

The Alpine Health Region Salzburg - an evidence-based health tourism approach for the valorization of natural resources within and outside protected areas

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Abstract

Regarding the growing scientific evidence of nature's positive effects on human health and well-being, protected areas' landscapes build an excellent base for the development of evidence-based health tourism. The Federal State of Salzburg currently follows the approach of a government-driven health tourism development of location-bound natural healing resources. Within the Alpine Health Region Salzburg evidence-based health tourism products are developed and promoted. The strategy is characterized by a constant dialogue between the federal government, medical research and science, and the tourism industry.

Keywords

Health tourism, evidence-based medicine, regional development, protected areas, natural health resources

Introduction

Our modern urban societies increase the need for recreation and preference for nature. Outdoor recreation in natural environments is well on the way to becoming an important element of a healthy living and a remedy against the deficiencies of an urban life separated from nature (BELL et al., 2007, HÖHNE, 2015, VAN DEN BERG et al., 2007). Therefore, health tourism built on natural resources is seen as a growth driver within the tourism industry and an increasing number of tourism destinations are positioning themselves as health regions in order to attract health-conscious customers (CHANG & BEISE-ZEE, 2013, PERIS-ORTIZ & GARCÍA, 2015, RULLE, 2008).

Medical evidence, i.e. the use of scientifically proven and effective resources and interventions, is an essential prerequisite for health tourism. Regarding the growing scientific evidence of nature's positive effects on human health and well-being, natural resources build an excellent base for the development of evidence-based health tourism (HARTL et al., 2016, STECKENBAUER et al., 2017).

Destinations with a rich heritage of location-bound natural health resources, such as Alpine regions and especially protected areas, dispose of excellent prerequisites for health tourism product development. However, to exploit the growth potential of sustainable nature-based health tourism, a systematic innovation process as well as a structured product and destination development approach is required.

The Alpine Health Region Salzburg

The Austrian Federal State of Salzburg is currently following this approach through a government-driven health tourism regional development initiative. In 2012, a project was launched to evaluate health tourism potentials of natural resources in Salzburg. Within this project, around 200 healing resources relevant to the development of health tourism were identified, located on a resource map and assessed by their tourism potential (STECKENBAUER, 2013, WINKLMAYR & HARTL, 2013).

This potential analysis built the base for the development of the 'Alpine Health Region Salzburg' (Alpine Gesundheitsregion SalzburgerLand). Within this strategy, the province positions itself as major health tourism destination in Europe. In cooperation with all relevant stakeholders evidence-based health tourism products are developed and promoted. A strong focus is on location-bound natural healing resources as basis for health tourism development and USP for specific destinations (SALZBURGER LAND TOURISMUS GMBH, 2016).

The strategy of the Alpine Health Region Salzburg is characterized by a constant dialogue between medical research and science, the tourism industry and regional development agencies. This high level of interdisciplinary interaction fosters quality, professionalism and specialization, and guarantees the development of tourism services based on scientific evidence at all stages of the process (STECKENBAUER et al., 2017). For this approach, the initiative won the Austrian national award 'Flagship Project for Innovative Tourism' in 2013 (BMWF, 2013).

Future Perspectives

Regarding the further development of the Alpine Health Region Salzburg, great importance is attached to medical-scientific substantiation of identified healing resources and to qualification and knowledge-transfer initiatives in order to strengthen the innovation capacity and knowledge base in health tourism. Currently, the Alpine Health Region Salzburg is involved in two EU-Interreg projects with the target of developing sustainable health tourism products and service chains:

The project 'Trail for Health Nord' (Interreg V-A - Austria-Germany/Bavaria 2014-2020, AB40) focuses on the demographic change and its impact on health tourism. In a cross-border cooperation of research facilities, tourism destinations and transfer organizations, innovative concepts for health tourism are developed that focus on the growing market of senior citizens. A randomized controlled clinical trial, conducted by the Institute of Ecomedicine at the Paracelsus Medical University, builds the base for product development in three tourism regions (TRAIL FOR HEALTH NORD, 2016).

'WinHealth', the second EU-Interreg project, aims at the sustainable valorization of health tourism potentials in Alpine winter tourism (Interreg V-A - Italy-Austria 2014-2020, ITAT2015). The project addresses the urgent need of Alpine regions to develop innovative and environmentally responsible tourism concepts to respond to the already noticeable impacts of climate change and altering customer demands (PICHLER & HARTL, 2016).

The Alpine Health Region Salzburg has raised considerable awareness not only on regional and national, but also on EU-policy level. Within the EU-macroregional strategy EUSALP, health tourism is now seen as strategic sector to increase the economic potential of the Alpine region: Under the chairmanship of the Federal State of Salzburg, the subgroup 'health tourism' within the action group 2 of EUSALP was established (EUSALP, 2017). The interdisciplinary group works on the integration of health tourism as a core area for the establishment of new forms of sustainable Alpine tourism strategies. In this way, it also contributes to nature conservation, as economic benefits derived from nature-based health tourism can serve as incentives for natural resource conservation (SALLETMEIER et al., 2017).

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