Overview: tourism sustainability in the Alpine region: the major trends and challenges

Raphaël Dornier
Université Savoie Mont-Blanc, Chambéry, France, and
Chiara Mauri
Department of Economics and Political Science, Università della Valle d’Aosta, Aosta, Italy

Abstract
Purpose – This introductory paper aims to provide a broad overview of the significance and contributions of this theme issue.

Design/methodology/approach – This introductory paper draws from the papers presented at a conference on tourism and local development in the Alpine region (Courmayeur, Italy, June 26-27, 2017). Sustainable tourism from different perspectives was a core topic at this conference, and it is a theme widely discussed in the literature.

Findings – Sustainability in mountain tourism has many facets, and it involves many aspects of tourism management: mobility and mobility infrastructure; global warming, snow shortage and long-term viability of ski stations; pollution and clean air; price of accessibility; stakeholders’ involvement and networking; and cross-border partnerships. The tourism literature has always been in transition, with many disciplines contributing to its development. Sustainability adds new perspectives that enrich the field and broaden the horizon and discussion. Even though each paper has its own specific conclusion, there are several key themes that emerge from most of the papers. Among these, sustainability is stimulating a re-think of the “classical” products and services provided in mountain destinations, particularly in relation to the winter season. Snow, water and other physical resources typical of mountain regions can no longer be taken for granted, and their progressive scarcity requires a long-term view.

Practical implications – The findings indicate that it will be necessary to encourage tourists to try and explore the wider range of products and services that a mountain destination can offer. To facilitate this, tourism operators will need to configure a broader and richer experience in the future. The issue of sustainability involves many stakeholders, who can combine their knowledge, competences and activities to maximize the attractiveness of a location while preserving its resources for the future.

Originality/value – The value of this paper is that it highlights the key themes and perspectives that sustainable tourism is raising.

Keywords Sustainability, Alpine tourism, Trends and challenges, Winter sports

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction
This theme issue emerged from the Alcotra project, under the Interreg European Framework, aimed at fostering cooperation between the French and Italian organizations located around the southeast part of France and the northwest part of Italy. The Interreg Framework has as its main goals to promote innovation, a safer
environment, the valorization of natural and cultural resources and social inclusion. At the same time, it aims to address the climate change issues, sustainable mobility and youth employment and education in the cross-border area by involving different companies and institutions in the creation of an integrated and sustainable development approach. The Alcotra project was designed and is being implemented over a three-year period by two universities located near each other but on different sides of the border, i.e. the Savoie Mont Blanc University in France and the Valle d’Aosta University in Italy. The first step in this joint project was to organize an academic conference in Courmayeur in the Italian Alps in June 2017 based on the theme Tourism and Local development in the Alpine Region, gathering academics from different Italian and French Universities who for two days shared their thoughts, opinions and suggestions.

Purpose
Among the 32 papers presented at the conference and the two round table discussions, a central issue arose: to what extent is tourism development in the Alpine space sustainable. During the past few decades, the Alps have experienced near constant growth in tourism and with that, increasing tourist flows and infrastructures. This development started well before the birth of a collective consciousness about the necessity to limit the negative impact of tourism. Originally based mostly on skiing, tourism in the Alps is becoming increasingly diversified, with a desire to benefit from a more regular flow of tourists during the whole year and to cope with climate change. Moreover, as the Alpine space encompasses eight countries (Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Slovenia and Switzerland), the issue of international governance of this vast territory is a crucial one. Therefore, the issue of tourism sustainability in the Alps requires different perspectives (business and management, technology, transportation, physics, biology, law and geography, among others) and involves different levels of analysis – micro, meso and macro – to discern a deeper understanding of its different dimensions.

The main question framing this theme issue is therefore related to the new trends that are emerging in the Alpine space and their relative sustainability. These changes have an impact not only on the tourism industry but also in a more general way on local development. They should be analyzed from different angles, as they have different origins, dynamics and specificities. Some trends arise from institutional changes with laws that were recently implemented in France regarding mountain areas. These laws were supposed to grant more autonomy to local authorities based on the assumption that they will have the capacity to drive projects taking into account the specificities of their territory. Nevertheless, we will question the efficacy of these legal measures that seem to be undermined by a lack of cooperation between competing municipalities.

Other trends related to the rise in significance of the internet and the sharing economy as illustrated by companies like Airbnb and BlaBlaCar are impacting “traditional” tourism organizations, such as hotels or taxis. This, in turn, calls into question the competitive and legal environment in which these new forms of travel and accommodation operate. Most academic studies on these companies focus on urban contexts, as they originally emerged and expanded in the city, but it is time to enlarge the view to include also mountain destinations. The contribution of Hutting, Dornier and Selmi is a step in this direction: in a mountain area, where it is
hypothesized that Airbnb users are likely to be more sensitive to sustainability and in particular, its environmental dimension, than they are in an urban context.

Transport in the Alps has become a key issue, and there is now a deeper focus on ways of managing tourists’ mobility and improving traffic flows by combining more ecological and economic modes. Without travel there is no tourism, so the concept of sustainable tourism is linked to sustainable mobility. The paper by Larosa, Signorile and Spiru presents a new model for sustainable mobility in mountain areas. This is important, given the rise in traffic jams on highways leading to skiing stations and the pressure on parking at ski locations, and must be addressed by a new thinking.

There are also changes occurring in consumer behavior, as Mauri and Turci report that an increasing number of tourists spend their holidays in mountain resorts for reasons other than skiing, and Osti and Cicero observe that this includes appreciation of the landscape and sightseeing opportunities. A better understanding of tourist behavior will therefore enable local organizations to develop new tourism offers and implement the necessary changes.

Finally, a significant long-term trend is climate change. Rosson and Zirulia outline why now shortages are forcing ski resorts to review their offer, to define their prices in a more sophisticated way and diversify their activities, including during winter by promoting other activities complementary to skiing. Joly and Urungueanu report that some low-altitude villages that were once ski resorts have already abandoned their skiing infrastructure and are investing in activities that do not depend on snow. Adaptation to climate change can be enforced by law, as Joye observes in his paper, but more generally, legal perspectives are playing a more prominent role in mountain tourism (for example, the article by Courrège). A further connection with climate change is the quality of the air, which is usually taken for granted in mountain destinations and the paper by Arcaro, Gorla and Zublena explains how mountain destinations can be ranked according to their air quality index. This index can be used in communication campaigns, and in tourism marketing more generally.

The promotion of a mountain destination as a place to experience more than skiing requires a partnership between many stakeholders who can share their knowledge and competences by participating in long-term projects. This is the case with EUSALP, an example of territorial cooperation within a dense network of actors operating in the Alpine region and discussed in the paper by Bramanti and Teston. Similarly, the “Grande Traversée des Alpes,” with its many trails reflects the work of various organizations who collaborated to create a recreational product, as explained in the paper by Leroux.

**Outcomes**

The demand for more environmentally conscious and sustainable tourism grew in the 1980s and now sustainability has become an important issue in tourism. This issue is arousing discussion and an increased need to understand its many facets. Given that it has entered almost all kinds of tourism activities and environments (Saarinen, 2006), sustainability has greatly enlarged its domain and has attracted many disciplines. This World Hospitality and Tourism Themes (WHATT) theme issue represents a move in this direction, and it provides a valuable forum for professors and PhD students of management, economics, law and geography to discuss their points of view and help to find long-term solutions.
Reference

Further reading

Corresponding author
Chiara Mauri can be contacted at: c.mauri@univda.it