive farming and, at the same time, farming contraction have caused a loss in semi-natural landscapes. In areas where agriculture could not be intensified, livelihood pressure increased. This, in turn, lead to a loss in population in remote regions with little alternative income possibilities. Tourism became economically significant in terms of both its net product and its effect on employment (Bätzing 2002, Hammer 2007b).

Tourism development. Mass tourism came up and with it a concentration of tourism in regions with better infrastructure, accompanied by economic development. However, this also caused a two-fold impoverishment of landscape: in the tourism centres through the establishment of more infrastructure, and in remote regions through the decrease in extensive agriculture and through population movement to the centres.

Nature protection movement. Nature was more and more seen as endangered. Totalitarian exponents of conservation perceived

1 In the following we simply refer to “nature conservation/protection”, which includes more landscape-oriented strategies of “landscape development”.

every (tourism) infrastructure as a disturbance and wilderness as an ideal, while others considered preservation of the traditional rural landscape just as important.

Against this background, the challenge today is to reconcile nature protection, tourism, and regional development. Connecting these three goals requires an adequate understanding of the respective fields (Hammer 2007b). Only with an understanding of nature protection which allows for – and is willing to support – areas for recreation and education by humans (such as grasslands, pastures, and forests) will tourism and regional development be possible. Likewise, it is desirable to have an understanding of regional development which does not only use economic strength as its main indicator of success, but also aspects like quality of life, education, nature, and landscape aesthetics. Combining nature protection and tourism will not only be rewarding for nature protection, but also for regional development as shown by the examples given below (Hammer 2007b, pp. 21–31).

According to the network approach, the creation of new products often involves a cross-sectoral cooperation of multiple stakeholders (Hammer 2007b). In the Alpine area, stakeholders of tourism and stakeholders of nature protection generate their income basically on the same resource – nature. Nature-based tourism (box 1) is the shared platform on which players from both grounds can meet. It can generate employment and income for the local population, and, at the same time, use nature lightly.

Against this background, the approach for regional circles is of great significance (Hammer 2007b). It looks at chains of action (social dimension of a sustainable regional development) as a foundation for the development of value creation chains (economic dimension) and regional material flows (environmental dimension). Both nature protection and tourism are basically interested in regional circles with the inclusion of further sectors. A common intersection lies, for example, in local agricultural products. These industries (e.g., cheese, organic meat, herbal teas) contribute to both nature protection (among others: use and care of areas which are ecologically and aesthetically valuable landscape elements) and economy (among others: product marketing, hotel and restaurant industry, attractiveness for tourism).

In the Alps, both nature conservation and tourism have major potential for the future because the region has relatively large areas that are little influenced by humans. The manifold natural conditions are varied habitats for flora and fauna. The Alps are attractive as a place to live and as a place for tourists to spend their holidays (Broggi et al. 1999, Luger and Rest 2002). There is a fundamental difference between winter tourism largely based on skiing infrastructure, and summer tourism which is often oriented towards hiking and outdoor experiences. While the former is strongly associated with major intervention in the landscape, the latter is more oriented towards nature-based activities and desire for attractive landscapes (Luger and Rest 2002).

Competition from mass tourism with its more favourable economies of scale is a fundamental problem for protected area tourism. In order to be competitive, protected area tourism needs regional political support. A further reason for the necessity of regulatory intervention lies in the fact that protected areas often are located in remote areas. Without transfer payments, the economy and the population in this type of region have no chance of survival (Boesch et al. forthcoming). In places where the majority of the population migrates to urban centres it is difficult to implement nature-based tourism, as inhabitants are needed to maintain the typical semi-natural landscapes and the tourism infrastructure. Therefore, nature conservation policy and regional policy or the promotion of nature-based tourism should use specific promotional instruments integrated in the regional management system.

Nowadays, protected areas (figure 1, p. 154) are also expected to contribute to regional development (Mose and Weidbaumer 2002, Simmen et al. 2006). Various studies show that this is quite possible especially through protected area tourism (Job 2008, in this issue, Küpfer 2000, Scheurer and Küpfer 1997, Siegrist et al. 2007b). The encouragement of protected area tourism compatible with conservation is one way, especially in infrastructurally weak regions, to support future regional development (Hammer 2003b, Laurens and Cousseau 2000, Mose 2007b).

Nature-based tourism thus makes a significant contribution to the promotion of nature and landscape protection and serves as an essential argument for the creation of new large-scale protected areas. Sensitising guests to nature, culture, and landscape concerns is another important aspect of a nature-based tourism accompanied by a professional information strategy (Siegrist 2006). Successful nature-based tourism can improve the chance of launching projects to finance sustainable regional development including nature and landscape protection on a superior state level.

Although protected areas and protected area tourism are of major significance for regional economy especially in remote areas, the limits of economic exploitation must be taken into account. From a general economic point of view, nature-based tourism in protected areas has always been a niche product. Under certain circumstances, it is capable of stepping out of its economic niche. These include:

1. existence of an adequate number of natural and cultural attractions;

**FIGURE 1:**
This map is compiled from different official sources. It is not exhaustive. All rights reserved. 1/2007. © Task Force ALPARC | Permanent Secretariat of the Alpine Convention | www.alparc.org

Map of Alpine Protected Areas

The success factors for tourism in protected areas specified below tie up with these conditions. They are described in detail for specific fields of action of the protected area management. As demonstrated here and in the examples below, under good basic conditions and with a professional management protected area tourism is fundamentally compatible with nature and landscape conservation. We assume that it is the central responsibility of the actors involved in protected area tourism, who are most familiar with the regional situation, to ensure this compatibility for their products and services. Our contribution therefore does not aim at an in-depth evaluation of the possibilities of reconciling nature and tourism. Its aim is firstly to identify the success factors for protected area tourism and secondly to explain how these success factors can be promoted, especially by regional policy.

The following specific questions will be addressed:

- What are the success factors of protected area tourism?
- How are these supported by regional policy?
- How can they be even better supported with regional policy instruments?
- Does this have consequences for reworking regional policy?

**Success Factors of Protected Area Tourism**

The success factors of protected area tourism were determined through a two-round Delphi survey of 27 experienced actors in protected areas and their neighbouring tourism associations in the Alpine region. The study was carried out in France, Austria, Germany, Italy, and Switzerland in 2006. Its aim was to gain insights with a view to developing well-directed subsidisation and promotion of protected area tourism. The theoretical basis of the study, its methodology, and detailed findings are described in Siegrist et al. (2007a) and summarised in Lintzmeyer et al. (2006). Based on the findings, three central categories of success factors could be identified: general conditions of protected area tourism, cooperation between the actors involved, and design of tourism services and products. Most of the factors are strongly linked to or dependent on other factors; however, we consider it helpful to clearly distinguish the different factors. An overview is given in the table.

**General Conditions of Protected Area Tourism**

One crucial success factor is the existence of sufficient resources (factor 1), particularly financial. They can enable the management of a protected area to place emphasis on tourism as well as on its core responsibility which is usually in nature management. This involves cooperation with tourist service providers, creating and marketing special offers as well as motivating local actors to invest in the provision of relevant services. Besides, positive perception of the protected area and protected area tourism by local and regional actors including the local population (factor 2) is just as important. Particularly in the case of these success factors, there are differences between more centralised countries (France, Italy) and federal states (such as Switzerland and Austria) (box 2, p. 156).

### Table: Success factors of protected area tourism.

| General Conditions of Protected Area Tourism |  
| 1 | adequate resources, especially financial, for the management of the protected area |
| 2 | positive attitude to the protected area and to protected area tourism on the part of the actors involved |
| Cooperation Between the Actors Involved |  
| 3 | genuine participation |
| 4 | regular contacts between representatives of the protected area management and local and regional tourism organisations |
| 5 | project-related cooperation between different groups of actors |
| 6 | institutionalisation of a responsible body with a broad range of different partners |
| 7 | conflict resolution through cooperation and exchange of information |
| 8 | good balance of top-down and bottom-up approaches |
| Design of Tourism Services and Products |  
| 9 | intact landscape |
| 10 | value for money |
| 11 | target-group oriented, close-to-nature services |
| 12 | experience orientation |
| 13 | consistent marketing strategy |
| 14 | integration of services on offer in protected area tourism into the regional tourism services chain |

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3 National findings were not evaluated individually in the framework of the Delphi analysis.
The recent introduction of the ordinance for the development of new regional nature parks, nature experience parks, and national parks4 in Switzerland is a good example of a positive outcome which resulted from the implementation of these success factors. The ordinance supports park projects based on regional initiatives and backed by the local population. Financial contributions are calculated according to a performance agreement with the park sponsors/management. The park label is awarded by the Swiss Confederation when the performance criteria have been achieved (Schweizerische Bundesbehörden 2007).

Actor Cooperation
Several success factors are related to the quality of cooperation among the actors involved. Genuine participation (factor 3) of the actors during the development of tourist services is a precondition for taking actors’ interests into account. It ensures that the various service providers support services compatible with nature-based tourism and that they work to provide high quality. Besides, it secures acceptance of (tourist) services on the part of the local population. In particular, genuine participation necessitates regular contacts between representatives of the protected area management and local and regional tourism organisations (factor 4). Such contacts further a broadly supported development and elaboration of tourist services utilising the attractions of the protected area involved. They (together with genuine participation, factor 3) also facilitate project-related cooperation between different groups (factor 5). This is important in order that innovative, cross-sectoral project ideas develop and are implemented, especially projects that include non-tourist actors (e.g., producers of local high-quality goods).

An example of synergetic cooperation between different groups of actors at various levels is the education programme Naturparkakademie Steiermark (Austria). This programme works simultaneously at strategic and operative levels. The development of the courses on offer, their coordination and implementation is carried out by the individual nature parks, the courses are brought together in a common brochure, and advertising is cooperative. Nature parks and tourism organisations share responsibility for marketing the nature parks academy.5

A further three success factors in the area of cooperation relate to institutional aspects. The institutionalisation of a responsible body of the protected area or protected area tourism with a broad range of partners (factor 6), including, for example, political, economic, and civil society actors, encourages actors to identify with and support the protected area and the tourist activities carried out there. It also leads to coordination of the various tourist and non-tourist activities. Possible fields of conflict can thus be recognised more quickly and conflicts can be defused by internal negotiation. Likewise this also makes conflict resolution through cooperation and exchange of information possible (factor 7). This ability to resolve conflicts should be seen as a separ-

4 The names in German: Regionaler Naturpark, Naturerlebnispark, Nationalpark.
5 Personal communication by Franz Handler, managing director of the Association of Nature Parks in Austria, September 6, 2007.
rate success factor, as it makes sure that individual projects and entire programmes cannot simply be blocked, but instead the likelihood of finding good or at least acceptable solutions for all actors increases, thereby encouraging the development of tourism.

All of the factors in this category already mentioned can contribute to the achievement of a good balance of top-down (goal-oriented coordination) and bottom-up (participation) approaches (factor 8) in the management of protected areas or protected area tourism, which facilitates the development of innovative projects and their effective implementation.

An example of successful balancing of bottom-up and top-down strategies can be seen in the UNESCO Biosphere Entlebuch UBE (Switzerland). The UNESCO Biosphere Entlebuch has succeeded in linking a participatory process which has a high level of acceptance in the population with a strong, goal-oriented park management. Of central significance is a broad palette of cooperation projects and information measures (Hammer 2007a).

Design of Tourism Services and Products

Six further success factors were identified relating to the tourist services on offer. An intact landscape (factor 9) in the sense that the landscape is perceived as attractive and worth seeing by the tourist target groups, as well as value for money (factor 10) are relevant success factors in this category. Two findings relating to the latter factor are worth mentioning: firstly, a wide availability of beds in the zero- to three-star category is considered more important than the presence of four-star hotels; and secondly, it is not the prices or the price categories in themselves, but rather quality in relation to price that plays a role. Protected area tourists are apparently not primarily interested in very cheap offers, but rather in quality, service, and value for money.

Further success factors are target-group oriented, close-to-nature services (factor 11) and their experience orientation (factor 12). Though protected area tourism on the whole can be categorised as belonging to a single nature-based tourism segment, it appeals to quite different target groups (including school groups, families, “golden agers”, clubs, hikers, scientists, people with an interest in nature) who wish to make use of specific services, often with an adventure element (box 3, p. 158).

The mere presence of relevant services is usually not enough on its own to mobilise potential protected area tourists. A consistent marketing strategy supported by the service providers as well as local and regional tourism organisations is essential (factor 13). The last but no less important success factor is the integration of protected area tourism services into the regional tourism services chain (factor 14). This enables a broad anchoring of specific services for protected area tourism in the region and strengthens regional tourism overall.

The need for action to create a common tourism policy for protected areas is now being recognised in Austria. The umbrella organisation Association of Nature Parks in Austria (Verband der Naturparke Österreichs) is working with the individual nature parks to (re-)position the parks in terms of tourism. Success factors for nature-based tourism are being taken into account centrally and in cooperation with the tourism service providers.

Inferences from the Success Factors

The promotion or attainment of the success factors cited above is, however, not a sufficient precondition or even a guarantee for successful protected area tourism. Success factors can be viewed as constitutive elements, the encouragement and support of which can at least be expected to lead to an improvement.

Besides, the individual success factors cannot be viewed in isolation; instead they exert a reciprocal influence on each other. Nevertheless, the success factors resulting from our study are suitable starting points for fostering protected area tourism.

Regional Policy Support of Protected Area Tourism

Despite the wide variety of regional policies in the Alpine states and in the European Union (EU), of types of protected area and the institutional regulations in the individual states (Netzwerk Alpiner Schutzgebiete 2002), it is possible to make some general statements.

Regional Policy Support for the Success Factors

Four levels can be distinguished in the regional policy support of the success factors for protected area tourism:

- firstly, support from within the region itself, for example, in the framework of an association of local authorities (the local authorities themselves can pursue a regional policy);
- secondly, subsidisation at a sub-national or supra-local authority level (Bundesländer, provinces, cantons);
- thirdly, national subsidisation (including national programmes such as the Programme for the Support of Structural Change in Rural Areas (Regio Plus) in Switzerland;
- fourthly, support from the international level (including the Interregional Cooperation Programmes [Interreg] funded from the European Regional Development Fund [ERDF]).

At all of these levels there are several ways of promoting the success factors. Two general types can be distinguished:

Firstly, the promotion of success factors frequently takes place through individual projects: the protected area management itself initiates and implements a project, with or without external partners, and applies for regional policy support (at one or more levels)

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6 “UNESCO Biosphere Entlebuch” (UBE) is the proper name of the biosphere reserve Entlebuch.
7 Personal communication by Franz Handler, managing director of the Association of Nature Parks in Austria, September 6, 2007.
8 The concept of “regional policy” is understood in a broad sense here. It also includes tourism policy measures with a regional policy background. In Switzerland such measures can be funded through the Innovation tourism programme (Innotour), for example.
Box 3: Parc Naturel Régional du Queyras (France)

The Parc Naturel Régional (PNR) du Queyras is an example of an integrated protected area concept (figure 3). It was founded in 1977 as one of 45 nature parks in France. The PNR Queyras is situated in the French Hautes-Alpes at the border to Italy. The park, reaching over an area of 650km² with an average altitude of 1650 metres above sea level and supporting eleven communities with 2,400 inhabitants, possesses an extraordinary natural and cultural heritage and offers a multitude of tourism services.

The park management holds a strong financial foundation and has about a dozen employees. It is therefore able to perform its tasks professionally within the different fields of action. For years the park has been receiving a positive response from both people generally, and stakeholders involved. This comes from the fact that nature-based tourism has become an important economic factor in this peripheral protected area which lacks infrastructure (success factors 1, 2).

On the operational level the management of the PNR du Queyras collaborates with the regional tourist organisation Office Promotion du Queyras and with further groups (e.g., harborers, communities, agriculture). New offers of the nature park tourism are being developed in cooperation and in accordance with the goals laid down in the Charte PNR (guidelines of the park). In several communities there are also attractive information centers.

The institutionalisation of the park is being implemented by a responsible body with a broad range of different partners (factor 6). The “Syndicat Mixte du PNR du Queyras”, which is composed of representatives of municipalities, stakeholders, and the general public, arranges, on behalf of the Région, a revision of the Charte PNR. The Charte PNR from 1997 will be renewed in a broad participative process by 2009 and will then be valid for the next twelve years. The principal actors of the process are the following eight thematic commissions which are open to the public: agriculture; wild animals and environment; river levels of regional policy subsidisation). Examples are financial support for close-to-nature strategies or the resettlement of great predators in some of the Alpine national parks. Such projects can promote various success factors of protected area tourism (e.g., through the process initiated by the project) (Hammer 2003a).

The second, less common route is indirect support by promoting integrative protected areas as actual instruments of regional development and nature-based tourism. Such protected areas are dedicated to regional development as well as to nature conservation. Examples are the above cited support of the Swiss government for new protected areas, or the development of Parcs Naturels Régionaux (PNR) in France since 1967. In the latter case one of the area management’s tasks is creating the conditions necessary for viable protected area tourism. Through this integration of nature conservation and tourism the management can, indirectly, promote the success factors more broadly than through

support for individual projects. There is, however, a fundamental risk that this type of promotion places more emphasis on the regional economy than on nature conservation. This is particularly true in protected areas assigned to Category V (protected landscapes) by the IUCN (see Stoll-Kleemann and Job 2008, in this issue). Protected areas that have low percentages of strict nature protection zones in relation to their overall area, or none at all, and which also have a strong emphasis on leisure and educational functions are assigned to this category. Institutional arrangements must guarantee that nature conservation also retains central significance in integrative protected areas. Their management guidelines must address the issue of nature conservation explicitly (Hunziker et al. 2007).

Dependent on the regional policy level, there are different instruments to actually implement policy support:

- In the protected areas themselves regional policy measures can be pursued. One option is an open-ended (in temporal terms) institutionalisation of cooperation between the protected area management and the tourism service providers, for example, in the form of an association to which demands in the interest of the success factors can be made. Another option is working for an extension of the protected area’s mandate from within the region itself, and for an institutionalisation of the promotion of protected area tourism as a constitutive element of protected area management. An example is the UNESCO Biosphere Entlebuch (Switzerland), for which eight local authorities are responsible and which must pursue sustainable regional development as a political requirement by the local authorities.
- Existing regional policy instruments at the sub-national, national, and international levels could be adapted to the promotion of the success factors and, for example, the allocation of funding could be tied to preconditions that are in accordance with the success factors of protected area tourism.
- National and regional administrations in the field of nature protection and regional politics could create more promotional instruments for the development and implementation of integrative protected area concepts, i.e., concepts that coordinate and simultaneously promote nature conservation and protected area tourism.

Consequences for the Revision of Regional Policies and Protected Area Policies

Given the growing significance of conservation and the development of nature-based tourism in the Alpine region, it makes sense to develop regional, national, and international instruments that encourage the development and implementation of integrative protected areas, so that regional nature conservation and the development of nature-based tourism can be coordinated in conceptual terms and at the highest level of management. This requires integration of nature conservation policy and regional policy and therefore a paradigm shift in the relevant areas of policy and politics. Conservation policy must take human activities and economic needs more into account, while regional policy must begin to see effective conservation and the development of nature-based tourism as an integral element of regional development. Aspects relating to the quality of life are of central significance in this context. This should not only be seen in the establishment of new large-scale protected areas in peripheral areas, but also at the edge of metropolises, where leisure functions are more important than regional economic aspects. A current example for a periurban UNESCO biosphere reserve is the recently established biosphere park9 Wienerwald (Viennese Forest) at the edge of the Austrian Alps.

Conclusions

The 14 success factors described relating to general conditions for protected area tourism, cooperation between the actors involved, and the quality of tourist services can be promoted at several levels. The positive examples presented here should not, however, obscure the fact that the implementation of the success factors is in its infancy in the Alpine states. This is partly because nature protection and protected area policies on the one hand and tourism or regional policy on the other are based on quite different principles and usually administered by different authorities. With regard to integrative practice, new dimensions of communication and cooperation must emerge for both the individual protected areas and the administrative level.

At a local and regional level there is also a need for suitably trained and experienced specialist staff for protected area management (or interdisciplinary management teams) as well as close cooperation with tourism development or even the integration of protected area management and tourism development in a single regional management office.

Such new concepts can emerge if protected areas are not merely understood as conservation projects, but also in an integrative way as projects for sustainable development, through which natural habitats are preserved for flora, fauna, and mankind. Nature-based tourism compatible with conservation should not only be allowed but should be encouraged, especially in the categories of regional nature parks and biosphere reserves, but under certain preconditions also in national parks. Specific requirements for the protected area management are associated with this integrative understanding, including the definition of spatial zones with different levels of conservation and development, appropriate visitor management, and funding concepts. The latter are central: if protected area managements are also to take on tourism management, financing based on conservation funds (which naturally can only be used for conservation) cannot be sufficient. Mixed funding from local, regional, and/or national sources dedicated to regional development, tourism, or economy is essential for the coexistence of nature conservation, tourism, and regional development.

9 “Biosphere park” is the Austrian notion for “biosphere reserve.”
As a further measure the institutional basis (including laws, charters, and agreements) in the protected areas can be adapted to the integrative approach. Likewise, regional policy at regional, national, and international levels can develop specific programs for the promotion of integrative protected areas with an economically and ecologically successful nature-based tourism.

Such measures can help to improve the acceptance of protected areas in politics and among the local population, to motivate local and regional actors in tourism to develop conservation-compatible activities, and thus to maintain the typical semi-natural and natural landscapes of the Alps, which are dependent on both man and nature, in the long run.

References


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