



CIPRA-Position paper

Solstice in winter tourism

Tourism has brought wealth to the Alps. In many regions it remains an important source of income, but lack of economic diversification is also a risk. The importance and orientation of tourism differs strongly among Alpine countries, but all of them need new strategies and approaches to cope with shifts in visitor behaviour and climate change. A socio-economic transformation is needed that takes account of tourism's past, present and future potential.

The International Commission for the Protection of the Alps, CIPRA, sees the present position paper as a constructive contribution towards the promotion of change in tourism destinations. There are no standard recipes for sustainable winter tourism. Therefore, the following postulations should be seen as food for thought. CIPRA is convinced that, through the implementation of intelligent concepts, tourism will connect different aspects of life as well as the diverse interests of local populations and tourists in the Alps, contributing towards enhancing the quality of life for all. Because, in the end, this is what it is all about: a good life in the Alps – both in summer and in winter.

Starting positions and trends

The number of overnight stays in the Alps has been declining for years, even at previously successful winter sport destinations¹. In all Alpine countries the number of first visits to skiing areas, the so-called skier days, has shown a downward trend over the past five years, just as the length of visits². One-third to one-fourth of the ski resorts shows a deficit³. Visitors have high standards: they do not just want to ski but also go snowshoeing, visit concerts, relax in spas or attend meditation courses, enjoy regional specialities or experience local traditions. Young people in particular only participate in winter sports occasionally, if at all⁴.

Global competition for investments is increasing. Many in the Alpine tourism industry strive for 'bigger and faster'. They focus on distant markets and tempt guests from

¹ International Report on Snow & Mountain Tourism 2016. Overview of the key industry figures for ski resorts www.vanat.ch/RM-world-report-2016-vanat.pdf.

² Martin Falk, Gains from Horizontal Collaboration among Ski Areas, Tourism Management, 2017. Take the example of Switzerland: operators of chairlifts, rack-and-pinion railways and the like recorded 34 million skier days in 1994, but only 23.9 million in 2014, a reduction of 25%. Source: Schweizer Seilbahn-Verband Geschäftsbericht 2014.

³ Martin Falk, A Survival Analysis of Ski Lift Companies, 2011.

⁴ Machiavelli and Pozzi 2014.



faraway with spectacular events, frequently just one-offs. The cost of marketing, infrastructure and entertainment are increasing.

Climate change makes these challenges more acute. Throughout the year there is already more rain than snowfall below 1,000 metres⁵, the ski season is increasingly becoming shorter⁶. Artificial snow is only a stopgap: with the conventional, permitted methods, it requires three to five consecutive days of temperatures below 0°C - which happens less and less frequently⁷. According to forecasts, only areas above 1,800 metres will be able to rely on ski tourism by 2050⁸. What will the other areas do?

Some of the measures taken to address these challenges actually accelerate climate change, as when visitors are attracted from afar and travel by airplane. Some have serious consequences for the environment and the well-being of the population. Covering a slope with artificial snow, for example, leads to an exponential increase in water and energy use. The drinking water quality in the ski resort is affected by contaminated water from reservoirs, water pumped from elsewhere and snow additives used in preparation for ski events. Soil erosion and landslides increasingly affect the landscape and the safety and health of the inhabitants⁹. Noise and particulate emissions caused by tourist traffic not only reduce the quality of life at the destinations but also in the regions along the route.

The image of snow-covered mountains and pristine landscapes the tourism industry transmits to its customers is less and less connected to reality. But for many tourism destinations and operators questioning Alpine skiing amounts to sacrilege. In spite of the uncertain prospects they stick to the expansion of ski infrastructure. The cry for public funding of marketing activities and infrastructure becomes louder; the risk is transferred to society.

Postulations

1. Sustainable tourism respects the limits of available resources and stimulates innovative approaches!

There are many ways to make winter tourism in the Alps sustainable, whether in terms of travel, accommodation, gastronomy or leisure activities. Rethinking winter tourism means using local resources to develop holistic packages; and it should encompass year-round tourism. Such packages highlight the value of natural and cultural heritage; involve visitors, local inhabitants and owners of second homes; show a clear awareness of mobility issues; and link tourism to other aspects of local society –

⁵ Marty and Meister 2012.

⁶ Universität Neuenburg / WSL-Institut für Schnee und Lawinenforschung SLF / Eidg. Forschungsanstalt für Wald, Schnee und Landschaft WSL 2016.

⁷ Falk and de Jong 2015.

⁸ Bürki, Elsasser, Abegg, Climate Change and Winter Sports: Environmental and Economic Threats, 2003.

⁹ De Jong 2011.



agriculture, crafts, education, wellness activities or cultural heritage. This exchange can become a driving force of social and economic innovations that go well beyond the creation of economic value added and enrich the whole region. The precondition is that tourism destinations critically examine their values and potentials and develop holistic strategies. This requires locations where visitors and locals can jointly experience participation and innovation as well as the facilitation of this process and the realization of its results through politics.

CIPRA calls on local and regional politicians to reflect on their responsibilities towards society: instead of striving for quick success at the ballot box they should undertake long-term work on framework conditions enabling a good life for all in the Alps, whether inhabitants or visitors, and motivate them to help shape these. Those framework conditions are based on three guiding principles: to protect and reevaluate the environment; to diversify and specify the offer; and to increase quality in all respects - in hospitality, the landscape or public service.

2. No development of glaciers and unspoiled landscapes!

The Alpine landscape is tourism's capital. Opinion polls confirm that experiencing nature and mountains is right at the top of visitors' wish list, followed by hospitality¹⁰. However, nature and mountains are not safe. The rise of the snow line and the decrease in areas with guaranteed snow – consequences of climate change – should not result in a development of more ski areas and high-impact human activities on glaciers and in unspoiled landscapes. CIPRA calls for a prohibition of further touristic development of glaciers or untouched landscapes. CIPRA specifically points out that the present trend towards merging of ski areas does not guarantee additional visitors¹¹. Merging of ski areas not only has a substantial negative ecological impact, it is also economically questionable. Concentrating mass tourism in existing ski areas and the optimization of these can contribute towards reducing pressure on the industry to develop previously undeveloped areas.

3. Dismantle decommissioned infrastructure and scale back areas designated as residential zones!

In some tourism regions, planning and infrastructure date back to a time of euphoric notions about infinite growth. Since then ski lifts and other sport facilities have been decommissioned; they become derelict and spoil the landscape. In many locations, the immense areas designated for the construction of second homes and hotel complexes are an obstacle to high-density planning which saves land. Second homes drive up real estate prices, making housing unaffordable to locals. Municipalities must provide

¹⁰ Schweiz Tourismus 2013.

¹¹ Martin Falk 2017: Gains from horizontal collaboration among ski areas.



access and utility infrastructure, although second homes are only used a few weeks a year.

CIPRA calls for a conversion of decommissioned touristic infrastructure, or for dismantling it where conversion is not possible, in the case of constructions outside areas designated for development, for example. Innovative models must be developed and applied for the valorization and use of second homes. Spatial planning policies should aim at using the scarce land resource prudently and facilitate new development perspectives. In this regard, oversized residential development areas should be downsized and areas to be developed should be based on realistic scenarios.

4. Create and promote environmentally friendly mobility!

Without mobility, there is no tourism. The return journeys of visitors in particular and mobility at the destination are a heavy burden on people and the environment. It is important that solutions are offered for both as nobody will stop coming by car if it is not possible to get around locally without one. Apart from noise, CO₂ emissions are among the most serious consequences. Of the CO₂ emissions caused by tourism, 75 per cent are traffic-related; 84 per cent of the holiday trips in the Alps are taken by car¹². However, there are great differences among the Alpine countries. In Switzerland, for example, tourists as well as locals benefit from a well-developed public transport network. Looking at the Alps as a whole, however, the availability of public transport tends to decrease, especially in rural areas.

CIPRA calls for a wider availability of public transport that reflects the needs of both visitors and the local population. Where expansion does not make sense, transport models based on local demand such as volunteer-run and taxi buses can be offered. Here, increasing digitalization opens up undreamed-of possibilities. Packages facilitating comfortable return trips that include luggage transport and simple booking systems should be made available to visitors. Prioritisation of public transportation must be combined with comprehensive visitor information as well as effective marketing activities.

5. Support for tourism requires holistic regional strategies!

Financial support for tourism determines whether its development reflects the principles of sustainability. Every euro invested in artificial snow, for example, increases the dependence on ski tourism. Particularly in lower-lying areas, such investments do not make sense in terms of business. In addition, it reduces the funds available for investments with long-term perspectives in other areas.

¹² CIPRA-compact «Tourismus im Klimawandel» 2010.



CIPRA calls for a reorientation of support policies. International, national and regional support should be guided by support strategies based on criteria for sustainable tourism. Special, regionally adapted support programmes are needed for innovations and opting out of, or shifting away from, intensive winter tourism; for example, by converting hotel overcapacity into housing. These will require the definition of comprehensive quality standards based on existing scientific knowledge¹³.

The objective must be to focus support policy on networked, long-term and viable measures favouring sustainable winter or year-round tourism and to keep the economic value added in the region. In any case, regional, holistic strategies that also take into account energy use, mobility and other relevant sectors such as sustainable agriculture or biodiversity conservation are a precondition. When elaborating such strategies, the dwindling interest in tourism must be taken into consideration. CIPRA also calls on the public purse to make the allocation of subsidies public and to review the use and effectiveness of the allocation criteria regularly.

6. Learn from pioneers!

Destinations exist in which new perspectives on tourism are being developed. These good examples should be supported and publicized. Natural parks for example can act as model regions for a regardful stewardship of natural resources, where a new culture of hospitality and cooperation is experienced.

CIPRA calls on decision makers in tourism to support and propagate alternative and innovative approaches. This requires a reallocation of marketing budgets: instead of courting visitors from abroad and overseas with unrealistic images and ski run kilometres, activities and accommodation adapted to local conditions attract visitors who are interested in nature and culture and who are looking for authentic mountain experiences. In pilot regions new tourism models are tested, which are based on respect for and valorization of the environment and their resources. This leads to a new appreciation and new stimuli for local expressions of Alpine culture. Exchanges among the pioneers of this innovative tourism and with representatives of other fields strengthens supra-regional and interdisciplinary cooperation and stimulates continued development.

Schaan, February 2017

¹³ Siegrist, Gessner, Kettner, Bottelamme 2015: Naturnaher Tourismus, Qualitätsstandards für sanftes Reisen in den Alpen.