

POSITION PAPER



Tourism in Austria's National Parks

Sustainability as an opportunity for successful nature
conservation and development of regions

Supported by the federal government and the European Union

Summary

The status of national parks as protected areas can and should benefit both nature conservation and the local population as well as the tourism industry.

The prime objective of the national parks is to protect and preserve what constitutes their very value. At the same time, they have a clear mandate for tourism and environmental education. This is why national parks also have a special responsibility for the development of nature-friendly tourism in the national park region.

The Austrian national parks, as representatives of Austria's natural heritage, are committed to ensuring that this heritage is heeded in the tourism strategies at all levels just as prominently as Austria's cultural heritage.

The national parks are generally open to all visitors providing nature and experience-oriented offers as well as environmental education programmes for a wide range of target groups.

Partnerships between businesses in the national park regions and the national parks shall create win-win situations.

Arrival by public transport and soft mobility within the region are in line with the philosophy of the national parks.

The national park regions are motors of sustainable regional development.

Preamble

This position paper of National Parks Austria deals with tourism in the Austrian national parks and national park regions. It presents the positions of the Austrian national parks on tourism in the national park regions. The contents of the position paper are in line with the objectives of the Austrian National Park Strategy 2020+ specifying it in detail. It provides the national park administrations and tourism decision-makers with orientation and decision-making aids on a strategic and practical level. The contact persons for the national parks are the tourism service providers in the national park regions and in the national park, such as the lodge and trail managers, the regional destination management and the provincial tourism organisations as well as the Austrian National Tourist Office. In terms of its importance for tourism, Austria's natural heritage is of equal value as Austria's cultural heritage. The combination of natural and cultural heritage within such small an area is outstanding and unique worldwide. Within an Austria-wide tourism strategy - the „Plan T-Masterplan for Tourism“ by the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Regions and Tourism (BMLRT) it is therefore justified and consistent to give as much space to the natural heritage and the Austrian national parks representing this heritage as to Austria's cultural heritage .

„Nature and landscape“ are among the most frequently cited reasons for tourist visits to our country (Austrian National Tourist Office, 2015): Three out of four holidaymakers are looking for „nature and tranquillity“ (Marketagent.com, 2016). The spectacular, unspoilt landscapes of the national parks are among the most beautiful and valuable Austrian sceneries. These are the areas where guests can sense and experience nature and wilderness directly.

85 % of the Austrian population can imagine spending their holidays in a national park region.

These regions generate a high level of satisfaction among their guests: almost all (97 %) would recommend the Austrian national parks to other people for recreation and insights into nature (Marketagent.com, 2016).

The fact that 11 % of the people living in the national park regions are employed in the core sector of tourism, i.e. in accommodation establishments and in gastronomy (National Parks Austria, 2018) is further evidence of the importance of tourism in the Austrian national park regions. In 2017, the national park regions generated more than 9.5 million overnight stays, which is almost 7 % of total Austrian overnight stays.¹

The Austrian national parks have an intense relationship with the people living in these national park regions and also with those who visit and appreciate these special places. Guest expectations of the naturalness and originality of their holiday destinations are growing. This makes it more important also for the tourism industry to preserve these remaining natural areas.

The Austrian national parks correspond to IUCN category II² protected areas. As such, they are challenged to protect the ecosystems entrusted to them and to preserve them for future generations. In addition they are tasked to act as catalysts for sustainability and development at local, regional and national levels. Sustainable tourism not only helps to preserve the natural heritage in the long term, but also strengthens the local cultural identity and creates long-term income opportunities for the local population.

In this respect, the Austrian national parks perceive sustainable tourism as an opportunity and potential for the long-term successful development of the regions and regard the businesses and the tourism industry as important partners for sustainable regional development in the national park regions.

1 Results of a survey in the course of the preparation of the position paper.

2 The IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources) has developed a seven-level global categorisation system for protected areas. Category II stands for national parks

Objectives of the cooperation between *national parks* and *tourism*

Both nature conservation and the local population as well as the tourism industry can and should benefit from the status of a national park as a protected area.

The national parks are the „core areas“ of the national park regions. A clear demarcation between national park and region is important for nature conservation. In practice, it must be taken into account that guests make little distinction between the protected area and the national park region. The natural resources of the national parks can be used as a tourist USP of the respective region. To do justice to this potential and for the sake of credibility, national park regions should both reflect the image of the national parks in their general concept and use the national park philosophy for stringent touristic offers.

Nature conservation and sustainable tourism must go hand in hand in the national park regions. Their connection is based on mutual appreciation, understanding, experience and the active involvement of all stakeholders. Our goal as protected area administrations is to raise the awareness and appreciation for the outstanding universal values and the unique landscapes both in the visitors of the national park regions as well as in the local population.

They shall assume co-responsibility for the protection and commit to the conservation of these values for the benefit of present and future generations. Appreciation by the local population for the high-quality nature and the philosophy of the national parks as well as awareness of the offers and opportunities in the protected areas are the basis for adequate communication with the guests.

High-quality offers fulfil the ecological requirements of the national park regions. They thus contribute to a uniform overall image, which is important for environmentally sensitive national park guests. This translates into economic and social benefits for both local businesses and the population as a whole.

We, the Austrian national parks, provide the basis for a touristic use of the potentials of the positive images generated by national parks among holiday-makers worldwide. This use is linked to the respect of the national park values by the tourism sector. Ideally, national park values are embraced by the brand values of the respective destination. This requires a cooperative, coordinated approach between national parks, tourism associations and tourism providers. A joint strategy can form the long-term basis for successful communication and marketing with tourism providing consistent communication and marketing work and promoting quality tourism offers by the national parks. The national parks support these communication and marketing measures to the best of their abilities. Close cooperation between national parks and tourism as well as coordinated programmes, offers, and marketing activities are important for converting challenging day tourism into value-adding overnight stays. The status of the national parks as protected areas can and shall bring benefits for nature conservation, the local population, and the tourism industry as a whole. The goal is to build a common identity as a national park region.

National Park administrations in the tourism structures

The Austrian National Parks as representatives of Austria's natural heritage are committed to ensuring that this heritage is given as prominent a place in tourism strategies at all levels as Austria's cultural heritage.

At present integration of the national park administrations in the regional tourism decision-making structures varies greatly, ranging from the formal status as shareholder of a regional tourism ltd to working group member with or without formal membership in the tourism association. The tourism associations are important partners of the national parks in marketing the national park idea and philosophy within the national park regions - to the tourism businesses and service providers. It is all about cooperation: the national parks see themselves as guardians and developers of the values that underlie the national park concept offering with their rangers and facilities high quality services in line with their protection and education mandate. Integrating these offers into the marketing activities of the tourism regions and using them to build up each region's tourism image as a sustainable, nature-focused destination provides an opportunity for unmistakable unique selling propositions. Further tourism products in line with these values and a joint communication line (visual language, etc.) based on the umbrella brand Nationalparks Austria (Nationalparks Austria, n.d.) furnish the national parks with the opportunity to present a uniform image for their respective destinations. This coherent tourism image leads to a clearer perception and greater success in the tourism markets. Participatory involvement in key tourism decisions creates win-win situations. Representatives of the national parks offer their cooperation in tourism strategies for the national park regions. The aim is to develop tourism in harmony with sustainability and the ecological and social needs of the region while also generating economic profit. This gives account to the interests of the population and allows for an optimal development of the national park and the surrounding region.

Mutual trust, material cooperation and regular communication are just as important as formal integration into the tourism structures of the destinations.

The aim is to place greater emphasis on the ecological and touristic values of the national parks in the activities of the Austrian National Tourist Office. The Austrian National Parks, as representatives of Austria's natural heritage, are committed to ensuring that this heritage is given just as prominent a consideration as Austria's cultural heritage in the implementation of the 'Plan T - Master Plan for Tourism' and in tourism strategies at all levels.

Limits to tourist use

The primary objective of national parks is to protect and preserve what constitutes the value of a national park. At the same time, they have a clear mandate in tourism and environmental education. This is why national parks also have a special responsibility in developing nature-compatible tourism in the national park region.

Tourism infrastructure within the various national park regions varies greatly. National parks are located in rural regions which throughout their development have managed to preserve their own ecosystems in the long term and thus obtain the designation of national park.

Still these regions also harbour locations or areas that have hit or exceeded their ecological stress limits. Causes include proximity to urban agglomerations and associated recreational and day tourism, individual tourist attractions and activities within or on the edge of the national parks, and the sensitivity of certain ecosystems. Here natural processes can be massively impacted by tourist activities. Such activities include - to varying degrees - mountain biking on unauthorised routes, entering prohibited areas (e.g. wetlands), ski touring in winter barred areas or flights with helicopters or other aircraft. Problems often arise from violations of the rules, especially when the protected areas are easy to reach and access.

These impact limits must be differentiated subject to seasonal and spatial criteria. It is the responsibility of the national park administrations and their experts to define these limits and to develop measures that will safeguard the ecosystems and their species in the long term. Together with the national park administrations and the rangers tourism providers and guests preserve the high ecological value of nature and landscape and thus the value of nature experience. Communication with all relevant stakeholders in the national park regions should achieve the highest possible acceptance for these measures.

Target groups and offers

The national parks are basically open to all visitors and offer nature and adventure-oriented as well as environmental education programmes for a wide range of target groups.

The national parks are open to all visitors. The offers of the national park administrations appeal above all to individual visitors of all ages, from all backgrounds and from all social classes who are interested in nature. Schools and other groups are also important target groups. Great attention is paid to offers for locals of the national park regions. They are the most important opinion leaders and multipliers to the guests.

The outstanding feature of the national parks is their unspoilt nature. This is the basis for the design of exciting tourism products such as decelerating adventure and educational offers. Such offers often make guests stay longer. The national parks also offer spontaneous, short experiences drawing attention to nature and motivating people to engage more comprehensively with the protected area.

In many places offers create incentives to spend several days in the national park regions in order to boost regional added value.

All Austrian national parks are in themselves tourism providers with specific competences: visitor centres create leisure and touristic options for different target groups including exhibitions, seminar facilities and accommodation, theme trails, campsites and national park camps, as well as general educational offers with rangers. Often these programs are available in several languages and are hence of great interest to international guests.

Such offers comply with the high quality standards of the National Parks which they implement through constant quality assurance, e.g. through eco-labels, ISO certificates, etc. Wherever possible, local barrier-free offers shall supplement already existing barrier-free mobility offers by the transport providers.

The national parks exclusively support offers and events in the regions that conform to national park standards and are prepared to cooperate with the tourism associations on a joint strategy development. This makes it possible to achieve an overall portfolio of the national park region that coherently reflects the values and goals of the protected areas.

Corporate partners of the national parks

Partnerships between businesses in the national park regions and the national parks to generate win-win-situations.

The successful commitment of local businesses is crucial for the effective development and management of sustainable tourism as well as for the acceptance of the national park in the region. Partnerships between businesses and national parks create win-win situations: businesses benefit from a general image transfer and specific marketing advantages. The protected areas find multipliers and communicators of the national park values.

Partner enterprises of the national parks can be tourist enterprises in the gastronomy and accommodation sector, tourist attractions, agricultural and other producers, direct marketers and other local service providers.

The exact definition of criteria for national park partner enterprises and the specific cooperation are in the hands of each individual national park or national park region.

What the partner enterprises have in common is that

- they are committed to the national park idea and the values of the national parks;
- they intensively promote and communicate the national park programmes and offers and, if relevant, also make use of them themselves;
- they fulfil relevant quality and sustainability criteria in their business management;
- they maintain close relations with the protected area administrations and other partner enterprises.

The national parks or national park regions organise networks of partner enterprises and contribute to the marketing activities of the enterprises through their own communication channels.

The partnerships are regularly subjected to quality assurance and evaluation by the national parks and national park regions in order to ensure long-term benefits for both sides.

Touristic mobility in the national park regions

Arrival by public transport and soft mobility within the region are in line with the philosophy of the national parks.

Promoting gentle mobility using own muscle power and public transport while at the same time minimising individual transport is in line with the philosophy of the national parks.

Most Austrian national park regions are easily accessible by public transport. Mobility within the national park regions in some cases is in need of further optimisation.

Providing mobility offers and transport services is not part of the tasks and responsibilities of the national parks. What is needed are regional and supra-regional solutions of equal benefit to both locals and guests.

The national parks are willing to contribute their possibilities for the development and implementation of regional soft mobility concepts. The services offered by the national parks for visitors should be tuned to the locations and timetables of public transport services.

Promotion campaigns in the national parks' information media give preference to arrival by public transport.

The national parks welcome barrier-free offers by the transport providers as well as the expansion of environmentally and climate-friendly mobility alternatives in the national park regions.

Contributions to regional development

The national park regions are motors of sustainable regional development.

Embedding each national park closely in its region is a declared goal of the Austrian National Park Strategy. This goes hand in hand with the cooperation of the national parks with the local economy, agriculture, the population and the authorities through sustainable regional initiatives.

National parks create jobs, attract public funds and subsidies to the regions and with their infrastructure contribute to the overall offer. Cooperative partnerships create benefits for both sides and are important for the overall further development. Sustainability in all sectors, especially the preservation of biological diversity and the cultural legacy of the region, is a declared focal point in the development strategy of national park regions.

National parks, together with various local partners, are involved in numerous joint regional rural development projects. Tourism and the development of experience-oriented products here have a high priority and are often co-financed by EU funds.

One important component of sustainable development is the marketing of regional products. In Austria the national parks support many such co-operations in the national park regions by defining partnerships for the development and marketing of regional products as a responsibility of each individual national park together with the destinations and relevant regional actors. This also means that any awards with logos or certifications are in the hands of each protected area.

All these measures and possibilities turn the national park regions into model regions. Together with the population, they constitute motors of sustainable regional development..

Vienna, October 2019

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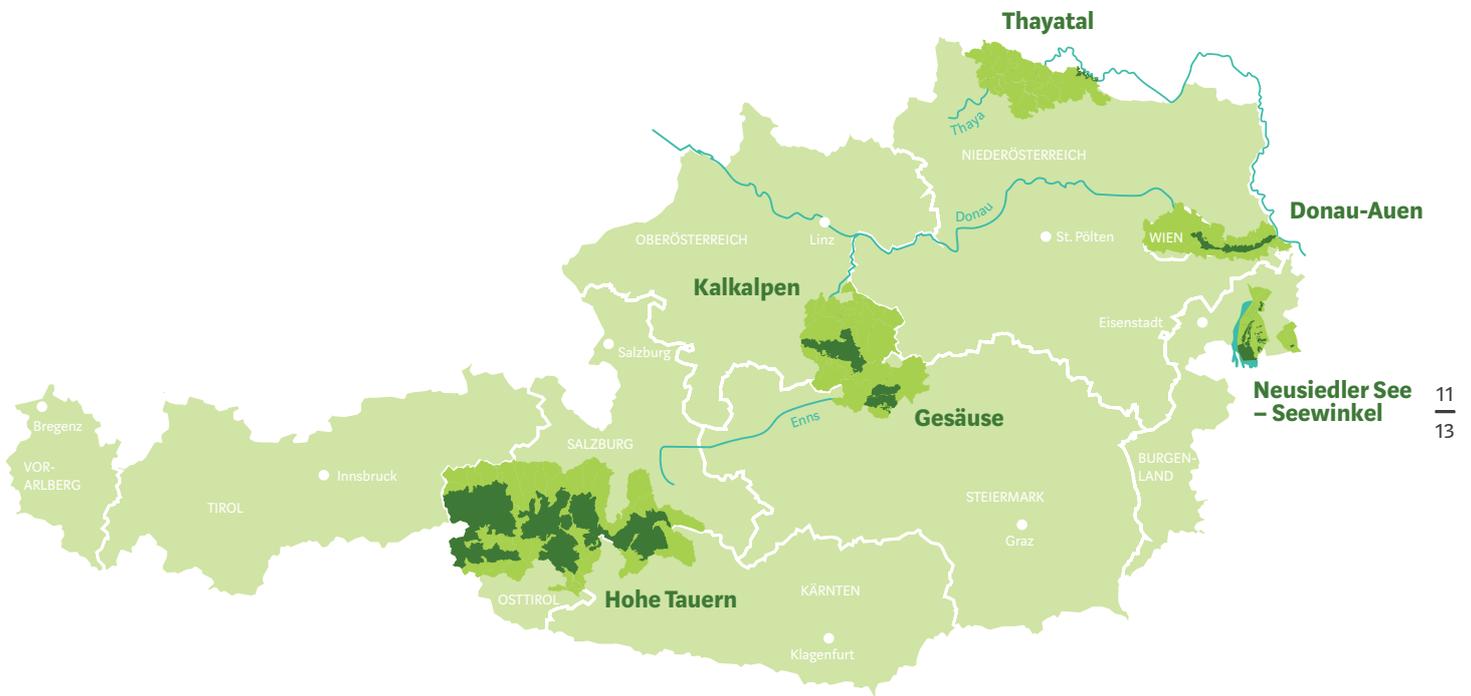
Adopted by the National Parks Austria Advisory Council, Vienna, October 2019

Cover photo: Gesäuse National Park,

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The Austrian national parks

and their regions



- Nationalparks
- Nationalparkregionen

Quelle: Nationalparks Austria,
Stand: Juli 2020

Annex 1

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Annex 2

Definitions

Leisure activities: in contrast to day tourism, leisure activities take place in the immediate and slightly wider residential environment; they also do not serve professional or educational purposes or the provision of daily necessities.

Sustainable tourism: sustainable tourism offers visitors a meaningful quality experience, preserves natural and cultural values, supports local value creation and the quality of life of the inhabitants and is economically profitable.

National park: national parks are protected areas of category II of the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources): „Protected areas which are intended to protect extensive natural areas together with the occurring species and ecosystems in the long term. These should also be available - in an environmentally compatible manner and with local acceptance - for spiritual needs, science, research and education, and for local recreation and sightseeing.“

National park region: the term „national park region“ is defined differently in the individual national park laws. It describes the surroundings of the actually protected area, usually the areas of the shareholding municipalities in the national park, sometimes also the riparian municipalities. The main share of tourism activities and the majority of tourism value creation takes place in the national park regions. A map of the Austrian national park regions can be found in the annex.

Plan T - Master Plan for Tourism: the Federal Ministry for Sustainability and Tourism (now BMLRT) presented the Plan T - Master Plan for Tourism in March 2019. Options for solutions and actions for the challenges in the tourism policy core topics such as networking of agriculture and tourism, marketing, tourism financing, indicators, tourism framework conditions, labour market as well as training and further education were developed in nine workshops and expert groups on future activities.

Protected area: protected areas in nature conservation and landscape protection are delimited areas in which the protection of ecosystems, certain species, biocoenoses and landscape types is of primary importance. There are different categories of protected areas, e.g. Natura 2000 areas based on EU directives or the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources) classification of protected areas.

Tourism: tourism (touristic travel) comprises the totality of all phenomena and relationships associated with leaving one's usual place of residence and staying at a different destination or travelling to another region. Travelling outside one's usual working and living environment is the only determining factor.

Day tourism: day tourism is defined as trips of more than 40 km which involve leaving the home environment but not staying overnight, which do not serve occupational or educational purposes or the provision of everyday necessities, or which take place on a regular basis.

Environmental education and education for sustainable development: environmental education and education for sustainable development aim at raising awareness and imparting knowledge about nature and the environment as well as human-nature relations. Education for sustainable development promotes a critical reflection on one's own reality of life, social conditions, prevailing models of thought and value judgements, and aims at the responsibility and maturity of the individual. Environmental education is one of the core tasks of the national parks. Depending on the target group, many environmental education offers are also tourist offers .