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Perception and needs of senior visitors in the Swiss National Park – a qualitative study of hiking tourists above 55

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Keywords: Seniors, elderly, tourism, Swiss National Park
Fig. 1: Visitors watching the rut of the red deer at Val Trupchun. (Foto: Corvin Bulliard)

Introduction

Most protected areas in the Alps have become attractive tourist destinations. Also the Swiss National Park (SNP) receives more than 150'000 visitors per year, who are attracted by the park’s pristine environment, flora and fauna, and hiking opportunities (Lozza 1996). The SNP, located between Engadine Valley and the Val Müstair (46° 40' 21" N, 10° 10' 31" E), comprises a surface of 170 km² and heights between 1400 and 3100 meters above sea level. Founded 1914, it is the oldest national park of the Alps. Since 2010 the area, enlarged by the Val Müstair forms the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve Swiss National Park/Val Müstair. On weekends with good weather thousands of visitors are on the trails and crowding becomes an issue, especially because visitors have to remain on the trails and designated pick-nick areas. A relative large proportion (27.4 %; unpublished survey of the SNP 2006) of the visitors are elderly people, a group that receives rising attention by the tourist industry (Prahl 2002). Due to better health conditions, higher life expectancy and the ability to stay active for a longer period, the elderly are participating more in tourist and leisure activities than a few decades ago. Moreover, their financial means have also improved in recent years also due to a well working pension scheme, which is why they are seen as an important future market. Moreover, they also have a disproportionally high interest in nature tourism (Hennig & Grossmann 2008). The high demands – based on experiences in the past – of this group of tourists are not
easily pleased. This article addresses the needs and desires of senior visitors of the SNP. Qualitative interviews were conducted with people above the age of 55 during summer and autumn 2009 in several resting areas of the park. In addition, experts from the region were interviewed to ascertain how this group is appreciated by the tourist industry. Since summer tourism to the SNP generates up to 50 percent of the region’s direct and indirect revenue from tourism – in 1998 this amounted to CHF 10,2 millions (Küpfer 2000) and generated 120 jobs (Cathomas-Bearth 2001) – in-depth information on the increasingly numerous group of elderly tourists is important for the region. In this paper we first give a brief overview over research on elderly people. Second, the methods and subsequently the results are presented and discussed. In the end we will conclude with a few recommendations. {end of page 47 in the print version}

Elderly people in tourism research

Due to better health conditions, higher life expectations, and better financial means, elderly people are much more active, confident, adventurous, and leisure-oriented than a generation before (Scheiner 2001). Hence, they have even become the preferred target group for the leisure industry, even though they are not so easily pleased and have high demands (Prahl 2002).

Older people, seniors or 3rd age refers to people aged 55 or more. They can be divided in subgroups such as empty nesters (55-64 years; Möller et al. 2007), young olds/young seniors (55-69; Nimrod 2008; Thieme 2008), 3rd age (65-79; Kochsiek & Gieselmann 2009), old olds (75-90), aged (above 85), and long-livings reaching 100 years (Prahl & Schröter 1996). For this investigation mostly empty nesters, young seniors, and 3rd age people were interviewed. The interest for nature and conservation is increasing with the age of people causing a general increase in the age of visitors to the SNP (Hennig & Grossmann 2008). 61 percent of visitors to Berchtesgaden National Park aged 55 and older describe themselves as nature lovers and state nature and landscape as the principal reasons for their visit. Moreover, the ability to move around, to hike, and to visit tourist destinations has a positive effect on physical and mental health (Flade et al. 2001; Käser 2003). The number of elderly visitors to conservation areas has also increased due to the emergence of theme trails, hiking events, and the promotion of nature tourism (Dreyer et al. 2010).
Methods
During summer and early fall 2009 110 elderly visitors have been interviewed in the SNP using a qualitative approach using a convenience sample. The interviews were conducted in different locations in the park, mostly in resting areas. A problem-based guideline interview after Witzel (1985, in Flick 2010: 210f.) was used that included episodical sections stimulating interviewees to expand. The interviews were subsequently transcribed, coded, and analyzed. The main categories were “patterns of moving”, “interests”, “needs”, and “desires”.
The results of this visitor interviews were subsequently discussed with ten experts, selected through theoretical sampling including representatives of tourism, the hotel sector and gastronomy, public transportation, municipalities and the management of the SNP itself. The aim was to get a broader understanding of the attendance older visitors get in this region and what measures are taken to accommodate their increasing number and demands.

Elderly visitors’ perception of the SNP
Senior visitors to the SNP mainly come for the fact that it is a protected area, in which fauna and flora can develop undisturbed from human interference: „Nowadays... it is good to have a spot where nature can just remain nature“ (woman 60-64). To preserve this they strongly support strict regulations given by the park management: Hunting, fishing, depositing rubbish, or leaving the trails is prohibited. Hence, “nowhere else one can observe chamois and ibex in such a nice way as here, as nobody would disturb them” (man 70-74).
Since the visitors regard the park as property of the Swiss population, they also want to have access and think they have a right to enter. Some miss the opportunity to enter the park in winter on snow shoes, which is not allowed. However, for most the motivation to visit the park is to hike and observe its natural beauty, especially when ungulates are around. Hence, the peak season is from July to August and during the rutting of the red deer that can be observed in Val Trupchun at the end of September: “It is the power, the power they have, that’s really special” (woman 65-69). Most do not come with a single interest but for the park’s variety of things that can be seen and done. Senior visitors are mostly visiting regularly; 75 percent of the respondents visited the park at least once before. Some remember that fifty years ago the forests were in an inferior state and remark on the regeneration that has happened since. Many bring along reference books to determine plants or birds or use binoculars to
observe wildlife. They also like to get in touch with park rangers or researchers. Another point is that seniors often bring along their family and friends: “It is not simply running around getting sweaty and thirsty, it is an incredible extension of the feeling for nature [for the grandchildren]” (man 75-79).

Almost every visit requires some fitness. Therefore, in the interior of the park visitors above 80 are very rare. As frequently returning visitors many elderly know that they take longer for the trails than advertised on the signposts. Being less surefooted they require well-maintained trails. In general they emphasize that the trails are in excellent condition safe for a few difficult spots where they would have appreciated steps or handrails. They also expect extensive information and adequate maps from the SNP and some also use the digital media offered by the park. Besides that, some (mostly women) would like to have toilets in the larger resting areas and benches to rest without having to sit in the grass.

The elderly visitors have great expectations, they want to see everything they came for. Therefore, they are less tolerant to crowding and inappropriate behavior. They even scold people who are not following the rules or report them to the rangers and they are wary of school children whom they describe as loud and undisciplined. As a consequence, they ask for more trails in order to avoid crowding.

Results from the expert interviews

The interviews with tourist experts from the region shed a different light on the group of elderly tourists. They report that while the visitors of the SNP in general have a higher level of education than average tourists, the elderly are among the keenest to learn new things and often visit the visitor centre to get information brochures or buy books. They are frequent participants of excursions offered by the SNP management or private organizations. If they are pleased with what they have experienced they are very grateful guests, states a leaseholder of a park cabin. Moreover, for the senior tourists the park is a special attraction since mountain-bikers – from whom they often feel disturbed when hiking in other regions – are not allowed to enter.

Seniors are known as very reliable visitors who often come back every year. They also serve as multiplicators bringing along friends or family. Knowing about the great interest this group has, tour operators offer tailor-made tours, excursions, and information events. One hotel in a tourist resort explicitly caters for visitors above 50 with sufficiently large printed information (including the “small print”) and menus.
and a direct access to the nearby spa. Also public transport is aware of the special needs of this clientele. Timetables are printed in as large fonts as possible and drivers are trained to be attentive and informative.

**Discussion**

In the SNP a special group of exceptionally fit and interested seniors are found. The results show that the senior visitors are also exceptionally well informed about the conditions and requirements of the trails as well as about the flora and fauna they are about to encounter. Their need for the experience of undisturbed nature is sometimes threatened when crowding occurs and other visitors do not follow the SNPs rules. The seniors do not only have clear ideas about their fellow visitors, they also have high expectations towards infrastructure and the quality of information. No other age group shows more interest in background information and seeks contact to the park rangers. The tourist industry in the area is aware of the potential of this group and has adapted some of their offers to seniors. In response seniors are more often returning and become regular guests and serve as multiplicators.

**Conclusion**

Demographic changes such as the greater number and fitness of elderly people have consequences for tourism in protected areas. The expectations, needs, and desires the seniors expressed in the qualitative interviews require some adaptations by the management of the park as well as by the tourist authorities. Many have been accounted for or are part of the maintenance of the park. The seniors are very much in favor of the park’s management and emphasize that the rules are appropriate and should be enforced even stricter. Their wish to have toilets and benches in selected resting areas can probably not be fulfilled. The biggest issue is related to crowding. The seniors are most sensitive about this and their tolerance for disturbances through other visitors is very low. The park management is well advised to monitor this issue carefully.

Fig. 2: Interviews in the Swiss NP, researcher in the orange vest (Foto: Corvin Bulliard)

References


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