

PROTECTED AREAS IN TOURISTS' DESTINATION CHOICE IN THE ALPINE SPACE

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Abstract

The Alps are one of the most important leisure and tourism regions in Europe. Alpine summer tourism strongly relies on the natural integrity of destination areas. Several studies indicate that protected areas are a point of attraction for tourists and can contribute significantly to the rural economy (e.g. Job et al. 2005, Brau & Cao 2005). The alpine space is characterised by a high proportion of protected areas to protect the very special biological diversity of the area. The alpine region contains 14 national parks, 70 regional or nature parks, 9 biosphere reserves (ALPARC 2008). A significant part of the Alps has been designated as Natura 2000 sites. So far several on-site studies have investigated the role of one specific national park or nature park in the choice of a specific destination, but so far this topic has not received any more general attention, such as in an investigations in the tourist origin areas. The current study investigates in a Germany-wide representative online survey the role of protected areas in tourists' destination choice for their alpine summer holiday.

The study uses a discrete choice experiment (DCE) where the respondents have to make a choice between two different alpine destinations or travelling elsewhere. Websites of holiday destinations are simulated in the study to make the choice task more realistic. In the study the following questions are investigated: Which tourists find destinations in protected areas attractive? What are their expectations? Is a "nature- tax" acceptable? What is tourists' willingness to pay? Under which conditions are they willing to pay more in regions with protected areas?

First results are described briefly. The most important attributes and offers of an alpine destination turned out to be good quality of accommodation and gastronomy, intact nature and landscape, fair price of accommodation and gastronomy, hiking and mountaineering opportunities, swimming opportunities, protected areas in the region and above-average days of sun.

More than half of the interviewees state that protected areas are a very important (15%) or rather important (42%) criterion in their destination choice. Only 14% would not be willing to pay a premium price in a region with protected areas. Half of the interviewed persons would be willing to pay 1-5€ more per person and week. The following items were listed as the most important conditions under which a premium price would be appropriate: if this money was dedicated to the protection of endangered species, to the protected area in general, for the improvement of recreational infrastructure and for research in the protected area.

In this study also persons with little or no experience with holidays in the Alps are included. So the question can be investigated what their expectations are and how it is possible to win new visitors for protected areas.

Key Words

Protected areas, destination choice, Alps, discrete choice experiment, willingness to pay.

Key References

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