

Nature Tourists and National Parks: How important are Nature and the Protection Status of an Area for Visitors?

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Keywords

national park visitors, relevance of nature, relevance of territorial protection status

Summary

Nature or nature-based tourism is often defined as: '*... a form of travel to natural areas where experiencing nature is a key motivation of the tourist*' (STRASDAS 2006). Thus, natural settings and protected areas are and also are expected to be in the future attractive tourism destinations (HAWKINS & LAMOUREUX 2001; EAGLES 2007).

Protected areas belong to the most important nature conservation instruments (BFN 2016). According to HANNEMANN & JOB (2003), the status 'national park' functions as a positively occupied trademark and national parks are commonly associated with sound nature, pristine wilderness, unique flora and fauna also as great scenery (GHIMIRE/PIMBERT 1997 quoted from: JOB et al. 2003).

Visitors come to national park regions not only intentionally and not only because of the designated national park status (JOB et al. 2003). Moreover, many researchers agree that natural attractions (e.g. protected areas) are visited 'by a wide range of different types of tourists' (ARNEGGER et al. 2010). Analyzing the importance of nature and the protection status of an area for visitors is an interesting research topic. Findings can bring useful information for national park visitor management. Also, an impression can be gained about how important nature and protected areas are for tourism and recreational purposes.

There already exist a lot of studies dealing with the effects of protected areas (especially the larger-scaled ones: national parks, biosphere reserves and nature parks) on the destination choice (PRÖBSTL-HAIDER & HAIDER 2014). According to PRÖBSTL-HAIDER & HAIDER (2014), tourism research on destination demand has two main shortcomings: 1) neglecting the role of natural resources, and 2) analyzing only actual destination visitors.

The aim of this study is to show both the importance of nature and the importance of the status as national park of an area for visitors. The investigation also focuses on the actual visitors of the destination (national park), but tries to overcome the first mentioned shortcoming.

The analysis represents a small part of a PhD-thesis (forthcoming). The PhD-thesis deals with the 'product based typology for nature-based tourism' by ARNEGGER et al. (2010) and examines its practical applicability in three case study areas. The empirical data were collected during the summer season 2014 (July - September) by a face-to-face visitor survey in the three German national parks: Berchtesgaden, Kellerwald-Edersee and Schwarzwald. In total, the sample size counts roundabout 340 questionnaires.

The analyses on visitors' importance of nature and the status national park presented here, is limited to a descriptive statistical analysis.

To find out how much nature matters, the visitors were asked about their motivations coming to the area. Questions were raised, among others, about the importance of 'experiencing nature', 'learning about nature' and 'protecting nature'. In addition, the visitors were asked about how important they evaluate different items of nature (e.g. nature-near landscape, untouched nature, wilderness or biodiversity) for their stay in the area.

The importance of the status as national park was analysed by identifying visitors' national park affinity. This was done in a very similar manner as Job et al. did in their studies about the economic impacts of tourism in large-scale protected areas (e.g. JOB et al. 2003) by asking 'several successive questions' referring to the 'knowledge about the status as protected area and its relevance for visitation' (MAYER & WOLTERING 2017).

Also, as in those studies, a hypothetical question was raised, which is concerned whether the respondents would have come to the area without being it a national park.

The questions about the importance of the protected area status (national park) were put directly, which means that the term or label 'national park' was not operationalised. Accordingly, the responses must be interpreted. The responses reflect visitors' subjectively perceived importance of the protection status. This subjective perception does not necessarily correspond to the true meaning of the protection status for visitors, because it is not clear whether protected area visitors are aware of the effects a designation as protected area really has. For example, like WOLTERING (2012) points out, it is questionable whether a nature-near landscape can be preserved without designating the area as a protected area, like a national park.

The empirical data illustrate that 'experiencing nature' is one of visitors' key motivations. The various items of nature, however, are evaluated differently; wilderness, e.g., was less important/expected than nature-near landscape.

Furthermore, the analysis shows, as well as the study by PRÖBSTL-HAIDER & HAIDER (2014), that visitors' positive interest in nature or positive meaning of nature does not automatically mean that the status as protected areas is also of great importance.

Regarding the importance of the protection status, some respondents indicated, as in the WOLTERING study (2012), that they would have come to the region without it being a national park, but if it would look like the same. For other respondents the national park status neither was important, rather other aspects such as the existence of a certain natural attraction (e.g. a certain mountain, such as the Watzmann in Berchtesgaden), a certain type of infrastructure (e.g. cycling trails), or special infrastructure to experience or to learn something about the environment (e.g. lynx trail in Schwarzwald national park).

This study analysed explicitly visitors' importance of nature and the status as national park of an area. Concentrating on the subjective perception of the visitors, it is impossible to determine the whole meaning of national parks for tourism. Not neglecting the fact of social desirability in such surveys, the value of the national park (protected area) is underestimated, as it is often the case in other investigations (PRÖBSTL-HAIDER & HAIDER 2014).

The protected area status, evaluated as an important reason for visitation or not, helps to conserve the natural resources of an area and thereby it contributes to preserving the basis of nature-based tourism.

Research treating visitors' perception of nature and nature protection can be of great importance for protected area management and marketing purposes.

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