

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
OF WHITEWATER SPORTS IN THE SOUTHERN ALPS

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Abstract

Purpose: In order to better understand how certain sports tourism professionals have overcome the economic crisis, this paper focuses on how they have innovated on technical, managerial and marketing levels. Analyzing these strategies in the sector of “recreational white-water sports tourism” appears as a way to prospect.

Design/methodology/approach: The offer of white-water sports tourism does not fall under tradition forms of organization known to work in the tourism sector. Since the end of the nineties its mode of development seems to have enabled this sector to avoid undergoing the economic crisis. The methodology, based on interviews with entrepreneurs in the sector of white-water sports tourism in the Southern Alps, addresses their managerial strategies and strategic modes of operation in the development of their businesses. The aim is to explore the managerial factors that have resulted in both economic and environmental sustainability. The concept of sustainable development is employed to understand how these entrepreneurial activities are embedded in the social, economic and natural environments of the Southern Alps valleys.

Findings: The investigation shows that, rather than focusing on business strategy, professionals in this sector focus primarily on community relations. The supply of white-water sports tourism is presented in a lattice form which develops as a community. The modes of development of this sector, far from corresponding to standard business rationale, amount to a form of sustainable development which may explain the relative success of sport tourism in this period of crisis.

Keywords: Management, Offers, River, Sport, Sustainable, Tourism.

Introduction: Recreational sport tourism does not suffer from the crisis

If we analyse the performance of the different types of sports tourism, relative to culture, environment or entertainment-based tourism sectors, it is clear that demand for these types of tourism has risen steadily since the eighties, in spite of the economic crisis that hit in 2008 all areas of tourist attraction around the world with varying intensity (+4,6%/year 1996 to 2008, W.T.O. 2008). Professionals in sports tourism, private and public, have effectively apprehended this market change. In the French Riviera and the Southern Alps region of France, for example, these sectors have continued to propose, host and organise successful, national and international sports tourism events (Nice Ironman triathlon, Nice Cannes marathon, Louis Vuiton trophy, Europétanque, Roc Azur mountain bike ...).

In accordance with these trends, the development of sports tourism along the rivers of the Southern Alps has been on the rise despite the economic crisis. It appears clear that the majority of these business activities have developed in a sustainable manner. Not only have they been less affected by the economic fluctuations, but their offers appear to maximise use of local facilities and resources while preserving the natural heritage. The offer is therefore presented as an alternative to traditional entrepreneurial tourism. Based on these combined observations pertaining to the growing and seemingly sustainable sector of white-water sports in the Southern Alps, this paper addresses the managerial strategies of the entrepreneurs in this sector. Our investigation thus focuses on how, in the valleys of the mountainous Southern Alps region, the multiple entrepreneurs in the

tourism and sports sectors regulate their activities (Filloz, 2000). By focusing on their strategic modes of organisation in the development of their businesses, our aim is to explore the causal factors that have resulted in both economic and environmental sustainability.

1. The white-water tourism sector

A first characteristic of the offer of white-water tourism in the Southern Alps involves its position within the regional tourist industry. The sector falls in line with the overall institutional objectives of the French Riviera tourist industry, which seeks to enhance the attractiveness of its mountain areas, in order to complement the coastal offer and to boost its image. In addition, there has been increasing attention from public opinion, institutions and the tourist industry along the French Riviera to economically develop out-door, non-conformist and innovative types of tourism, while balancing the concerns for protecting natural areas (Bessy, 2008). Adherence to this principle has been achieved in part through funding. The development of white-water sports offers necessitates the instalment of specific equipment, the design of documents for users, and the creation of circuits for rafting, kayaking, canyoning, hiking, climbing, treetop trekking or via ferrata (Chazaud, 2004). Their funding depends heavily on the expertise of public institutions in order to attract funding on a local, national or European level. Funding otherwise relies on relations with political representatives of local communities. Institutions are particularly open to projects that balance economic development, environmental protection and the enhancement of local cultures and heritages. In harmony with such objectives, the marketing rationale of professionals in the white-water tourism sector emphasises the natural and durable distinctiveness of their business activity, while seeking to limit over-use of the river and strains on the environment (Darrol, 1997).

Moreover, the number of users is generally limited by ministerial decree, and tourist flows are closely linked to water flows and seasonal peaks, with saturation in August. The clients opt for short-stay activities (two to four days), aspect which limits the environmental impact and promotes a rapid turnover of customers. The product pricing is modest and the spending of the clientele remains directly related to the sport activity : equipment purchase, transport, low-cost accommodation such as camping (Giard, 1997). The quality of the rivers and their recreational use are the fundamental assets of the suppliers. Promotion of the products is usually communicated via institutions run by local communities, thanks to the relationships between the recreational sport operators and tourist offices and visitors' bureaus (Massiera, 2010). Nonetheless, tourists arrive from a large range of geographical origins with a predominance of visitors from Northern Europe, as is commonplace in white-water sports and tourism sectors throughout Europe.

2. The distinctiveness of the white-water tourism offer in the Southern Alps

In terms of the activities offered within the white-water sports sector of the Southern Alps region, the offer has recently expanded from traditional river activities, such as canoeing and kayaking, to include a diverse range of recreational activities. This has led to the rise of a competitive market based on white-water sports. The white-water sports sector, consistent with ongoing trends regarding the development of recreational activities and sports practices, has increasingly expanded its offer to the tourism sector. Most notably, white-water tourism has diversified and grown through the introduction of new variations in recreational white-water sports. The organisation of river treks and other water activities, for example, led to a wider range of practices, including rafting, hydro speed, floating, water hiking or canyoning (Dayrolles, 1997). The offers have very little focus on performance. Rather than "performance-model" sports offers, the offers are "participation-model" in that the main concern is the search for pleasure through recreational and sport practices in a natural environment (Coakley 2006). Such offers in white-water tourism grew as a niche even until the 1990's, up until its current model as a real niche market, but which has remained moderate in its number of offers and competitors due of the natural constraints on recreational white-water activities.

This range of services has brought together a number of sports professionals that work on the rivers of the Southern Alps which host white-water sports (La Tinée and La Roya rivers in the Alpes-Maritimes department; the Verdon river in the Var department; the Ubaye river in the department of Alpes de Haute Provence). The white-water sports tourism sector is formed by a constellation of individuals whose day-to-day lives and social interactions take place within the local communities. Within the nexus of the entrepreneurs, the shared location of their activities within the same watershed seems to foster a common identity and perspective on tourism that distinguishes these competitive offerings from other competitors in Europe, yielding a strong competitive position (Wright, 1974). A report by the Ministry of Tourism already attested to strong market potential of this sector (Du Cluseau, 2002).

Despite its apparent success, the offer of white-water sports tourism has evolved only very slowly and the structure has not been dominated by efficiency. Nonetheless, this study points to the idea that these same characteristics, which contrast starkly with traditional and formerly identified forms of entrepreneurial tourism,

may explain the sustainability and success of the sector. Indeed, the very structure of the offer of recreational white-water sports diverges from rational models of management typically found in sports and tourism organisations, which appear to be governed by individualism, passion for the sport, autonomy and empiricism. On the contrary, the activities of all these professionals do not appear in the form of an offer consisting of a traditional product mix with rational pricing policies and active marketing. This difference may however be the source of their relative durability. A comprehensive approach shall allow us to understand the regulatory mechanisms of this sustainable market.

3. Methodology: investigating the entrepreneurial reality of white-water sports tourism

This qualitative field study involves a series of interviews conducted with entrepreneurs proposing white-water sports and tourism activities along the rivers of the Southern Alps. The study focuses on the fundamental contribution of each individual as bearer of multiple identities constructed through mountain sports (Corneloup, 1991). The approach seeks both to apprehend these entrepreneurial activities that sometimes take a clearly collusive form, and to address the community logic which seems to underlie the social fabric of the business life. The interviews took place within several aquatic sports and tourism businesses that carry out their activities on the same site, within the three major alpine valleys relatively close to the French Riviera.

We proceeded by meeting with the heads of seven structures, four within the tourism sector (lodge, hotel, holiday resort, tourist office) and three from the field of aquatic sports (rafting, canyoning, canoeing). The offer of recreational sports in France being massively assured by very small businesses, this sample meets this size criterion (Pigeassou, 2002). In order to highlight the modes of organisation of the development of these businesses, the principal focus was placed on the discourse concerning the coexistence of activities and the organisation of meetings between the different actors involved, including residents, farmers, ranchers, fishermen, hunters, sports tourists and visitors. The offer of sports tourism is dependent upon these different actors with diverging interests.

4. The development of the offer through a community rationale

The offer of white-water sports tourism overall appears rooted in a network of relationships. The small sports-oriented businesses being embedded in the socioeconomic environment of the mountain, the offer is characterised by a relational system which lends to a sustainable means of development. This organisational development is usually explained by the regulating effect of the community phenomenon (Segrestin, 1985). This strategy ultimately secures a more optimal sharing of the site, through consultation with the local people, protection of the habitat with the advice of environmentalists, employment development thanks to versatility of the professionals, improved quality of market and nonmarket services to customers, expanded accessibility through better distribution, and promotion of a local identity clearly positioned on the theme of "world of white-water". This organisation reverses the usual process of policy development which seeks to maximise short-term profits by standardising products to be more intensively used (Kotler & Dubois, 2000). Rather, development is based on the synergy of its various local actors. The sustainable development of white-water activities that is observed in the Southern Alps can be explained by the community characteristics of the offer.

Regarding the volume of activity, the rationale is based on the idea that the activity must allow all the professionals to earn a living. Activities that can endure the seasons, such as the new types of multi-sport training, are therefore preferred. These activities are complementary rather than leading to over-use. Controlling the inter-seasons is therefore a central concern. The entrepreneurs redefine the types of practices so as to be able to cater to families during periods of low water flow. Regarding adaptation of the offer to cater to a large range of users and demands, the facilities are improved or adapted to respond to the demand of the various publics. The entrepreneurs also reach out to local users by organising events and creating educational projects in public schools. The sports activity becomes a means for discovering the aquatic environment rather than an end. The professionals address the elderly and people with disabilities, who are generally less present, by creating an offer that is enhanced in terms of comfort and security, allowing for increased autonomy within an environment that is usually inaccessible. The range of products is therefore presented in a form of concerted development.

5. Sustainable adaptation of the offer to market demands

According to the seasons and material conditions, the white-water sports offer avoids featuring one sole characteristic by presenting two types of products. The "dry product" takes the form of a single service such as boat rentals for partial or total river descent. Canoeing, despite seeming simple, has revealed to be tedious to manage. In spite of difficulties that are easy to overcome with adequate counsel, users solicit access to the activity without instruction. Such activities are offered on sites configured to allow for semi-autonomous initiations on stretches of the river that are calm and easily reached. The "integrated product" consists of a set of inseparable, embedded services proposed by a single service provider. For example, during a river trek, the boat

operator offers: suitable wear for aquatic sports, rental of the boat, transfer by vehicle to and from the starting and finishing points, professional supervision and guidance during the sport activity, complemented by accommodation and catering services. However, an integrated on-site service runs up against seasonal fluctuations in demand as well as the need for specific qualifications of personnel, all of which hinder mass development of these all-inclusive products.

The professionals have therefore expanded their range of products to encourage the practice of activities outside the peak season, which occurs between early June and mid-August. The mid season includes the months of May and September. Finally, the low season covers the rest of the year but remains without structured activity by professionals, who are rarely on-site during this period. The period of autumn has developed by opening up the business to aspects relative to the local environment and culture. Two examples illustrate this: hiking near the river to observe wildlife during the fall breeding periods and hiking trips in the landlocked enclaves of streams, as these habitats are conducive to the collection of different plant varieties. In order to offer this and to sustain their activities on the site, the professionals take advantage of their complementary products. We have noticed that several providers often work together to provide customers with more comprehensive products. As part of the organisation of the clients' stay in the mountains to exploit the river activities, a tour operator provides travel by bus to the practice site. Food and accommodation are provided by a set of professionals running hotels, restaurants, hostels or campsites in the valley. At the end of the chain, local professionals provide the recreational sport activities. The offer includes sports (outdoor and white-water sports) and socio-cultural activities (environmental explanative tours, museum and city visits, cultural and festive evenings ...). The offer often includes the aquatic sports in conjunction with complementary sports activities such as mountain biking, hiking, via ferrata and climbing.

The pricing of services is generally based on the use of equipment over time and various costs incurred by the operation of the business (buildings, equipment, personnel...). Professionals determine the individual costs by dividing the purchase price of their equipment by the number of places available. They divide this capacity by the number of operating days of their equipment. For example, the price of a canoe is about 1,000 Euros and its life is limited to three years. The professional uses this equipment approximately 50 times per season. This data is used to determine the price. Thus, the acquisition of 1,000 Euros, divided by the 150 operating days in three years, yields a cost of 6.6 Euros, to which he adds his salary and social costs. Finally, hiring a canoe for half a day for one, two or three customers is offered at a price of around 10 Euros, which is modest and accessible to a wide audience.

Regarding the marketing of the offer in this area, it usually focuses on a simple description of the activity, and deploys words that evoke emotions. The providers sell their products through unique marketing, guaranteed specifically by the synergy of a network of institutions, associations, communities and organisations from the private sector such as works councils, tour operators or travel agencies.

6. Conclusion: The community dimension explains the sustainability

As primarily seasonal activities, recreational white-water sports seem to endure the economic crisis because they are inherently structured by a rationale of sustainable development. The offer consists of ties between entrepreneurs of aquatic sports and professionals of mountain tourism. The exploration shows that the activities of these organisations are based on the dynamics of this tissue of social relations. While the modes of organisation of two types of professions may be different, their interests become converged when it comes to regulating the inter-seasons and the diversified clientele. This sector is therefore doing well because it has developed in a coordinated fashion. This coordination involves managing the high consumption period, and extending the periods of activity by protecting and promoting the natural and cultural heritage around the river. The offer of white-water sports tourism has developed through an effective community approach. Bringing together all the sports and tourism operators from the same valley, this community dynamic engenders a product line with increasingly diverse, comprehensive, concerted and complementary practices, all of which contribute to promote these outstanding sites: the rivers of the Southern Alps in France.

This "new" tourism offer, based on the use of local natural, geographic, social, economic and cultural characteristics, could allow tourist attraction zones to be safeguarded from trend effects. Henceforth these characteristics become the core of a form of sustainable development, more respectful of the local populations and environment.

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