

Will climate change increase the attractiveness of summer destinations in the European Alps? A survey of German tourists



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ABSTRACT

The possible consequences of climate change on tourism in the Alps have been discussed widely, but much less so for the summer season. Based on a literature review on the effects of weather and climatic conditions on destination choice and development, this study surveys German tourists about travel to the Alps. The survey includes a two-step choice experiment to analyse the effect of additional days of sunshine on visitation to the Alps during summer. The findings show that an increase in the days of sunshine is only relevant for some tourism segments when traded off against other destination attributes such as outdoor activities, nature experiences or events. The likelihood to switch to a substitute destination because of additional days of sunshine is low. Destinations attracting activity and relaxation-oriented tourists would gain the most, while the nature-oriented segment is indifferent to more sunny days. The paper also discusses the methodological challenges of researching the effects of climate change on destination choice based on an extensive literature review.

MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

Given the study focuses on destination choice, its implications are relevant for destination marketing in the first place:

- (1) About 10% of the tourists still perceive the Alps as a cold and rainy destination;
- (2) the discussion about climate change and its most obvious impacts such as debris flow after heavy rains might be perceived in an exaggerated manner by tourists from further away;
- (3) a significant nature-oriented clientele makes its destination choice independent from weather and climatic changes—therefore this target market should be regarded as the priority segment;
- (4) for activity-oriented visitors more sunny days do not necessarily compensate for the desired recreation activities; and
- (5) when positioning Alpine destinations in comparison to the Mediterranean, the marketing strategies should not rely on contrasting the moderate Alpine summer climate but emphasize typical alpine experiences and outdoor recreation activities.

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1. Introduction

The process of destination choice has been a significant field of research since the 1980s (e.g. Mathieson & Wall, 1982:28;

Woodside & Lysonski, 1989:9) with its goal to understand, anticipate model and influence travelers' decisions. Key components of all these models are the tourists themselves (including their lifestyles, values, experiences and socio-economic and behavioral characteristics), information and marketing (including product design, pricing, advertising, travel arrangements) and the attributes of the destination (including accommodation, activities, local attractions and landscape characteristics) (March & Woodside, 2005:142; Woodside & King, 2001). Local climatic conditions

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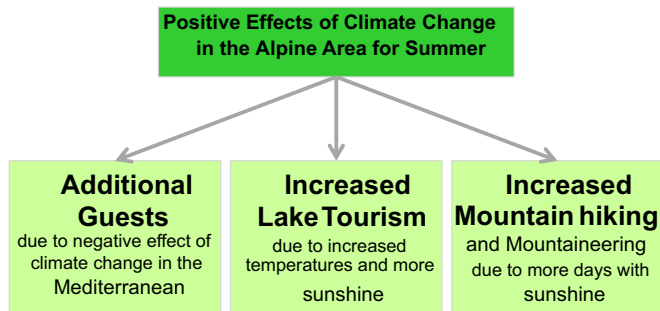


Fig. 1. Possible positive effects of climate change on summer tourism in Austria (after Pröbstl, Greil, & Wirth, 2012).

in the destination typically constitute one of the crucial attributes, especially in the case of sun and beach destinations, but also for winter destinations. The aim of our paper is to study the possible impact of climate change for summer tourism in the Alps within the complex trade-offs that visitors face when selecting an Alpine vacation destination.

The possible consequences of climate change on tourism in the Alps have been discussed widely. However, most of these studies, focussing on destination choice and climate change, are analysing possible effects on winter tourism (e.g. Abegg, 1996; Elsasser, Abegg, & Bürki, 1998; Bürki, 2000; OECD, 2007; Pröbstl & Prutsch, 2007; Unbehaun, Pröbstl, & Haider, 2008; Landauer, Pröbstl, & Haider, 2012). Given the high likelihood that the amount of snow and period of snow cover both will decline significantly due to climate change (Formayer, 2011), the Alpine winter experience, including opportunities for winter sport and snow related activities will be affected (Pröbstl et al., 2008; Unbehaun et al., 2008; Landauer & Pröbstl, 2008; Landauer et al., 2012).

On the other hand, the expected effects of climate change on Alpine summer tourism are less critical or might even be positive. Negative effects might occur if the loss of permafrost and melting glaciers would lead to dangerous situations for mountaineering (Braun, Fiebig, & Muhar, 2007; Müller, Weber, & Thalmann, 2007; Pröbstl & Damm, 2009). These effects pertain to specific user groups and very specific areas only, while most experts expect overall positive effects of climate change on the summer season (Moshammer et al., 2014). Fig. 1 summarizes the three main reasons for this positive judgement. It is expected that the mountainous areas will attract more tourists, because increasing temperatures will still remain in a comfortable range, especially in higher altitudes. Furthermore additional days with sunshine are supposed to make the mountainous areas more attractive and appealing for many activities such as mountaineering, climbing and hiking. New target groups mainly interested in relaxing in the sun (“sunbathing”) and swimming could also be attracted in the future. Especially the traditional Alpine mountain lake regions may become more appealing for this sun and beach oriented target group.

In addition to these effects, trend researchers and tourism experts expect a renaissance of the “Sommerfrische”, a term that describes the former behavior of the wealthier urban population in the 1920’s who spent at least some part of their summer vacation in the rural, mountainous environment of the Alps (Müller et al., 2007). The Austrian Tourism Agency is already promoting this new trend in their advertising. Using the term “settimana verde” (green week) the moderate summer climate in the Alps is already promoted in Italy (Österreich Werbung, 2011). The revival of the “Sommerfrische”, characterized by convenient conditions for outdoor sports and other activities, will likely be supported further by more frequent heat waves and increasingly warmer conditions in the Mediterranean area. A possible fundamental shift in European

vacation preferences from a focus on sun and beach to alternatives such as the Alpine region is not well researched yet (Zebisch, Grothmann, Schröter, Hasse, Fritsch, & Cramer, 2005:144; Müller et al., 2007:92). After significant losses in the late 90s, the number of overnight stays during the winter and summer seasons are now about equal in Austria (Smeral, 2014).

Recent research about climate change in tourism focuses predominantly on two approaches (Gössling, 2005). One is the modelling of climate indicators such as temperature and precipitation and correlating them with recent tourism indicators, such as the number of bookings, arrivals, or the length of stay, to infer the attractiveness of regions under changed climatic conditions. These models are also used to predict the future behavior of tourists (Pretenthaler & Formayer, 2011). The other main approach is based on investigating possible behavioral changes of tourists induced by climate change. In this approach, tourists typically respond to questionnaires which often contain stated preference surveys (Richardson and Loomis, 2004; Pröbstl et al., 2008; Unbehaun et al., 2008; Landauer et al., 2012; Landauer, Pröbstl, & Haider, 2014; Pröbstl-Haider and Haider, 2013).

Both types of studies try to identify “winners” and “losers”, i.e. which tourism destinations are likely to benefit or suffer from climate change effects. Typical results of such studies are expressed in terms of expected losses of arrivals in the Mediterranean and the Caribbean during the summer (Maddison, 2001; Scott & McBoyle, 2001; Hamilton, 2004; Hamilton, Maddison & Tol, 2005; Amelung & Viner, 2006; Bigano, Hamilton & Tol, 2006). However, the likely effects of climate change on mountain tourism and summer tourism in the European Alps have not been studied in detail yet (Zebisch et al., 2005:144; Müller et al., 2007:92). Much less research has focused on the effects of climate change in the context of the already complex phenomenon of destination choice. The interactions between many competing offers and destination attributes remain still unclear and constitute an important research field (Gössling, Scott, Hall, Ceron & Dubois, 2012; Pröbstl-Haider & Haider, 2013). Therefore, this study explores whether the European Alps may expect positive effects of climate change during the summer. Focusing on a representative sample of German tourists, who constitute the main market for many Alpine destinations, our main hypotheses are that

- (1) Additional days of sunshine influence destination choice positively;
- (2) the effects of increasing temperature and additional days of sunshine differ by visitor segments; and
- (3) the perceived effects of climate change depend on the preferred activities in the mountains.

2. Climate and weather conditions in tourism research

2.1. Climatic conditions and the attractiveness of tourism destinations

Weather conditions and climate constitute part of the natural attributes of any destination and have therefore been studied for decades. Many authors analysed climate related destination attributes to characterise destinations and explain their suitability for tourism purposes (Hu & Ritchie, 1993:29; Baloglu & Mangalolu, 2001; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003:111). The focus of recent work has shifted more towards destination choice and possible behavioral changes due to climate change (De Freitas, 2003; Gomez Martin, 2005; Hamilton & Lau, 2004; Amelung & Viner, 2006:350; Gössling & Hall, 2006b; Mansfeld, Freundlich, & Kutiel, 2007). Lise & Tol (2002) as well as Hamilton et al. (2005) highlight that

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