

Sustainable Mountain Tourism in the Alps: The “Mountaineering Villages” Concept, a Local Model for Sustainable Mountain Tourism in the Alps

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ABSTRACT

The Alpine range is one of the best-known regions of relentless tourism growth. While it attracted outstanding numbers of tourists through both, summer and winter season, main destination areas are distributed very unevenly across the different parts of the mountain area. This led to a significant concentration of tourism intensity in some regions and even local “hot-spots” with a rising concern for negative effects on environmental performance. Alpine stakeholder groups (CIPRA) therefore advocated very early to address the issues of “overtourism” in this sensitive mountain context and succeeded in convincing politicians to agree on the Alpine Convention (1991), a policy agreement concerned with a whole set of sustainable development issues, including sustainable tourism pathways. Against the persisting mainstream of large-scale mountain tourism in large parts of the Western Alps, but also in Western Austria, few actions towards sustainable mountain tourism were elaborated. Since 2008 small communities have elaborated the concept of “Mountaineering Villages”, first as an initiative of the Austrian Alpine Club within the framework of the Alpine Convention’s activities. It seeks to promote low-intensity tourism strategies in high mountain areas, benefitting from unique mountaineering options. Due to its close interrelation with landscape development and land use, linkages to agriculture and local development of agritourism activities are an important element in these local initiatives. Aspects of enabling nature “experience” and emotional encounters with natural resources and mountain assets are considered instrumental for the attraction and success of the alternative tourism scheme. Spreading from a number of committed communities, at present 22 villages in Austria and increasingly also mountain communities in Italy, Switzerland, Slovenia and Germany are engaged in this concept. At present (May 2022) the association of the Mountaineering Villages extends to 36 municipalities. The paper will analyze how this small niche activity of mountain tourism achieves to address the specific assets of mountains, linking outdoor activities such as climbing, hiking, and nature exploration with landscape development, preservation of nature protection areas and adapted land management. It appears crucial that this link of agricultural activities, agritourism and other forms of rural and mountain tourism shape a specific profile of small-scale communities. Local strategies oriented at sustainable mountain development concepts are assessed as pivotal to provide targeted and ecologically-beneficial approaches of mountain tourism. These might serve as insightful models against growth-dependent large-scale tourism stereotypes.

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1. Introduction

The Alps are globally known for its early tourism development, shaping tourism hotspots and leading to widespread areas of high tourism intensity. Though a more differentiated analysis provides a more nuanced picture of areas affected by big tourism demand, the amount of tourism activities in this mountain range is overwhelming. It is often perceived as forerunner to tourism development or role model for other mountain regions. In specific spatially concentrated areas tourism intensity, calculated as overnight stays per inhabitants, has achieved particularly high levels of intensity, above all in the central and eastern parts of the Alpine area (Chilla et al., 2019: 41). Besides these regions of Western Austria, Northern Italian regions of the provinces of Trento and Alto-Adige and Eastern Switzerland, also parts of the Western Alps, like the Aosta Valley and the Savoy region have seen relentless tourism growth over past decades.

As long as regional development was mainly assessed on growth achievements, the long-lasting tourism performance and intensive mountain tourism activities over both summer and winter seasons was acknowledged as success and role model for other mountain ranges of the world. However, over the second half of the 20th century also in parallel an important discussion thread, criticizing the unreflected use of sensitive mountain spaces, and implicating also ecological threads and destruction, gained in weight. Based on activities and demands by CIPRA, the International Commission for the Protection of the Alps, the Alpine Convention was approved in 1991 as the first legal trans-national framework for mountain governance. Incorporating some of the recommendations of CIPRA in its policy documents it focused on a sustainable tourism strategy (Alpine Convention, 2013) as one of its priority action lines. In line with this orientation the Austrian Alpine Club (AAC) together with the Alpine Convention elaborated a pilot project for community-based tourism in remote mountain locations featuring mountaineering as the core activity for tourists. This initiative starting in 2008 with a first bulk of 15 “mountain villages” in Austria soon gained recognition and widespread interest as an example of sustainable mountain tourism type in the Alps. Given its appeal to an emerging share of domestic and foreign tourists, additional mountain villages in other Alpine countries engaged in this strategy and joined the initiative.

This paper builds on the national assessment study carried out by the Federal Institute for Agricultural economics, Rural and Mountain Research (BAB) that aims to explore the specificity of participating communities, supportive and adverse factors for participation in this initiative, the relevance of the strategy to turn tourism trends towards sustainable pathways or to secure beneficial conditions and developments, and lessons for effective programs for sustainable mountain tourism. In the following section, the on-going discussion of tourism development in mountain areas is presented. It is crucial to situate the emergence of the “mountain villages” initiative in the context of the tension of tourism in the Alpine range between highly impacted touristic centers that even can be understood as hot-spots with significant features of “overtourism” (Peeters et al., 2018). Afterwards a short

section on the methodological approaches used and the implementation criteria of the mountain villages scheme is described. This is particularly important to understand the practical aspects of the initiative and reveal the focus on low-intensity and mountaineering focus of the participating communities. The results section highlights the implementation of the initiative as a “niche product” of sustainable mountain tourism. It pursues the application of this scheme over the last 15 years and compares observed trends against criteria set by the initiative. Afterwards main aspects of applying the initiative are discussed, with an emphasis on success factors and aspects of limitation for such activities. One of the crucial discussion points is the scope for replicating or learning specific aspects from these mountain communities. Here we comprise different activities of mountain sustainable tourism initiatives to extend our learning experiences to similar programs or programs conceived under different cultural conditions and with different activity focus. It seems important to address these cultural differences in order to gain effectively from international exchange. This also is an important aspect for the conclusions where we claim that the small initiative observed and analyzed in this paper might be seen as precursor to future shifts in tourism approaches, not least stimulated by recent developments in the COVID period and other crises of global challenges.

2. Literature Review

The sheer amount of mountain tourism at the global scale underlines its relevance for sustainability issues. A cautious estimation by a Working Group of the Alpine Convention calculated about 95 million long-stay tourists and 60 million day-trip visitors to the Alps every year (Alpine Convention 2013: 27). The bulk of the long-stay tourists includes a predominant share of foreign tourism, but a significant amount is due to national tourism as well. However, this calculation might even be an underestimation as stays in secondary residences are hardly taken into account in national statistics, and this type of tourism has particularly boomed over recent years. But already the early history as a tourist destination led to widely shared views of the Alps as a model of mountain tourism exerting substantial influence on the development of other mountain ranges (Debarbieux et al., 2014). Global assessment of mountain tourism challenges and opportunities underscored the need to managing the environmental and social Impacts (UNEP, 2007) and its relevance for local communities’ development (UNWTO, 2018). It was highlighted that the inherent potential of mountain tourism could only be realized by orienting mountain areas strategies towards sustainable approaches (Gössling et al., 2009; Richins et al., 2016³).

These changes have been prefigured decades ago, when the iconic assessment of Alpine tourism got under severe pressure as the scale of mountain tourism threatened natural resources and implied negative effects on the environment

³ See also Chapters 4, 16, and 25.

(Reiner, 2007). Today, Alpine tourism clearly faces this paradox of heavily impacted touristic centers, often included in discussions on the emerging topic of “overtourism” (Peeters et al., 2018), and, on the opposite side, large shares of mountain regions characterized by marginalization and steady population decline. This nurtures considerations for less intensive tourism destination strategies and even degrowth focus (Hall et al., 2020) like partly addressed through the presented initiatives of this article. Already Butler had defined sustainable tourism as “tourism which is in a form which can maintain its viability in an area for an indefinite period of time” (1999: 36) “and does not degrade or alter the environment (human and physical) in which it exists to such a degree that it prohibits the successful development and wellbeing of other activities and processes” (1999: 35). But warnings of limitations of growth and system boundaries (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018) and misuse of the label of “sustainable tourism” (Butler, 2018) have increased since then. In an integrated view on mountain research objectives (Dax, 2017) effects and interlinkages of sectoral policies are core to sustainable mountain tourism perspectives. The search for new forms of tourism activities has to adapt to spatial context conditions and might be addressed in various policy programs (Gløersen et al., 2016).

Nevertheless, for a long time the Alps were seen as the guardians of a pristine environment but, at the same time, should provide the necessary and high-quality infrastructures expected by tourists. This tension between conservation and development was one of the main triggers for approving the Alpine Convention, the first trans-national agreement on mountain collaboration and legal framework for targeted policy coordination with regard to mountain development challenges (Price et al., 2011). This dichotomy of development options in Alpine regions continues to influence the position on the international tourism market. On the one hand, there is the widespread commitment to preserve the unique assets of its mountain specificities in order to attract tourists, on the other hand, its core base, the impressive scenery of the mountain landscapes and the image of a still unspoilt environment call for intensive preservation activities throughout all Alpine regions. The continuous struggle to withstand the temptation to “valorize” its potential and utilize the respective territory is visible throughout the various levels, be it local, regional or national development strategies.

The economy of only 10% of the municipalities, representing 8% of the Alpine population, is based on tourism, and 46% of the beds are concentrated in 5% of the municipalities, according to the Working Group Demography and Employment of the Alpine Convention (Price et al., 2011: 8). Tourism concentration in mountain hotspots is an issue since long in the western part of Austria with few tourism centres attracting excessive numbers of tourists, both in summer and winter tourism (Dax, 2004). In view of the considerable tensions for mountain areas from such a high tourism intensity and the high attractiveness of mountains for large groups of Europeans, already the regional development activities of the 1980s and 1990s strived for a more balanced coverage of regions through tourism demand. The small-scale

local development support initiated in Austria under the term of “endogenous development” promoted niche tourism activities in less accessible and hardly known places (Gerhardtter & Gruber, 2000). Linking tourism activities to exploring adapted land management practices through agri-tourism appeared as one of the attractive place-based solutions (Streifeneder & Dax, 2020). The intention was linked to diversification activities for agricultural households and local bottom-up approaches aiming to provide new innovative concepts by locals and restricting tourism growth to “sustainable” levels, i.e. limited to the size of local population numbers (Dax, 2001). Indeed, small-scale support was mainly focused on regions in less intensive parts of Austria in the eastern part of the country, primarily characterized by domestic tourism. Moreover, new types of tourism included, besides agritourism consolidation, innovative forms of cooperation, emerging markets for new mobility arrangements, facilities for less mobile person groups, health and culinary tourism that was hardly relevant so far, and a dedicated shift towards valuing nature and outdoor activities as attractive elements. These trends to appreciate less intensive forms of tourism were enhanced by climate change impacts (Pede et al., 2022) and changing value patterns of diverse tourist and age groups (Spindler et al., 2022). The most recent increase in the importance of low-intensity tourism happened as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and affected particularly areas in reach of agglomerations and urban places (European Commission, 2021).

3. Methodology

Results reported in this paper are derived from a national research project aiming at a qualitative analysis of opportunities and challenges of the mountaineering villages initiative, and its potential to provide good practice examples for sustainable mountain tourism approaches in the Alpine regions. Beyond a short survey on quantitative indicators of participating villages, a qualitative research approach was esteemed most appropriate to capture the specificities of individual cases, explore historical and cultural roots for the various initiatives, and assess commonalities between the small group of villages. For a more detailed analysis at local level case studies of three differently structured mountaineering villages were conducted. Due to Covid-19 period most of the contacts to actors and interviews had to be done virtually. In total a number of 23 online interviews were carried out on the basis of a semi-structured questionnaire, selecting most relevant community stakeholders and local experts on various aspects of community and tourism development. The interviewees were nominated representatives for the initiatives on the ground, including mayors and local administrators, tourism partner enterprises, people in charge of the local alpine clubs, members of local tourism boards or alpine consulting enterprises, or managers of protected areas. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed according to four main topics: Information on the process leading to setting up the initiative, tourism development on site, implementation aspects and local specificities of the initiative,

actors, participation, and cooperation aspects, as well as issues of future development and options of the community strategy.

A presentation by mountaineering village is preferred as contexts are quite diverse and depend on specific local traits and historical developments of mountaineering, community-based tourism approaches and local institutional background. The initiative is thus promoting the individual presentation of each of the village through village specific information, leaflets and small booklets, summarizing historical background of the initiative and core features of tourism actors, local tourism activities and suggestions for experiencing trails and mountain hikes within the surrounding mountains. At the same time, these brochures might serve as initial reports on status of tourism capacity and could provide a benchmark for further development.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. The Mountaineering Villages initiative

In the context of intensive, but at the same time very skewed tourism development across the Alpine area, the Alpine Convention focused on “sustainable mountain tourism” development as one of its core objectives. The Austrian Alpine Club (AAC) engaged in activities to elaborate a local scheme for small mountain villages, aiming at building on their mountaineering past and fostering strategies to enable sustainable pathways for those villages. From the outset of the initiative the target was to present a high-quality concept for local actors that is distinct to “hot spots” of well-renowned tourism places of the Alps (Kals, 2018). At the outset a small group of 15 villages and small-scale regions across Austrian mountain regions were selected and their potential for including them in an action programme on “mountaineering villages” was assessed. From 2008 onwards, these communities were approved and eligible for project support through the Rural Development Programme and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. This first phase enabled to establish a national project management for involved municipalities to elaborate destination management, selection of partner enterprises and marketing activities. As soon as first activities had started a procedure for quality assurance was installed. By and by this attracted mountain locations in neighbouring Alpine regions and due to international collaboration from 2015 onwards municipalities in Germany (2015), Italy (2017), Slovenia (2018) and Switzerland (2021) joined the initiative. Most recently the initiative accepted new members attaining now a group of 36 municipalities and extending from the core partners in Austria to the western part of the Alps in Liguria.

From the beginning the philosophy of the initiative was based on its core asset of “pristine” mountain locations with a significant contribution to the history of alpinism including cultural heritage and an attractive potential for experiencing mountaineering activities. This view chimes with the objectives of the Alpine Convention that had started with its Framework Convention (elaborated in 1991) and specified in its various development guidelines (so-called protocols) a vision for

sustainable use of this mountain space. The project for mountaineering villages actively seeks to realize those targets by aiming at highlighting municipalities that fulfil a list of criteria for implementation of those objectives. They are targeted at nature-related view of the following notions of “proximity, but retaining respectfulness”, “savouring mountain assets at high level”, “mobility based on own forces”, “stimulus without rush” and “liveliness without glamour”.

As such participating municipalities are obliged to engage towards processes to sustain models of regional development nuclei of sustainable mountain tourism. They present a sensible offer of tourism facilities oriented at the needs of mountaineers, dispose of an excellent landscape and environmental quality, and engage in maintaining local cultural and natural heritage. Providing centers for alpine competences these locations build on the responsibility and awareness of ecologically sound and respectful behavior of its hosts in this area and on the mountains. These aspects translate into a number of criteria (Table 1) which comprise different levels in the selection process.

Exclusion criteria convey the straightforward concept that these villages have to dispose of specific characteristics with regard to tourism, mountain landscapes, settlement structures and remoteness. If one of these aspects is not achieved candidates have to be excluded. It results from these four aspects that only attractive mountain locations with a sufficient relief energy, some tourism experience and remote rather small villages are further considered for integration into this initiative.

Table 1. Criteria for approval of mountaineer villages

Criteria	Indicator	Definition
Exclusion criteria	A1) Insufficient tourism infrastructure	Lack of quality accommodation
	A2) Little mountain specificities and endangered landscape character	Too little relief energy (minimum altitude difference of 1,000 metres); no landscape damage; limited interventions in protected areas, winter sports facilities, and energy production
	A3) Lack of village character	Too high number of residents (max. 2,500 per municipality/unit), no big companies or buildings, urban sprawl, and no predominance of non-hotel accommodation
	A4) Impact from traffic routes	Close location and/or impact from highways, expressways or airfields
Mandatory criteria	B1) Tourism quality	Refuges and huts available (above 1,500 masl), accessible only on foot, partner companies of mountaineering village, good range of accommodation categories and restaurants
	B2) Alpine competence (on services and tourism offer)	Looked after mountain pathways, competent local alpine advisory service, rental of mountaineering equipment, touring program and cooperation with alpine clubs
	B3a) Quality of appearance of locality	Local development strategy and staging “mountaineering village” concept
	B3b) Landscape quality	Absence of “hard infrastructure”, racing events and no

	(roadless parts of area and limited infrastructure exposure)	technical accessibility of mountain peaks; no new construction of hydropower plants, no mortise individual transport on pastures and mountain forests; minimum of nature reserves (> 20% of area of municipality)
	B4) Mobility quality	Mobility offers for mountaineers (public transport, pick-up service, carpooling)
	B5) Cooperation quality	Relevant players willing to cooperate, including collaboration with alpine clubs and dedicated working group; publication and regular participation in “mountaineering villages” activities
Target criteria	C1) Tourist quality	Local supply of daily needs; accessible by public transport, and appropriate information available for tourists
	C2) Cultural and regional specific features	Building on heritage features, activities to strengthen existing initiatives and offers
	C3) Alpine competence (on support information)	Updated guidebooks and maps, contact person, online route information, Alpine courses and training opportunities, all-inclusive packages, sports shop for mountaineers nearby (max. 10 km distance)
	C4) Landscape quality (comprising relevant service offer)	Nature reserve services are intact; tours and workshops to convey sensitivity for nature and culture of area

Source: Bergsteigerdörfer (2017)

4.2. Implementation of the initiative as a niche product of sustainable mountain tourism⁴

The Austrian Alpine Club (located in Innsbruck, Tyrol) has a central role in project conceptualization, elaboration and implementation of this initiative within local areas, by supporting the development process through its strategic steering group. Beyond general priority setting and guiding the selection process and balanced application of the scheme, respective tasks extended to involving relevant stakeholders on the ground, i.e. in each of the selected villages. These actors are nominated representatives for the initiative, including mayors, municipal administrative staff, members of local tourism boards, partner enterprises and companies, managers of protected areas etc.

A central component of the initiative is the building of a common marketing platform, which is run and supervised by the Alpine Club. This includes a dedicated website⁵, implementation supervision and the promotion of involved partners' activities. The homepage also comprises facilities of a booking platform for the participating partner enterprises. Consequently, the main intention of cooperation is the establishment of the brand “Mountaineering village”, continuous support to achieving higher brand awareness and to find a unique, distinguishable position in the tourism market, highlighting specificities for options of mountain tourism

⁴ Analyses in this sub-section refer to Austrian mountaineering villages alone.

⁵ <https://www.bergsteigerdoerfer.org>

activities. The 600.000 members of the AAC are addressed as the main target group but beyond that group all interested visitors to “soft” forms of mountain tourism are a potential target group.

The partner enterprises are an integral part of the initiative. These are traditional pubs, and specialized local inns, guesthouses, accommodation facilities for farm holidays, bed & breakfast locations or hotels – most of them family owned. The partner businesses are the central interface, as they come into direct contact with the guests and are largely responsible for the subjectively perceived quality offer at the local destinations. The partner business criteria set by the initiative to secure an appropriate quality and characteristic of mountain tourism should ensure a sufficient standard throughout all participating villages. These comprise minimum quality standards of accommodation, i.e. rooms with shower and WC, and offer of breakfast buffet with predominantly local products.

From the point of view of the tourism partner enterprises and the municipalities, generating a stable income from overnight stays is of central importance. The focus on enhancing summer tourism is particularly relevant because in many Alpine regions summer holidays development is lagging behind winter ski tourism. The main aim is hence to extend local activities and tourism offers to more seasons and aim at achieving a stable occupancy rate over all seasons, particularly improving occupancy rates also into interim periods of spring and autumn. Big accommodation facilities and mass tourism should, however, be excluded from these villages, and tourism characteristics should offer a “different experience” to intensive tourism developments in large parts of Western Austria⁶.

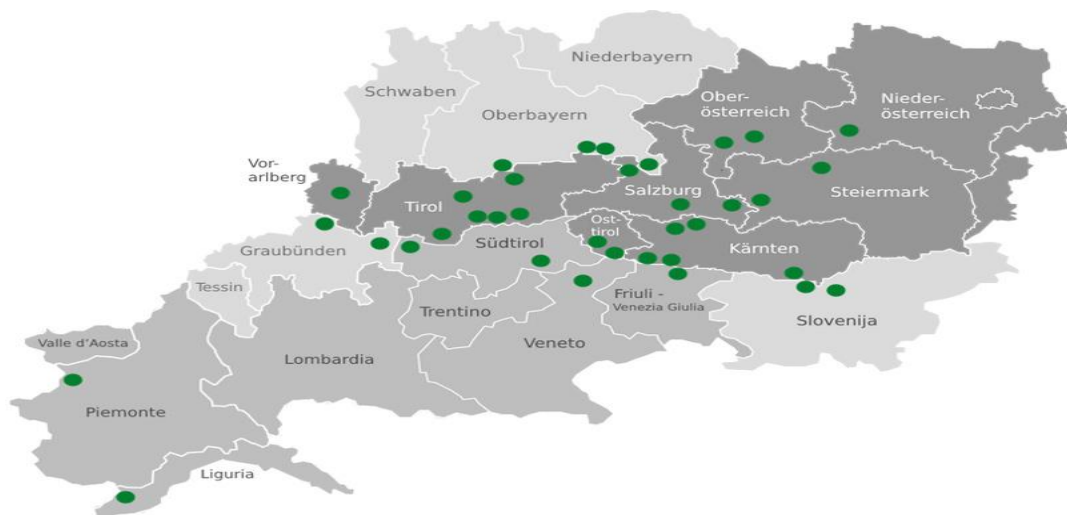


Fig. 1. Location of mountaineering villages (2022)

⁶ This tourism orientation is the main reason for excluding, respectively withdrawal of two former member municipalities from the initiative: The municipality Kals (East Tyrol) was deprived of its status as a mountaineering village in 2011 due to the construction of a holiday village outside the settlement centre of the village which, together with intended skiing tourism expansion, would jeopardize the “low-intensity profile” of the municipality. The second municipality that lost its status as mountaineering village was Reichenau/Rax (Lower Austria) which withdrew from the initiative in 2018 due to strategic shifts in tourism development (towards health and cultural tourism) and limited identification with the initiative’s objectives.

The location of mountaineering villages throughout the high-Alpine regions of Austria underline the core aim of the initiative to select villages that enable experiences and holidays linked to high mountains and mountaineering. They are scattered over all regions of Western Austria (and later extended to comparable contexts in other Alpine countries). It was important that a sufficient high number of municipalities joined from the start so that a combined strategy and promotion of the initiative could take place and show substantial effect in tourism profiling. As can be seen from the number of inhabitants in participating municipalities (Table 1), these are small settlements of about 600 – 2,000 inhabitants (only for some the number is even smaller or a little bit higher).

The analysis of the overnight-stays reveals a high diversity in tourism dependency in these municipalities. While some show significant overnight stays level per inhabitant of more than 100 (in particular, Johnsbach and Mallnitz), others hardly have any tourism so far. All mountaineering villages together registered a total of 1.6 million overnight stays in 2018/19 which refers to an average of 61 overnight stays per inhabitant. Tourism trends in these villages, measured on development between the initial year 2008 und level of tourism intensity attained in 2018/19, show that two thirds of the destinations dispose of a rather stable development or even revealed a (slight) increase of overnight stays. This is largely in line with the target of stabilizing tourism development and only increasing very slowly existing tourism levels if conditions allow for that. However, this quantitative analysis should not be overestimated and linked to closely to the period and effects of the branding strategy. In essence, tourism performance of the participating villages can only be partially attributed to the branding initiative because a wide variety of regional and global, socio-economic and cultural factors have an important impact on local outcomes.

Table 1. Population and tourism trends in Austrian mountaineering villages

Mountaineering village	Land	Start year of initiative	Inhabitants (2019)	Overnight stays/inhabitant (2018/19)	Tourism trend (2008-2018)
Mallnitz	Carinthia	2008	763	159	-
Malta im Maltatal	Carinthia	2008	1,967	42	0
Mauthen	Carinthia	2011	718	35	-
Zell/Sele	Carinthia	2013	601	2	-
Lesachtal	Carinthia	2008	1,319	87	0
Lunz am See	Lower Austria	2008	1,779	23	+
Grünau im Almtal	Upper Austria	2008	2,058	31	-
Steinbach am Attersee	Upper Austria	2008	882	95	+
Weißbach bei Lofer	Salzburg	2008	412	63	+
Hüttschlag im Großarlal	Salzburg	2008	906	54	0

Johnsbach im Gesäuse	Styria	2008	149	221	+
Sterische Krakau	Styria	2008	1,390	20	-
Tiroler Gailtal	Tyrol	2008	1,666	110	+
Villgratental	Tyrol	2008	1,671	44	+
Ginzling/Zillertal	Tyrol	2008	360	111	+
Gschnitztal	Tyrol	2019	1,757	44	-
St. Jodok, Schmirn und Valsertal	Tyrol	2012	1,410	24	+
Region Sellraintal	Tyrol	2013	2,130	97	+
Vent im Ötztal	Tyrol	2008	138	940	0
Großes Walsertal	Vorarlberg	2008	3,400	58	0
Steinberg am Rofan	Tyrol	2021	281	56	+
Göriach	Salzburg	2021	345	51	0

Source: BAB, result of the analysis

4.3. Discussion of main findings

From the analysis of the interviews it appears that the quality of cooperation is one of the key aspects of the initiative. The effective performance of the initiative depends heavily on the commitment and capacity of local promoters and institutional networks and, in general, a strong commitment of the community of the participating municipalities. Important local promoters were identified as people being responsible for the local administration, members of the local tourism boards, protected areas management, but also active accommodation providers, and members of local Alpine Club sections, etc. Furthermore, it has proven to be favourable to set up a working group consisting of local stakeholders. Overall, the central, strategic control by the Alpine Club association on the one hand and the support of people and institutions on the ground on the other hand have turned out to be a promising combination and basis for successful implementation.

The analysis of the interviews of people who are core to the development and implementation of the initiative revealed that low-intensity tourism has some appeal to small-scaled communities, but remains a niche product that covers specific so far marginal aspects of the tourism market. It seems crucial to specify and focus on interested target groups, i.e. mountaineers and ice-climbers, families with kids, single-women and people interested in remote places and experience of silence in rural regions, in order to achieve a basic turnover of the participating touristic partner enterprises.

But the analysis of the initiative through guest surveys also showed that limitation of the impact of the initiative might be limited, and tourism performance is dependent on a wider set of drivers, beyond the territorial brand established: The brand “Mountaineering villages” was only partially known among the guests of the partner enterprises and thus attractiveness of local communities can only partially be attributed to the brand itself. This is confirmed by interviews where partner enterprises perceive little linkage between bookings and brand awareness. This might be due to the need of sufficient time for establishing and promoting and the brand on the tourism market. However, this assessment also means that marketing

by the Austrian Alpine Club can be further professionalized. The request for a professionalized structure and supportive environment for the initiative also touches on the institutional bottleneck of the brand owner itself as the Austrian Alpine Club is engaged in a series of other activities and aims at a set of manifold goals for mountain development which limit attention and capacity for this initiative.

A further limitation on the effects of the measure for local development performance and well-being is the matter that tourism activities are just one of a range of economic and socio-cultural activities in these places. This implies that an integrated perspective for local and regional development needs to be adopted to address well-being of local population in a resilient and encompassing way. Moreover, at present prosperity of the villages is basically externally driven, particularly due to the extreme degree of remoteness of many mountaineering villages, linked to difficulties in accessing jobs, education and other services for local inhabitants. It is also striking that the local population is often only marginally involved in the initiative. This restricted interest and ambition for engaging in the initiative might be due also to the low attractiveness of tourism, including agritourism activities, and views on disadvantages of mountain framing. There is hence a decreased appreciation of the locally available resources, its opportunities and contributions to innovative local concepts, like the mountaineering villages.

Protected areas and protected area administrations are conceived as an integrative part of the initiative and should make an important contribution to the success of the initiative. The criteria of the initiative push for the establishment and nurture adapted management of protected areas in these mountain contexts. Cooperation with nature conservation institutions is therefore crucial for the initiative, addressing the cross-sectoral and territorial approach in their conceptual outlines.

Given the selection criteria and periodic checks on implementation of the mountaineering villages initiative the risk that the initiative will lead to an undesired intensification of the local tourism sector seems very low. The threat of unsustainable outcomes or even “overtourism” is hence restricted in the participating municipalities as the amount of overnight stays is limited and the tourism business is not the sole predominating source of income for the inhabitants. However, periodic problems might arise due to daily tourism inflows that exceed in few cases the level of overnight stays. This mainly concerns individual traffic problems, above all parking problems, access and activities off the hiking trails or prepared ski slopes or other areas for tourism uses. In particular, stepping into those agriculturally managed or natural resource areas might engender locally concentrated conflicts with farmers and landowners.

Also historical approaches of municipalities might have a strong influence on the implementation of the initiative. In several cases “path dependencies” of the participating municipalities could be identified: The most common type of village is the “historical alpine pioneer destination” often with close personal ties with the Alpine Club. Another common type of destinations are municipalities with

sustainable, low-intensity tourism focus that has developed gradually over time and never reached high tourism intensity. Other villages, mostly in western Austria, are located in close vicinity to hot-spots of winter sports destinations. Again others had a key event in the past that has set limits to tourism expansion (e.g. creation of a rest area according to the Nature Conservation Act, or of a citizens' initiative that has prevented a large-scale skiing project, or failure (disapproval to realize major tourism investments), or quantitative growth of tourism was curbed because of shortage of space and settlement area in the narrow alpine valleys. Yet for others, the establishment of a protected area has played a decisive role as catalyst for low-intensity tourism development.

Overall, it is essential to strike a balance between credibility and flexibility in the application of the initiative, through orienting local action both towards mandatory and target criteria of the initiative. On the one hand, it is important from the point of view of the Austrian Alpine Club to take care and survey compliance with these criteria as they convey visibility on the distinguishing features of the initiative. On the other hand, there are arguments in favour of a flexible handling of the criteria as the basic development vision of the municipalities must correspond with the criteria for low-intensity tourism development of the initiative that presents a compelling guideline for sustainable mountain development and an alternative approach to carefully utilizing mountain tourism opportunities.

4.4. Challenges and opportunities for replicating the "model"

The model of "mountaineering villages" have been applied in Austria since about 15 years and deployed some attractiveness so that neighboring Alpine countries have adopted the approach and elaborated several local applications in their contexts as well. Thus, we can conclude that mountaineering villages have been assessed as one of the inspiring models for sustainable mountain tourism (Elmi & Wolff, 2021) and might be seen as one model for enhancing alternative tourism pathways in mountain regions. Following from the discussion on the implementation experiences in Austria a number of challenges arise, in particular linked to the tension with mainstream tourism trends, global economic dependence and dominating narratives, largely still oriented on the "growth imperative" and liberal economy frameworks which is embedded within the dominant notion of development and modernity.

Challenges are linked to pretentious expectations of tourism development for remote and mountain regions. These often have been presented in the past, and sometimes still are seen, as "panacea" for local and regional development problems, and tourism growth is assessed as prime success indicator. Similar views are put on mountain areas: As FAO Director General Qu Dongyu expressed in his speech at the high-level event to celebrate International Mountain Day 2021 "for many mountain communities, tourism is their livelihood" (UNWTO, 2021). However, he added that "(p)romoting sustainable eco-tourism, agri-tourism and wellness tourism can help generate new jobs, diversify income, build robust micro-economies and revitalize

products and services”, and he called for dedicated activities to protect fragile mountain ecosystems and “rethink and reshape mountain tourism for the benefit of mountain communities, global wellbeing and planet’s health” (UNWTO, 2021). The analyzed initiative of mountaineering villages in the Alps provides an important case of local action to shift mountain tourism perspectives.

Currently tourism development in mountain regions has to meet a serious of challenges. In general, it is driven by the concern for achieving an economic base for the local population and preventing out-migration from remote locations (Dax et al., 2019). The main obstacles to divert the orientation towards development and intensive use of mountain destinations results from a complex set of inter-related issues of awareness of attractivity features, accessibility aspects, diversity and concentration and “branding” of destinations. Moreover, the focus on economic efficiency of tourism activities favours concentration processes in small areas, thus leading to divergent trends in mountain regions. At the same time, highlighting mountain landscapes as unique habitats tends to oversee the low-scale differentiation of mountains and abrupt changes in appearance. These might be due to development efforts at local scale which are often set in long-term historical contexts and relate to cultural heritage. In addition, mountain ecosystems are “particularly sensitive to alterations produced by human activity” (Romeo et al., 2021: 18). Such dependence adds to the reluctance to engage in transformations and aim at more demanding, sustainable pathways. However, it is exactly such a turn in conceptual orientation which is demanded for initiatives like the mountaineering villages to be elaborated, realized and thrive in an adverse context of liberal standardization of socio-economic structures. Lundmark et al. (2021) address the emerging debate on degrowth and its linkages to reshaping tourism trends.

Being a “pioneer of sustainable tourism and being part of the network of communities” of mountaineering villages (Elmi & Wolff, 2021) leads to a growing appeal of the label and extension to more and more villages in this mountain range. It can be concluded that this approach might serve as a model for many other mountain contexts, and indeed it is presented as one of the influential case studies on mountain tourism development by Romeo et al. (2021). Examples of similar approach and local action for sustainable mountain tourism are visible in high numbers around almost all mountain regions of the world. Some of them are reflecting key features of the mountaineering villages concept, like local participation, community-based action, close linkages to uniqueness of mountain topography and mountaineering experiences, low intensity of use of natural resources, integration of pasture area in land management and tourism activities, and satisfaction with the role of “niche markets” as secret for attractiveness of initiatives.

In considering transfer of lessons learned in the Alps it is crucial not to adopt a perspective of “copying” best practices and fail to adapt to cultural idiosyncrasies and local specificities. Nevertheless, some features of the mountain villages have turned out to be useful elements for similar tourism approaches. The core aspect for such initiatives is centred around a shift from “high-impact tourism to low-impact

one”, aiming at “tangible benefits for local communities” and supporting action “to enhance conservation of the unique mountain heritage” (UNWTO, 2021). There are several different thematic priorities in tourism orientation that can be observed by mountain tourism trends focusing on locally-led sustainable initiatives. These include the following types:

- Community-based approaches that nurture the participation and involvement of local population. These activities are led or primarily influenced by local actors and aim at providing possibilities for experiencing “local life” in mountain communities. The organization of homestay management and valuing of local culture is the core focus of programs like the community-based ecotourism of the Community Homestay Network (Walter et al., 2018) which has been elaborated in 22 communities of Nepal since 2012 to provide authentic experiences for tourists and a positive impact on destinations’ peoples and environment.

- For many initiatives the specific attractiveness of mountain areas for various forms of “slow tourism” activities is the decisive point of departure. Examples include the initiative “Astrostays” in Ladakh, India (Asgotraa, 2021) where astrotourism is promoted as a form of experiential tourism benefitting from clear skies in mountain environments. Beyond many examples from the Himalayas and other well-known destinations, ecotourism has extended to numerous locations, e.g. Iranian mountains (Heshmati et al., 2022), Southern Chile (Serenari et al., 2017), Georgia (Khartishvili et al., 2019) and Nepal (Poudel & Joshi, 2020). The observed shift towards ecotourism in mountain regions has already been addressed by the summary report of Williams et al. (2001) by emphasizing the diverse nature of attractiveness and inherent challenges for these development forms, focusing particularly on small and medium-sized enterprises as involved promoters of such activities.

- Of course, the most apparent similarity and stringent lessons might be drawn for trekking and mountaineering activities as widespread available in the Himalayas (Upadhayaya, 2018) or other mountain regions, demanded by a growing share of travellers, and increasingly appreciated by young groups of adventurers (Bonadonna et al., 2017). Many sports activities linked to mountain topography and particular amenities, such as mountaineering, climbing, skiing, cross-country biking, canyoning etc. find fertile contexts in remote and less-intensively used mountain regions.

- Still other types are related to specific features of land management in mountains, like pasture and other extensive grassland management that can be combined very well with slow tourism concepts. Like in many parts of the Alpine range, a great number of other mountain ranges deploy forms of natural heritage making use of pasture areas at high altitudes. The case of seasonal mountain settlements for summer cattle grazing of the katuns in Montenegro is a telling example for the endangered heritage (Laković et al., 2020) and the opportunities to elaborate low-intensity mountain tourism offers. As mountain pastures have to be viewed in close interrelation with the farmhouses in the valleys and adapted farm management of those areas, these forms of tourism interact with activities of guests

that appreciate local food and value farm resilience as an important contribution to fostering tourism in marginal mountain areas. Explorations of these linkages abound within the Alpine arc (Duglio et al., 2022; Stotten et al., 2021) but have been extended by global discourse for the UN Food Systems Summit 2021 to include a systemic approach synthesizing the trends for sustainable food systems across all mountain ranges of the world (Tribaldos, 2021). These considerations address the specificity of mountain agricultural techniques, its diversity and reliance on climate and socio-economic contexts, and the supporting functions for securing ecosystems and landscape frameworks for adapted mountain tourism activities.

▪ Finally, it seems important to underscore that these local and regional initiatives are spurred by the desire of governance to provide strategies for poverty alleviation. One of the early assessment reports on mountain tourism opportunities was focused particularly on this aspect as leading theme and motivation for enhancing awareness, local participation and ambition to integrate social with ecological prerequisites in shaping small-scale tourism projects (Bierling & Pasotti, 2006).

The topics to which the case of the mountaineering villages might contribute as information or model comprises thus a long list of various aspects. It highlights the widespread interest and effects of this initiative: the consequence is not to be sought in replicating the instrument through identical measures in other mountain ranges, but to learn from its main objectives, procedures, governance arrangements and mobilizing features. The references mentioned above are just exemplary, what they suggest is a rising concern for an orientation towards the “niche” type of sustainable tourism in mountain regions as a highly appreciated form of alternative tourism, with important implications for mountain destinations.

5. Conclusion

After decades of growth in tourism in all parts of the world, including mountain regions, concern for sustainable tourism development has risen over last decades and gains more and more influence for general tourism concepts. The niche initiative of the “mountaineering villages” provides a localized example for an alternative pathway, and is set amid the high-developed and intensive tourism region of the Alps. This spatial location and the institutional interlinkages render it to a particularly influential model. Having been elaborated over more than a decade the small number of about 20 villages in Austrian mountain regions have revealed their appeal and relevance for sustainable mountain tourism development. Over recent years, several municipalities in adjacent countries of the Alpine range have joined this former national initiative and thereby underline the more widespread relevance and interest for this approach. Even if other mountain ranges show quite distinct framework conditions, many similar programs have been elaborated throughout many mountain ranges of the world and underscore the global pertinence of sustainable mountain tourism.

The objectives of the initiative include tourism and socio-economic performance, resilience and sustainable development pathways. In this regard, they

can be assessed by some quantitative indicators of local development. However, the analysis reveals that these aspects cover just one part of project's intentions. The more meaningful aspects are the qualitative development of tourism features, with a focus on low-intensity trends and shifts towards soft tourism forms that are representative for alternative tourism concepts, in strong contrast to still prevailing mainstreaming approaches.

As the analysis makes clear these trends might be seen as precursor to emerging global tourism trends. Albeit local implementation is striving to achieve demanding high-qualitative forms of tourism, with challenges for resilient pathways, the rising demand cannot be overlooked. It seems particularly important not to fall into a trap of short-term economic success, but retain the alternative objectives of retaining ecological quality, unique features of mountain contexts and heritage, and inclusive roles of local stakeholders and actors. The art of continuous low-intensity tourism development demands to strike a balance between preservation of amenities of mountain areas, seen largely as sensible areas under pressure from global development trends, concentration forces, and neglected by liberal governance considerations, and such alternative concepts of sustainable mountain tourism approaches like the mountaineering villages that are oriented on other value frameworks. In enhancing local community-based tourism development and addressing ecological needs as core criteria they seek to combine mountain assets with concern for respecting limits of use of sensible areas.

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