

Matkailutkimus 8: 1, 7-23 (2012)
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National Parks in Italy: Sustainable Tourism Marketing Strategies

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In Italy there are different forms of management for protected areas, depending on the type of area, e.g. national or regional parks, natural reserves and marine reserves. The management of national parks is the most consolidated. Every park is managed jointly by a president, a board of directors and a park community, which all together form a board representing every local authority in the area. National parks are under the direct jurisdiction of the Environment Ministry and they are dependent upon it financially. Often they are created in inland and poorly developed areas with problems of unemployment and depopulation. Currently, due to the shortage of funds, the managers of national parks are increasingly conscious of the role of parks in local development and of the need to find economic resources. Consequently, they are thinking of new marketing policies with a strategic approach to governance.

Today, protected natural areas have become tourist destinations of increasing importance. They are not seen as places to be preserved intact and turned into museums, but rather as areas that need investment to favour the development of sustainable tourism. For this reason, the strategic aims of parks are increasingly focused on tourist marketing activities aimed at new tourist segments, often market niches, which should create extra wealth and employment whilst respecting the environment. Therefore, to become competitive in tourism, parks must carry out strategic marketing activities, identify the main target markets and create tourism products to be promoted. To achieve these aims, they need to involve all the private and public subjects operating in the park, to jointly develop marketing strategy and to try to exploit new tourism-related professions, such as park guides and promoters, who bring together all the tourism resources of the

destination.

Key Words: National parks, protected areas, management, marketing, sustainable tourism

Although the first measures to protect the ibex were taken in Italy as early as 1821, the first national park, Yellowstone, was created in the USA in 1872 (Cimini, 2011: 62). Fifty years passed before the creation of Gran Sasso National Park, the first in Italy¹, soon followed by other so-called *historic parks* in Italy.

The first protected natural areas were created mainly to preserve certain areas of particular natural importance (Hall & Frost, 2010b: 3). At that time the concept of protected natural areas was above all linked to the idea of allowing visitors to enjoy splendid natural locations (Frost & Hall, 2010), which were seen as *sanctuaries of nature*. In northern Europe, where one hundred years ago the first European park was created, protected natural areas were situated in isolated and rarely visited places, without any economic interest, considering these areas “natural landscapes without cultural heritage or human presence” (Wall Reinius, 2010). The main aim of parks was to preserve wilderness (Fredman & Tyrväinen, 2011: 7), and governments did not take into account the social aspects of conservation (Piccioni, 2011: 29).

In reality, at that time, partly as a result of the industrialization process that provided among other things the construction of the railway infrastructure, the idea of promoting tourism in those areas had already emerged. Thus, national parks played also a social role, reinforcing – especially in Finland and Norway – the national identity, unity and independence. In other words, these areas became patriotic symbols of social cohesion and political stability (Wall Reinius, 2010).

In Great Britain, in addition to meeting the aims described above, parks were created for recreation and the integral conservation of the countryside, also by maintaining agricultural activity. It was thanks to Romanticism that such areas, which previously in Europe did not enjoy a positive reputation, began to be appreciated, above all by intellectuals. This gave rise to the request to protect and use parks for recreational activities and, given their limited value in terms of production² and the absence of alternative business uses, for tourism. The need to preserve natural resources was also strengthened by rapid industrialisation and consequent urbanisation (Wall Reinius, 2010).

Beginning in the '70s³, a new purpose for parks emerged connected to the need to halt the loss of biodiversity, which is connected to the concept of *environmental sustainability* (Cimini, 2011: 64). For the first time in local development policies importance was placed on conservation, in order to guarantee future generations a quality of life that would be the same as or better than the current one (Storlazzi, 2003: 101): a concept which was to be shared by the local population and visitors (Ferraretto, 2009: 44).

¹ Italy was the fourth European country to set up national parks (Piccioni, 2011).

² This is the so-called worthless lands hypothesis (Runte, 1972, 1973).

³ This happened also following the Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972.

Today, notwithstanding divergent management models, worldwide parks are considered important instruments for growth, above all thanks to the tourism that they generate. Often, in fact, they are created in underdeveloped areas, inland areas afflicted by unemployment and depopulation, where the presence of a protected natural area can be a driver of *sustainable development*⁴, capable of encouraging not only the hospitality industry, but also agriculture, crafts, wine and food and other industrial activities (Frost & Hall, 2010a: 11).

Parks almost always have more than one function. Hall and Frost (2010a) identify the most important functions of the parks as: *regulation* (linked to the ability to maintain biodiversity); *habitat* (with an impact on local and regional wellbeing), *support* (in terms of preventing natural disasters), *sustainable development* (to boost the local economy), and *information* (for environmental education). To these we may add, especially in the highest quality parks, *culture* (i.e. maintaining traditions), *recreation* and the emerging function of *local marketing*, above all with regard to local people and their link to the countryside (Hall & Frost, 2010a: 308; Pratesi, 2009). This range of functions can easily create conflict among the various subjects involved, who often have different expectations and interests – hence the need for park managers to give priority to the human and social side, by agreeing on programs and involving the local population and all stakeholders in decisions.

In this light there clearly seems to be a potential clash between two key elements of the mission of protected natural areas (and of relevant legislation), i.e.: the need for conservation, on the one hand, and the need for public access for tourism and recreation purposes, on the other (Hall & Frost, 2010a). The two objectives, which cannot always be reconciled, have given rise in the past to a lively debate between those who saw the park as an area to be preserved at all costs, even to the point of barring access for visitors, and those whose top priority was the development of business by trying to make it eco-compatible and stressing its positive impact on the environment, as in the case of some forms of ecotourism (UNWTO, 2011: 55).

Today the idea of a form of nature conservation based on tourism has gained the upper hand (Piccioni, 2011: 17–18). The American National Park Service, in drafting its own strategic guidelines, stresses the need to pay increasing attention to socio-economic and cultural aspects, as well as to the involvement of the local community (Rossi, 2011: 173). According to some experts, it is only when a sufficiently high number of people visit parks and appreciate them that interest is created in their conservation and the public resources needed to this end are found (Eagles & McCool, 2002).

Moreover, it is only through the balanced distribution of benefits among users of the land and residents, that it is possible to pursue the objectives of sustainable development of an area (Caroli, 2011). This gives rise, among other things, to the importance of communication tools such as *sustainability reports*, which enable disclosure of the aims, resources deployed and the results achieved of the various strategic choices (Luzzati & Sbrilli, 2009: 192).

⁴ The most common definition of sustainable development is as follows: *Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the needs of future generations* (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987: 8).

Park management should therefore perform a range of functions aimed at (Ferraretto, 2009: 33):

- The protection and management of animal and plant species and communities, ecosystems, natural processes, and landscapes. Such a function should be carried out with the contribution of research activities, developing collaboration with universities, as is already the case in Anglo-Saxon countries.
- The socio-economic development of the territory, through the exploitation of local resources; tourism contributes enhancement through a hospitality system compliant with a park (integrated hotels, agritourism, B&B, etc.); preservation and development of traditional agricultural activities and of typical agro-food productions (linked to the uniqueness of the protected natural area).

The functions that should necessarily be performed by the parks are therefore the protection and control of the territory, to be favored also with the aid of environment-related education initiatives and communications aimed to involve all stakeholders in the enhancement of the park. A fundamental duty, then, includes the monitoring and management of visitor flows, so as to protect the environment and exploit its strengths.

Finally, a further function to perform is that of “interpretation”, that is to determine communication forms that aim at the following objectives (Uzzell, 1989:78): favor visitors’ involvement, share ideas on the role and functions of protected natural areas; increase stakeholders’ involvement; strive for a balance between visitors’ needs and natural resource management; develop park managers’ capability to combine the different functions that tourists expect from the park.

Everything should point toward favoring the conservation and exploitation of the natural heritage and park tourism development, preserving local critical resources, with the aim of enriching the experiential content of the visit and conveying information on local resources, life-styles, and culture.

The Italian situation

Italy is the European country with the greatest biodiversity, in terms of the number of species and ecological systems: it is in fact home to a third of European animal species and almost half its flora (WWF, 2005). The Italian system of protected natural areas is fairly well developed and can boast important results, both in terms of conservation and local development, despite insufficient attention to the issue of parks from the political sphere (Rossi, 2011: 175; Piccioni, 2011: 71).

In Italian law protected natural areas are divided into the following types: national parks, regional parks, natural reserves in land, river, lake and marine environments. In total there are 871 areas covering a total of 31,000 km², or over 10.5% of the country, to which may be added 28,000 km² of marine areas and 650 km of protected coastline⁵. The peculiarity of the system of Italian protected natural areas, which distinguishes it for example from the U.S. system, is the high level of human activity, due to the presence within these areas of urban centres, for a total population of around two million inhabitants (Second National Conference on Protected Areas, Turin, 11-12 October 2002)⁶. Moreover, the law also envisages conservation, experimentation, promotion and the emergence of compatible businesses, in order to encourage the social and economic development of these areas. The underlying idea is that conservation cannot be achieved without forms of social and economic development of the area which houses the park and that these must involve safeguarding the environment (Rossi, 2011: 173), a vision which is now shared also by park managers (Second National Conference on Protected Areas, Turin, 11-12 October 2002). For this reason, the strategic aims of parks are increasingly focused on tourist marketing activities aimed at new tourist segments, often market niches, which should create extra wealth and employment whilst respecting the environment.

Unfortunately, today the scarcity of economic resources and the continual cuts in national and regional funds are threatening the survival of protected natural areas, as well as preventing them from operating appropriately⁷. To this problem we may add other elements which make management difficult, above all for national parks, such as limited operational and economic autonomy, a marked fragmentation in responsibilities and limited differentiation in management models, even given very different environmental situations (Storlazzi, 2003: 88–90).

⁵ The areas are subdivided as follows: 24 national parks, 27 protected marine areas, 147 national natural reserves, 365 regional natural reserves, 134 regional natural parks, 3 other protected national natural areas and 171 other protected regional natural areas (Cimini, 2011: 71). The total surface area in hectares is 6,016,624.6 (Ministero dell'Ambiente e della Tutela del Territorio e del Mare. Direzione Generale per la Protezione della Natura e del Mare. See: www.minambiente.it/export/sites/default/archivio/allegati/varii/superficie_ree_naturali_protette_2010.pdf). 2010 data.

⁶ Currently in Italy national and regional parks involve a very high number of town councils (respectively 504 in the 23 national parks and 819 in the 123 regional parks), for a total of 16.2% of Italian town councils. Source: Compagnia dei Parchi (2004) and Dipartimento per il Turismo (2005).

⁷ For year 2011 the Italian Government planned a cut of about 50% in all parks' budgets; this decision would lead to the closure of a great number of parks. At present the situation is highly uncertain.

Protected natural areas as tourist destinations

Protected natural areas have become tourist destinations of increasing importance. In particular, national parks are promoted domestically and internationally as *must-see attractions* and, in many cases, have become real *tourist markers* (Wall Reinus & Fredman, 2007), that is key elements of tourism destinations which provide information and which evoke mental images in the minds of current and potential visitors (MacCannell, 1976; Leiper, 1990). The term “national park”, in addition to being connected to nature tourism, is considered an indicator of a high-quality natural environment (Haukeland, Grue, & Veisten, 2011: 81) and can become a symbol of national identity (Frost & Hall, 2010b: 63).

“Nature tourism” has been defined as *tourism in which the main aim of the holiday is the observation and enjoyment of nature and traditional culture* (Osservatorio Permanente sul Turismo Natura, 2007: 6). This is a segment in which demand is growing⁸, in Europe and worldwide (Fredman & Tyrväinen, 2011: 5)⁹.

According to the World Tourism Organization rarely do tourists move for just one purpose. Those whose only interest is nature, the so-called *hard ecotourists* (Blamey, 1995), are only a small niche in the market, and they are looking solely for deep immersion in nature. On the other hand, much more numerous are *soft ecotourists*, who combine other interests, linked for example to the local culture, food and wine, and sport (Fredman & Tyrväinen, 2011: 79). *Soft ecotourists* are looking for a complete holiday experience, which includes *authentic* elements of the area visited (Ferrari, 2006)¹⁰. From this viewpoint, the park should be a “local tourism system” which can offer services to provide knowledge not only of the natural environment, but also of historic, cultural, artistic, handicraft, and culinary resources, traditions and folklore. Thus, *ecotourism* must include a quite varied range of types of offer, which are connected in various ways to the philosophy of *slow travel*, in other words to the chance to become part of the local life and enjoy real contact with the places and people, especially when on holiday (Osservatorio Permanente sul Turismo Natura, 2007: 8).

In order to welcome ecotourists, in 2008 accommodation places (beds) available in national and regional parks totalled around one million in 27,942 accommodation establishments. In 2010 it is estimated that there were a total of over 99 million room nights in the official accommodation establishments which are located in Italy’s regional and national parks (Osservatorio Permanente sul Turismo Natura, 2011). The international component of these tourism flows is very significant. The foreigners who choose these destinations amounted to 4.8% of all those holidaying in Italy.

⁸ Sustainable tourism has been defined as: *ecologically sustainable in the long term, economically vital (profitable), ethically and socially fair for local communities* (Charter for Sustainable Tourism, Global Conference on Sustainable Tourism, Lanzarote, 1995).

⁹ According to the UNWTO around 10–20% of international travel is related to nature experiences (above all in Northern Europe) (Fredman & Tyrväinen, 2011: 9).

¹⁰ Tourists looking for *authenticity* (MacCannell, 1976), in fact, particularly appreciate contact with the local culture, which allows them to immerse themselves in the lifestyle of the place they are visiting, thanks to events, social gatherings, and contact with local people.

Italians account for around 40%, equal to 2.6% of all tourism (Osservatorio Nazionale del Turismo, 2011).

According to Federparchi, the Italian federation of parks and nature reserves¹¹, in protected areas there is an overall turnover of around 1 billion euro, with 80,000 people employed, which has led to the creation of agricultural, tourism and craft companies and around 1,200 cooperatives in the areas themselves (WWF, 2005). These figures confirm the significant attraction of parks as a tourism resource in Italy. Moreover, as shown by the *XIV Report on Tourism in Italy* (Dipartimento per il Turismo 2005), an analysis of the data for individual parks shows both situations of excellence and others falling behind in terms of tourist numbers and arrivals; therefore, it is possible to deduce that the overall panorama is quite varied at the national level in terms of tourism development.

Research objectives and methodology

The general aim of the study consisted in investigating thoughts and behaviours of park managers in Italy, given the current market and economic conditions. Specific research topics included: impact of nature tourism on local areas, type of initiatives and tools adopted to encourage the development of sustainable tourism in protected natural areas (taking into account human and business resources, regulatory system, positioning, internal and external communication), as well as opportunities and obstacles to marketing parks. Given the purpose of the study, which examines an under-investigated topic at the national level, a qualitative, in-depth interview-based analysis was adopted (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

In the preliminary research phase, an experience survey was implemented and both literature and secondary data on the theme of protected natural areas were analysed (McDaniel & Gates, 2006). First, in order to obtain greater understanding of the investigated matter, the issue was discussed with knowledgeable individuals (academics, managers, journalists, etc.). Once insights into the research problem were obtained, the most significant scientific contributions on the topic were searched and prior studies conducted both at the national and at the international level were analysed. Based on information gathered during the exploratory research, the interview script was designed.

A purposive, expert sampling method was used to choose subjects to be interviewed. Such a method consisted in assembling persons with experience and expertise in protected natural area management and marketing, leveraging also on the social network of the researchers. The results presented below are based on the 14 in-depth phone interviews conducted.

¹¹ Founded in 1989, Federparchi includes over 160 bodies managing national and regional parks, marine protected areas, regional and state nature reserves, and consists of regional coordination offices.

Results

Why nature-based tourism is important to society, in addition to the economy

The importance of national parks is witnessed by numerous contributions emphasizing not only the economic, but also the cultural, educational, and societal benefits that tourism sites of this type may bring to the region where they arise (Page & Dowling, 2002; Higginbottom, 2004; Jarvis, 2011). This importance is confirmed by the interviewees, who specifically highlight the positive impact that parks have on the host community, and ultimately on the entire natural habitat. With relation to the different missions that parks should pursue, all interviewees agree upon their great social significance. One interviewee even stated: *“Thanks to the protection of our park we offer the community a great service: in fact we preserve the air, water, food, that is to say the strategic resources for survival of the human race”*.

Among all the possible functions of parks – *regulation, support, development, information, culture*, etc. (Hall & Frost, 2010a: 308) – the function of promoting tourism development is considered by most of the interviewees not only necessary but, if appropriately handled, essential for economic sustainability, also given that parks cannot survive on state funding alone. *“Apart from our wilderness, we don't produce anything, so tourism is one of the compatible activities par excellence”*.

The presence of tourists in parks is seen as an essential element in a sustainable economic model, and not just for the direct revenue contribution they generate. Tourism flows provide, in fact, the opportunity for cultural exchanges between the host community and the visitors, enriching the local social context. These benefits have reverberated positively on the historically conflictual relationship between park bodies and the local population, which has been improving, however, in recent years. One interviewee said in this regard: *“This trend has occurred both because we have been more engaged in discussing and agreeing on decisions and because, grounded on objective data – tourism statistics – we have demonstrated the positive effect that nature-based tourism has on the seasonal adjustment of visitor flows”*.

In some areas, especially on islands, the interaction between locals and tourists has enabled the reduction of the excessive independence and hostility of residents. The manager of a park in a coastal area explained that “mass tourism” has a negative impact, not just in environmental terms (such as the destruction of the local area and of biodiversity), but also in social and economic terms (unemployment, social clashes). In fact, it concentrates its economic impact on a few local operators and, generally, in a well-defined period of the year, leaving several months and most of the population completely excluded from the process of development. On the other hand, sustainable tourism (the manager defines it as “welcoming” tourism) is focused on a number of local activities, compatible with conservation and with balanced development of the local area. It requires expert hospitality and is a form of cultural tourism which exploits the *authentic* (MacCannell, 1973; 1976), which has a secure market, with effects that are better distributed in both seasonal and social terms. *“In*

short, we don't have to attract people (as other inland parks do) but rather dilute their numbers".

The current economic crisis, which has inevitably reduced tourist spending, has had a much less marked impact on sustainable tourism: this is seen above all in mountain and inland parks. *"Obviously hotels no longer fill up as they once did, in restaurants people have one course rather than two. But the important thing for us is that we never stop, not even in the off season"* one interviewee said. In Abruzzo, for example, sustainable tourism in parks has had a calming effect on the damaging impact of the 2009 earthquake¹².

An important feature of sustainable tourism in protected natural areas is therefore *resilience* (Aiginger, 2009), resulting from an even distribution of tourists over the whole area, *"which does not impact on the environment and respects culture and local society"*. Many of the interviewees estimate that demand is moderately growing. In particular, it is noted that, for foreigners, parks are becoming *must-see attractions* and real *tourist markers*.

What is needed to develop sustainable tourism?

When processing all the answers, six main areas emerged where parks must invest in order to achieve their objectives.

Managerial skills

It is well known, in the tourism management literature, that a "superior" resource endowment of a destination does not represent per se a sufficient condition for being competitive. Capabilities are needed in order to integrate, reconfigure and develop new resources with the aim of matching (or even anticipating) the changes in the external environment (market, competitive landscape, etc.). Antecedents of these capabilities seem to be found at the individual, firm and network level (Zollo & Winter, 2002). Due to the complexity of relationships of local stakeholders, destinations are difficult to manage and market in an appropriate way (Sautter & Leisen, 1999). The need to reconcile the interests of both the professional and personal nature of people living and working in the tourist area encourages the employment of strategic activities that take into consideration the desires of all local stakeholders, be they individuals or organizations (Buhalis, 2000).

This given, for almost all the interviewees among the chief obstacles to the development of sustainable tourism is the limited managerial skill which has long been a feature of the bodies managing parks, whose approach has been more linked to the conservation of biodiversity than to the management and marketing of the local territory. *"Up to now the main skills were linked to conservation and research"* – one interviewee explained – *"and there was a widespread inability to take any other kind of initiative"*.

¹² On 6th April 2009, a devastating earthquake occurred in the region of Abruzzo, in central Italy. The main shock measured 5.8 on the Richter scale and 6.3 on the moment magnitude scale. The epicenter of the earthquake was near L'Aquila, the regional capital, which together with surrounding villages suffered the most damage.

However, there does not seem to be complete agreement about the specific way to market parks. There are in fact, for example, those who do not believe that marketing is part of their responsibility: *“tourism operators do that”*, said one interviewee, *“the role of parks is not to sell themselves, but is the concept of conservation. The term marketing is almost a fall from grace”*. Another interviewee confirmed the same line: *“The institutional aim of a park is to conserve. The promotion of tourism is an entirely secondary aim: God forbid it should become a priority, this is not Rimini. Other people do marketing.”*

Others, on the other hand, have a different attitude and see what they regard as the cultural backwardness of operators as the reason for the failure to develop tourism. *“The main obstacle is presented by those who are convinced that defending nature must be a static exercise and not a dynamic factor for development.”*

A regulatory system and adequate public funding

According to the National Association of Protected Areas Personnel (Associazione nazionale personale aree protette, 2012), Italian national parks have been recently undergoing the fifth financial cut since 2005, for an overall reduction of 35% in public funding. The decrease in available resources triggers the pessimism of a significant number of interviewees. A negative attitude is linked to the perception that public funding will further shrink, given a political culture which still does not see defending nature as a fundamental factor of the country development and a crucial element of the national tourism strategy. *“In the last three years the available resources have fallen by 70%; if that continues the future will be dramatic”*. Operators' distrust is also fuelled by an obsolete regulatory system (Law 394, policing national parks, dates back to 1991) which is often thrown into turmoil by what are perceived as rash and unforeseeable political decisions: *“At any moment they could endanger the work of years”*.

According to all interviewees, the current regulatory system is very inefficient: *“On the one hand, we have limited autonomy in spending decisions on investments, even the most basic, and, on the other, we are not ‘institutional’ enough, either as individuals or as a network, to be able to have an authoritative voice with regard to the local area”*. The prospect is, therefore, one of conducting *“long and difficult battles”* to reform the laws and encourage public-private partnerships.

However, what seems to be missing, also at a central, national level, are guidance and coordination. *“Marketing can't be done without a network”*. An effort to fill this gap has been made by Federparchi both at the regional and at the national level, and by EUROPARC internationally¹³.

¹³ The building and strengthening of a national system of protected areas marked by criteria of participation and democracy has been, since its inception, a major objective of Federparchi. Therefore, Federparchi devotes particular efforts to coordination and integration policies among its members, encouraging the exchange and sharing of knowledge, experiences and best practices among parks. Since June 2008, Federparchi has also been established as the Italian section of the EUROPARC Federation, joining with its members an organization that associates today around 430 institutions, public organizations, non-governmental organisations and businesses. Together they are responsible for managing hundreds of protected areas in 35 European countries. For more information visit: www.parks.it.

Tourism, or the income from tourism, in national parks could at least in part make up for the serious shortfall in public funding. However, at the moment, such income is no more than 15% of total income, also due to objective legal restrictions. *“We cannot sell merchandising, commercialize stuff or make promotions. Being public bodies, entities that manage parks are not supposed to perform marketing activities, and this holds true also from a legal and administrative point of view”*.

The need to target the tourism offering

Answers provided by the interviewees confirm the existence of two types of demand: *hard* and *soft eco-tourists*. The former, mainly foreigners, reach the destination already knowing what to do, where to go, what to expect. In other words, they need less accessory services on site: what they gain is uncontaminated nature, countryside and the rare species populating the area. The other type of tourists (*soft eco-tourists*), mainly domestic, require much more assistance, dedicated services, and information. These visitors need to be led and educated, and wish to enjoy a wide range of tourism services.

To appeal to the first target group, the quality of local nature and investments made to protect and preserve it are of paramount importance. In terms of “scarcity marketing”, rarity, and therefore the difficulty in accessing to some resources, can become a major source of attractiveness: *“it is necessary to convey the message that the presence of restrictions on usage allows tourists to rediscover in parks something which it is hard to find in other places”*.

On the other hand, marketing initiatives directed to the second target group must include the typical techniques of theme parks, museums, and tourism which is not specifically nature-based. *“There are people who ask for various kinds of service, above all for accompaniment and assistance”* – explained one interviewee, director of a mountain park. *“The most critical levers are therefore communication and services offered on site, as we try to intercept tourists heading for the typical vacation areas.”*

The challenge that national park managers have to face is related to their ability to cope with the co-existence of two customer categories that should not interfere with each other. This is possible if the offer is differentiated, respecting locally the different areas, which are more or less critical in terms of carrying capacity and of trade (agriculture, production, services, etc.) and taking into consideration the different targets (organised groups, individuals, families, etc.).

Therefore, sustainable hospitality cannot be realized only through accommodation deployment. It has to encompass the whole of experiences that a quality natural area can provide (and not only of a naturalistic type). *“We have to aim at diversity (in keeping with biological diversity), including also the cultural component”*. From a theoretical point of view, the approach is that of experiential marketing (Schmitt, 1999).

Pricing is a controversial issue. While it is generally assumed that services should be accessible to anyone (i.e. they should be free), there are also those who believe that a reasonable amount of money should be paid for benefiting from a quality service. This would also reduce the risk of diminishing the perceived value of what is offered.

“It is necessary to make the local area and also the tourists understand that anything of value has a cost and this must be paid for on a fair basis. Our experience teaches us the visitors are willing to pay for quality services”. It is even more critical, given the scarce resources, to manage to guarantee a service which, since it is paid for, lives up to expectations. *“If the quality of the service is low, there is a risk of developing and satisfying undemanding tourism which should not be the target for our product. So it is necessary to ask for a fair price and let people know about the quality we offer”*. All this makes *customer education* an essential activity so that visitors can *“develop increasingly demanding tastes”*.

Some interviewees were worried about the possible negative impact of marketing for tourists on the actual use of parks. *“I’m worried by an ill-considered increase in sport which is not in keeping with the aims of conservation. Sport is often an end to itself, even mountain biking is not really compatible with nature. Sport can be envied, but must be carefully and thoroughly regulated”*.

Internal marketing and partnerships with stakeholders

Adopting the goal of sustainability means that any tourism initiative must be integrated into a general strategy of sustainable development. This requires, in particular, that the planning stage gradually involves decision-makers, operators and the local population, beginning with its youngest members. Younger generations, in fact, appear to be more attentive to environmental issues and more inclined to adopt virtuous behaviours. This requires significant investments in internal communication (destined to the members of the host community) so that the subsequent external communication (aimed at promoting the destination) is coherent. *“Not everyone is happy about the creation of these parks, because they then come up against restrictions on their activities (in particular illegal activities), so the presence of tourists could even be a hindrance”*.

Given the extremely difficult period we are going through, it is not surprising that the issue of alliances recurs frequently in the answers given by the interviewees. They complain of the obstacles to such alliances often linked to the difficulty, or even impossibility, of working together towards a common goal, sometimes due to the excessively front-line role of operators. All the instruments which encourage cooperation are seen as necessary. Among these is the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism, which is promoted by EUROPARC and enables the creation of a relationship involving several operators focussed on common goals linked to sustainable tourism. *“Partnerships with local communities involve hard work, which is based not just on getting the communities to agree on the values of conservation (since residents are largely indifferent to these values) but also on getting them to perceive that the park can trigger a long-lasting (and therefore sustainable) economy which is much less subject to competition”*.

External communication

External communication is another element of common interest to the various interviewees. They are all convinced that it is necessary to raise awareness among citizens of the role of parks, in part to generate income and resources. It is noted in this regard that, by its very nature, sustainable tourism in parks is barely visible: *“there is more impact from one flat-out week when there is snow on the ski-runs than there is in 12 months of continuous niche tourism”*. As a precondition for effective promotion, then, it is necessary to invest in external communication, above all for those areas which are far from the large urban centres and from short-break tourism flows. In this case, too, all the interviewees recommend the leveraging of networks and partnerships at various levels – local, regional, national and international (as highlighted in the principles of the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism). *“It is necessary to create a critical mass in order to raise awareness and direct customer demand in a sustainable way”*.

The target of communication is not only tourists: it is necessary to raise the awareness of the public and, consequently, of the political sphere. *“External communication is necessary to make people understand how important the role of protected areas is in the current day, not only to protect the local area, but also to help it grow”*. In this light, Sustainability Reports are an important communication tool which lets stakeholders know what the park is doing and shows that it is something which can guarantee a high return on investment in both economic and social terms. At the moment, there is no universally accepted definition of corporate sustainability report (Roca & Searcy, 2012), but several definitions are available in the literature. In particular, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) defines sustainable development reports as *“public reports by companies to provide internal and external stakeholders with a picture of the corporate position and activities on economic, environmental and social dimensions”* (WBCSD, 2002). A similar definition is offered by Daub (2007), who states that a sustainable report *“must contain qualitative and quantitative information on the extent to which the company has managed to improve its economic, environmental and social effectiveness and efficiency in the reporting period and integrate these aspects in a sustainability management system.”*

Effectuation

In the difficult financial situation that parks find themselves in, it is difficult to adopt a traditional strategic approach which, starting from a present goal, defines a business plan and at the same time seeks the (public or private) resources needed to achieve the goal. Some of those interviewed spoke explicitly of adopting an approach which is diametrically opposed: they start from the (few) resources available – not just economic resources, but also intangible resources, such as talent, creativity, intelligence, relationships – to then only subsequently establish *“what”* it is really possible to do without getting their hopes too high and taking things step by step.

This approach of *“do what you can”* in theoretical terms can be traced back to the theory of *“effectuation”* (Read, Sarasvathy, Dew, Wiltbank, & Ohlsson, 2010). Relations with the local community are handled in keeping with this approach: *“we decided to avoid the method of ‘proscription’: we simply state what we intend to do and*

then we see who is interested in joining our project, if possible with the contribution of their own resources". Generally, this is mainly based on face to face meetings, starting with the most receptive interlocutors and trying to stimulate word of mouth promotion.

Discussion and conclusions

The role of the parks has changed. They are not sanctuaries of nature any more, aimed only at conserving and safeguarding territories and biodiversity, but rather they pursue an increasing number of objectives, characterized by high social, cultural, as well as economic value. They perform multiple functions that have a significant impact on the territory. The natural park managers who were interviewed are aware of the social responsibility of parks and of the need to favor sustainable development in protected natural areas, in addition to adopt more effective management tools and to endow their structures with specific managerial and organizational competencies. In particular, they all concur that tourism enhancement must be achieved through marketing initiatives addressed both to traditional park visitors and to new tourism segments, bearing interests not necessarily limited to naturalistic resources.

Furthermore, the involvement of all stakeholders, in addition to public opinion and the political sphere, appears to be fundamental to avoid further misunderstanding or the underestimation of the role of protected natural areas. Otherwise, resources could be further cut and become insufficient for achieving the aims of protected natural areas.

In light of the results of the survey carried out, we can confirm that park managers consider tourism as essential for parks. While for some of them it is a necessary lever to offset the continuous and dramatic cuts in public funding, for the majority it must become an integral part of the institutional aims of the body, since it is essential to encourage both the economic and, above all, social development of the local area.

Nonetheless, park managers are aware of the need to encourage forms of economic development which do not result in environmental imbalances and impoverish local resources. This objective should, according to the interviewees, be pursued while respecting nature and the environment, through forms of production of environment-friendly goods and services, thanks to controlled incentives for tourism-related initiatives and activities, which can encourage local development in accordance with rigid parameters of environmental sustainability. Tourism development should, in particular, always be regulated in such a way as not to threaten the natural environment, without underestimating a series of related risk factors.

Given the scarce available resources, management must adopt effective measures to increase demand both in terms of communication (to be carried out thanks to local alliances as well as national and international networks) and the product on offer. In particular, as for the service, it is essential to take into account the segmentation of visitors and plan to diversify the offer (where possible) or to explicitly position the park should, due to problems of carrying capacity or infrastructure, the two segments not be reconcilable and it be necessary to target only one of them.

With the scarce resources available, parks must act as an enzyme which, through small actions, shows the economic case for sustainable tourism on a daily basis, in other words an offer which is not based on the paradigm of “accommodation places” but on the complete nature experience. If, at the time of using the “good” (safeguarded, conserved and valued), the users note an extra quality to their experience compared to the norm, then the price requested is not a problem for visitors.

It is generally agreed that enlarging the functions and aims of parks enables protected areas to be considered as real *living countryside* (Mose, 2007) and highlights the importance of marketing, both internally and externally. In particular, no one underestimates the need for parks to be seen as drivers of development and as a positive element for the area that is host to them, and this makes specific marketing initiatives aimed at the stakeholders necessary. This is also useful in the current day to realise forms of cooperation, participation or partnerships with stakeholders, but also to find sponsorship and funding from private subjects.

For broader marketing, there is also a strong need for public-private partnerships and partnerships among individual parks in order to create a network among stakeholders that can, on the one hand, attract funds and significant shares of nature tourism (which is growing, above all, internationally), and, on the other, to generate services and information. The network is essential for tactical operations, such as joint participation in specialist fairs, but also to share experiences, research activities and good practice (Federparchi and EUROPARC offer a great deal from this point of view), and to find resources from private contributors and from the European Union (for example, through EUROPARC).

In general, if we consider marketing in its broadest possible sense – which thus includes the promotion of conservation and the education of visitors among its goals (Kotler & Lee, 2007) – the most important investment must be made in training so that all those involved in managing the local territory are truly capable of planning its sustainable development.

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