

The Fourth Report on the State of the Alps

Thomas Bausch

Together with the Alpine Convention the seven Alpine states pursue a policy of protecting and sustainably developing the Alpine space. The 145-page Fourth Report on the State of the Alps, published in June, examines tourism and in particular the sustainability aspects of this industry which is so important to many Alpine regions. It analysis the current state and indicates how tourism industry players in the Alpine space can contribute more to sustainability.

Demarcation of the Alpine space and sustainable tourism

The mandate of the Alpine Convention is restricted to the territorial area demarcated by the Convention (Alpine Convention 1991), which basically matches the geomorphologic borders of the Alpine mountain range. For the sake of simplicity, the legally binding demarcation lines were made to correspond to administrative areas. In Bavaria this means the Alpine counties which in part actually contain mountains, in Austria by analogy the districts, in Italy the provinces or in France the departments. From a touristic point of view, this demarcation must be seen as not quite correct. The interdependency between the Alpine metropolises such as Munich, Milan, Lyon or Zurich and the Alpine space itself is obvious. In their promotional campaigns aimed at international audiences all these metropolises emphasize their proximity to the Alps and the wide range of easily accessible Alpine attractions.

This interdependency is also reflected in the special situation of the Alpine peripheral regions with regard to the numbers of day visitors from the metropolitan areas to recreational areas near them. At many locations tourists as defined by the UNWTO (UNWTO (2010)) intermingle with day visitors. Since the early days of tourism this intermingling has sha-

ped development at these locations with their high percentage of second homes and double traffic loads at the weekends. As there is no reliable or comparable data on day visitors for the Alpine space as a whole, this group is not dealt with in the report. This also redirected the focus of attention to the tourism system within the area demarcated by the Alpine Convention.

A further demarcation problem lay in defining what exactly sustainable tourism and thus the object of examination is. It quickly became obvious that above all processes aimed at sustainable tourism development are of primary interest rather than the defining of a fictitious ideal point. This thought is reflected in the UNWTO definition (UNWTO 2012), which emphasizes three aspects. According to it, sustainable tourism should

- Optimally use environmental resources which are a key element in tourism development and at the same time maintain important ecological processes and help to preserve natural heritage and biodiversity.
- Respect the socio-cultural authenticity of the host communities, preserve their existing cultural heritage and their traditional values and contribute to intercultural understanding and tolerance.
- Ensure profitable, long-term economic activities and generate for all involved equitably distributed socio-cultural benefits. These include stable jobs and opportunities to earn an income, social services for the host communities and a contribution towards fighting poverty.

The report includes further definitions, for example of eco-tourism, but itself uses the UNWTO definition.

Heterogeneous structures lead to different policy approaches

In addition, an overview of the legal framework conditions and the associated different policy approaches in the seven Alpine states and in the EU

is given. On a European level approaches to sustainable tourism development had in the past failed to materialize because the Member States had not given a mandate to the Commission. It was not until the Treaty of Lisbon that the Commission received a soft mandate to submit a tourism strategy (EC 2010b), which has to be integrated into the overall EU 2020 strategy (EC2012a). There are therefore at the moment no Alp-specific policy approaches on a European level.

On the level of the signatory states to the Convention on the other hand there is a wide range of competencies and structures in the tourism sector. A main reason for this are the different political structures. Whereas France and Italy are still essentially centralistic states, Austria, Switzerland and Germany are federal republics in which traditionally the Länder or the Cantons are responsible for tourism. Moreover, the differences in the economic importance of tourism in the different states and regions lead to a considerably different weighting of tourism in economic policy. It is therefore not surprising that in a district such as Tyrol where the direct impacts of tourism contribute around 25% to total value added, this industry is given special treatment by the politicians. The aspect of sustainability is reflected in almost all national or regional strategies. Nevertheless, it has to be said that this aspect is not the primary starting point for an integrated policy approach. It is rather the case that tourism policy is everywhere seen as part of economic policy. Sustainability is therefore mostly treated from a market perspective and thus at present from the perspective of an emerging and increasing demand for natural and environment-friendly touristic offers.

The Alpine space: a very diverse group of destinations

In connection with the negative impacts of tourism on the Alpine region,



tourism is frequently subconsciously reduced to the big central Alpine skiing areas with their lifts and snowmaking facilities.

In comparison with coastal regions such as for example the Mediterranean, the North Sea and the Baltic Sea however, the Alpine region offers much more diversity: there are destinations with mostly winter tourism (ski destinations) or summer tourism (big lakes) as well as those offering both types. Added to these are

destinations with very high tourism intensity as well as those with very low numbers of visitors, usually in peripheral locations with very natural surroundings. Moreover, there are a number of locations which due to excellent cultural heritage sites have become magnets for visitors from far beyond the borders of Europe.

Natural health remedies in the entire Alpine mountain range also played a major role in the development of a number of locations: ther-

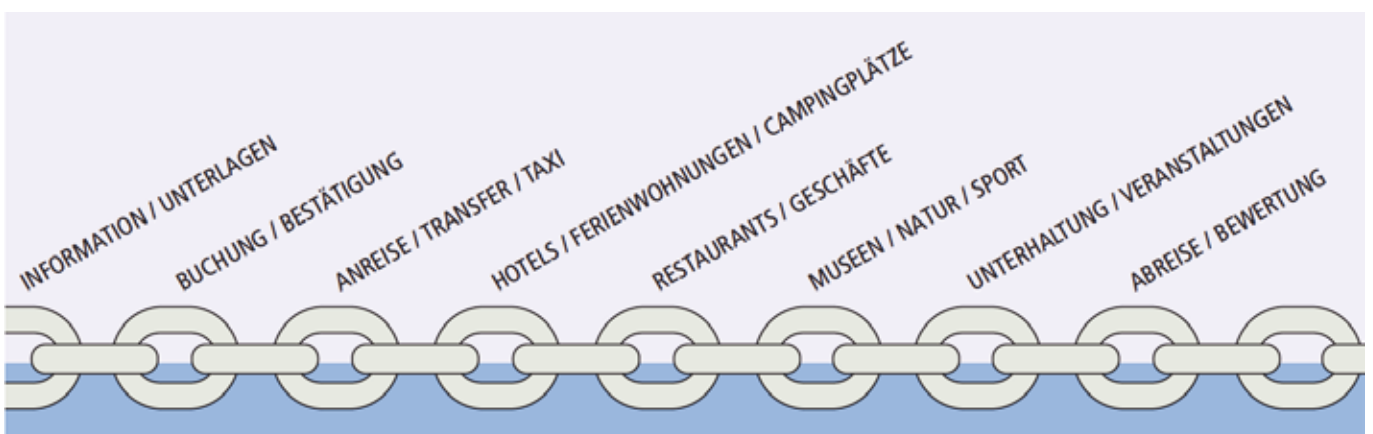
Mountain railways in Kronplatz, Pustertal change the scenic mountain backdrop permanently

📍 Thomas Bausch

The principle elements of the tourism service chain

📍 Nyon Région Tourisme aus Alpenkonvention(2013), S. 54

mal and mineral springs as well as brine baths are just as important as special microclimatic conditions in combination with a healthy stimulating climate. Finally, the importance of city tourism for the Alpine region should not be forgotten. Towns like Bolzano, Chambéry, Chur, Innsbruck, Salzburg, Sion or Trento with their wide range of attractions embedded in an Alpine environment attract large numbers of visitors usually all year round and thus make these towns ga-





teways to the Alpine region. In addition to this and distributed throughout the entire Alpine region is the not insignificant percentage of business-related tourism at a number of locations, supported by congress centres or smaller trade fair locations.

The Report on the State of the Alps does not deal with every form of tourism in connection with selected locations. Instead, an analysis is carried out along the tourism process chain to see which problem areas with regard to sustainability can be identified in Alpine tourism.

The report not only considers the problem areas, but also gives examples of good practice to show how these can be solved. An example of good practice worth copying is the Albergo Diffuso concept. This concept ensures the preservation of historical buildings in small Alpine villages by converting them for tourism purposes and at the same time it creates a

Without artificial snowmaking there is no guarantee that mega winter sport events can be staged – Example FIS Alpine World Ski Championship Garmisch-Partenkirchen 2011

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unique and non-reproducible offer for the guests.

Another special issue dealt with in the report is mega-events and their impacts. Such events are often the driving force behind extensive development and expansion projects as the organizers such as FIS and IOC constantly make greater and greater demands on the sports facilities. These events have become so economically important to the organizers, particularly through the marketing of the broadcasting rights, that the natural environment has to be neutralized as far as possible. It is quite common for World Cup events or international championships to be held on white snow tracks in otherwise snow-free landscapes.

The Report on the State of the Alps is very careful in what it says about mega-events.

It points out that the economic effects for the host communities and

regions are doubtful, the negative impacts on the environment and the destruction of the landscape and nature on the other hand considerable. Moreover, there is no conclusive evidence that mega-events provide a lasting stimulus to tourism, although organizers always quote this as an important reason for applying to hold them. Admittedly, it is also pointed out that there are few studies on this issue which have dealt neutrally and substantively with the impacts over time.

The report shows one thing clearly: within the process chain the elements Travel/Mobility, Natural Environment/Sport and Organised Activities/Events cause many big problems which have not yet been solved for all dimensions of sustainability. Moreover, these cannot be considered on a merely local or regional level, as considerable greenhouse gas emissions with a global impact are produced across all links in the process

chain. These intensify climate change, which especially in the Alpine region has significant negative impacts on tourism.

Typology of the destination types in the Alpine region

In particular the following aspects lead to different types of tourism in the Alps.

- **Mountains (M):** the height of the mountains and the thereby linked topography of an area lead to very different options for tourism development. The great diversity of Alpine mountain formations offers countless tourist options especially in the field of winter sports, hiking and climbing as well as for all kinds of activities linked to mountain experiences (M). In contrast to this many Alpine areas are at the foothills of the higher mountains with an open cultural landscape and a less extreme climate (m). Many lakes and Alpine rivers offer options for water-based leisure activities. Larger villages and Alpine cities are often located in river valleys or along lakes in the foothills.
- **Resources (R):** traditionally, local or regional resources in tourist regions are used as unique selling points. These resources can be nature or part of the tangible/intangible cultural heritage created by the native population. Very important for tourism are natural resources utilised as health remedies, which can be found in a broad variety in the Alps: mineral and thermal water, fresh air with specific additives, mineral rocks but also wild herbs or healthy local food. Nature itself is a resource with rare animal or plant species and also glaciers, waterfalls, springs, which are only available in a few Alpine places. Finally, cultural heritage is also relevant for tourism, combining tangible (architecture, clothes, tools) and intangible (knowledge of food production, music, local languages) elements. In this context, traditional cultural landscapes which have resulted from centuries-old farming practices also play an important role. Locations with few resources (r) try to enter the Alpine tourism mar-

ket through higher investments in artificial attractors.

- **Accessibility (A):** good accessibility (A) to a destination is a comparative advantage and stimulates tourism development and investments. Thus the combination of proximity to the metropolises around the Alps and a good transport infrastructure with motorways, dual carriageways and railways leads to a combination of tourism with overnight stays and day visitors from the population centres. Alpine cities generally have good accessibility, some of them also by air transport and therefore act as gateways to the surrounding valleys. All easily accessible tourism areas tend to have a high share of second homes, which are only used for a short period of the year (cold bed effect). Peripheral Alpine regions (r) mostly develop tourism types with a higher average length of stay.
- **Seasonality (S):** strong one-sided seasonality (S), either winter or summer, causes additional strain: a seasonal labour market combined with short duration of employment and with a high risk of temporary unemployment, high infrastructure capacities to cover seasonal peaks (overcapacities) and low utilization of tourism facilities outside the main season. From a sustainability perspective, all-season tourism with no great seasonal fluctuations is advantageous (s). However, even reaching a good balance between winter and summer season is a crucial step forward.
- **Tourism intensity (I):** The relative contribution of tourism to the total added value of a regional economy is an indicator of the intensity of the tourism sector in a region. A high intensity (I), measured by the relation of overnight stays to the number of inhabitants, can create dependency and a one-sided orientation of local and regional development policy towards tourism. In many Alpine regions and cities tourism is an important but not dominant economic sector (I).

From the combinations of these factors we can distinguish seven main types:

- Type 1: Foothill summer destinations
- Type 2: Health destinations
- Type 3: Nature experience oriented destinations
- Type 4: Alpine cities and villages
- Type 5: All-season inner mountain destinations
- Type 6: Ski resorts
- Type 7: All-season tourism in the mountains at the edge of the Alps

SWOT analysis as basis to identify options for action

The main strengths and weaknesses of each of these main types are summarized in the Report on the State of the Alps. In the summaries the focus was put on the three main fields of sustainability: economic (in particular the economics of tourism), environmental and social (in particular the impacts of tourism on areas affecting working conditions) strengths and weaknesses.

The tourism system is subject to continuous change due to long-term, exogenous development drivers. In a strategy development for the Alpine space (Gloersen et.al. 2013, p.42) the following were considered particularly important:

- Climate change
- Shifts in the energy market
- Economic globalization
- Development of the information society and economics of knowledge
- Demographic change
- Increased mobility of goods and people.

The report examines what medium- and long-term effects result from these drivers. Taking types 6 and 7 as examples, the procedure can be briefly outlined. At present both types have as a strength "attractive ski resorts with high-capacity lifts in the winter season". In connection with climate change however, the conclusions with regard to their strength differ for the two types. The report for example points out that high-lying ski resorts in the central Alpine area (type 7) can still expect snow certainty for a long time to come and thus initially potentially benefit from climate change (= opportunity) as lower-lying ski resorts gradually disappear from the market as snow beco-

mes less and less of a certainty (= threat). Although both types have at present a strength in this area, the drivers result in the one case in an opportunity and in the other case in a threat. The methodology chosen corresponds to a modified regional development SWOT analysis (Veser 2013). This identifies challenges on the basis of opportunities and threats for the adaptation of Alpine tourism resulting from the abovementioned drivers in the sectors environmental (EN), social and cultural (SC), economic (EC) and for cross-sectoral challenges (CS):

- EN1: Keeping biodiversity and protecting natural resources as the essential backbone of Alpine tourism
- EN2: Reducing the negative impacts of all kinds of tourism-induced mobility
- EN3: Reducing or even stopping land consumption caused by new tourism projects
- EN4: Handling the higher natural hazards risk potential
- SC1: Reducing the social effects of seasonality
- SC2: Balancing price level and income of local population
- SC3: Understanding “low-barrier spaces” as a matter of quality of life
- SC4: Keeping cultural heritage as the core of a unique way of living
- EC1: Further improvement of accessibility and regional mobility by sustainable transport systems
- EC2: Saving the labour force potential of the tourism sector
- EC3: Securing profitability regarding disproportionately increasing energy prices
- CS1: Strengthening the innovation and management capacity of the Alpine tourism actors for further sustainable development
- CS2: Improving regional welfare by strengthening cooperation between tourism and other sectors
- CS3: Making the benefits of sustainable tourism offers more visible to consumers in source markets.

Options to achieve more sustainability

A report on the state of the Alps which is to apply to the entire Alpine area and its very heterogeneous poli-



Schloss Neuschwanstein, view from the north-east with mountain panorama

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tical systems can in the final analysis only indicate general options in the sense of fields of action and instruments which appear suitable for them. The concrete design of such instruments in the form of measures to be taken must then always be done on the respective local or regional level. A differentiation can be made between hard instruments (legislation) and soft instruments (e.g. incentive systems). The Report identifies six different steps (L1 to L6) of decreasing hardness (Alpine Convention 2013, p.125). Finally, the Report indicates a number of options to meet the challenges. Some examples from the extensive list of options are given below.

Keeping biodiversity and protecting natural resources as the essential backbone of Alpine tourism can be achieved by

- Developing action plans of a destination’s positive contribution (participatory process) to promoting the exchange of information and project results dealing with climate change adaptation in the Alpine area (L4/L5).
- Designation of sensitive areas in spatial planning, where tourism facilities as well as tourism activities should not be developed (further) (L2/L3)
- Preservation of the traditional cultural Alpine landscapes by supporting environmentally-friendly agriculture through an enhanced cooperation with tourism stakehol-

ders (e.g. promoting farm-based products, on-farm holidays) (L3)

- Promotion of successful activities in the field of networking and on-site implementation of protection activities supported by tourism (L4/L5).

To keep the social and cultural framework of tourism balanced, the following important social aspects of sustainable tourism must be taken account of:

- Improvement of the working conditions in the hotel and catering industry through labour regulations (L1)
- Enforcement of the principle of low barrier planning in developing approval procedures of new tourism related building projects (e.g. entrance areas, public restrooms, share of low barrier rooms and restaurant places) (L1/L2)
- Support to all-year-tourism and the diversification of the touristic offer (L4)
- Publication and diffusion of planning guidelines on “how to offer low barrier tourism” combined with a voluntary network of businesses in line with these criteria (L4)
- Increased promotion of low-season holidays (L6).

Keeping a lively cultural heritage as core of a unique way of living can be supported by

- Setting up a UNESCO based inventory of tangible and intangible Alpine cultural heritage as a unique feature of Alpine destinations (L2)
- Developing sustainable tourist activities, which capitalize on regional traditions and local agriculture (L3)
- Promoting participation of the local population in designing and deciding about tourism development plans (L5).

Improved accessibility and regional mobility with a more sustainable transport system provide a competitive edge for strengthening the economic dimension of sustainable tourism. This can be achieved by

- Maintaining and improving the connections with long-distance trains or the European high-speed railways network well connected to

regional train and bus systems as well as the final destination including luggage transport (L2/L3)

- Funding “zero emission” local transport systems (e-mobility powered by renewable energy) (L2/L3)
- Strengthening the collaboration (service and technology) between tourism and local transport providers in order to elaborate attractive, clear, transparent and flexible services and offers at affordable prices for leisure and tourism transport (L3/L4)
- Improving the provision of information on the public transport options for travelling to, from and within a destination (L5).

The Report on the State of the Alps lists other options on pages 125-127.

Summary and outlook

The Fourth Report on the State of the Alps analyses the “Tourism in the Alpine Space” system with regard to sustainability. In the process it takes into account the diversity of the political systems as well as the heterogeneity of tourism in the Alps. Through a systematic analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the different destination types in the Alps in relation to the drivers relevant to tourism long-term, the central challenges facing all aspects of sustainable tourism are identified. A number of adaptation options using instruments of varying degrees of hardness to meet these challenges are listed. A number of good practice examples facilitate implementation on a local and regional level.

As required, the report starts by describing the present state and moves on to a future-orientated adaptation analysis before indicating possible solutions.

Many of the points of criticism named in the report and the assigned possible solutions are neither new nor surprising. On the contrary, the report makes it clear that a good 20 years after the signing of the Alpine Convention there is no longer a lack of knowledge on how to manage tourism in a sustainable way resp. to gradually develop a sustainable form of tourism. Market studies also show that sustainability is increasingly be-

coming important to consumers, i.e. that it can in time offer a significant competitive advantage over other providers. Thus the focus of further activities should above all be on reproducing existing knowledge and experiences by convincing many actors in the tourism industry that this is the direction to take and by enabling them to make use of the options indicated in the report for themselves and their destinations. 

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