Summer breeze instead of winter blues? – Expert hearing at the Munich University of Applied Sciences shows how climate change is influencing the alpine region and that it can even give wings to innovations

Palms in the Inn Valley, a looming “alpine Ballermann” and the call for snow and sun guarantee were the most striking issues of the expert hearing at the Munich University of Applied Sciences. The faculty of tourism had invited for an expert hearing with workshops that served to kick off the EU ClimAlpTour project. About 70 experts from the insurance and finance sector, natural landscape management, NGOs and tourism experienced three top-class lecturers and productive workshops. In the end, they received answers to questions like: “How does climate change influence tourism in the Alps?” The risks and chances for insurance companies and investors became just as apparent as possible strategies for today and the future. In short: Even though climate change promotes innovations, especially with regard to summer products, the overall awareness that adaptation to climate change is absolutely necessary is still not strong enough according to experts.

“We urgently need a “change climate” as a tourism approach. In the short term a change in guest behaviour could be the engine for adaptation rather than the actual climate consequences”, project manager Prof. Dr. Felix Kolbeck emphasizes. This is why the debate in public about the consequences for alpine winter sports and glaciers is beside the point. Alpine snow sports have been declining for years, demand high investments and operating costs connected with high non-payment risks. The International Alps Protection Committee CIPRA even describes winter sports investment in low altitudes as “ruins of tomorrow” and sees all the better chances for creative and good products in alpine summer tourism. As the leading German academic tourism institution, the Munich University of Applied Sciences has taken up the cause of “sustainable tourism development” and “competence in the alpine region”. The mixture of participants proved to be exciting and productive. “Finance and insurance companies do business with risks and dangers. Tourism, however, does business with “longing”, Kolbeck said wryly.

Prof. Dr. Peter Höppe of Münchner Rück – the world’s largest reinsurance company – emphasized that when choosing a destination, climate is mentioned as the most important reason. Especially coasts and mountains, which are regarded as “early
warning systems” in the climate change, are popular destinations. Höppe's department called “geo risk research” owns the biggest database worldwide for natural disasters and collects data of about 600 to 900 catastrophes per year. It does not only include data on the biggest humanitarian natural disaster in Europe in summer 2003 with about 70,000 heat deaths but also on the flood of the century in 2005 which has been the most expensive natural disaster so far. In Switzerland alone the flood caused damages of 1 billion US-. It is obvious that the dramatic increase in meteorological occurrences is also influenced by man. More storms, floods, thunderstorms, hail or mudflows. In short: more extreme weather phenomena lead to higher risks for outdoor-oriented tourism. Ski resorts at lower altitudes and regions with water shortage or increasing heat would be on the losing side also because infectious diseases would increase. According to Höppe, the alpine region could especially profit from summer tourism and from the idea that “CO2-emissions get a price label” which means staying somewhere near would be popular again.

The “Alpine Pearls” – a cooperation of currently 21 destinations such as Interlaken, Arosa or Berchtesgaden – apparently are the winners of the climate change. Together they generate 11 mio. overnight stays and house altogether 2 mio. guests. Dr. Peter Brandauer, president of the Alpine Pearls and mayor of the Salzburg municipality Werfenweng convinced the participants: the 10-point-mixture for sustainable mobility upon arrival and on site as well as cooperations with mobility services provide black figures and protect the climate. Thus, in Werfenwang the share of train journeys increased from 6 % to 25 % and the number of overnight stays also rose significantly. Finally this leads to acceptance among lessors and the population.

ClimAlpTour is one of the three spin offs of the EU’s ClimChAlp plan concluded in 2007, headed by the Bavarian Ministry of the Environment. In the third lecture, its representative Dr. Jörg Stumpp struck a blow for the international cooperation as well as for the Bavarian climate programme 2020, which is based on reduction, adaptation as well as research and development. The programme’s aim is to reduce per head CO2 emission to under 6 tons. With 6,7 tons at present, Bavaria finds itself below the nationwide average of 10.3 tons. The programme involves an additional 350 mio. € for measures to be taken. On May 26, 2009 cabinet approved the Bavarian climate adaptation strategy.

The three workshops (nature and sustainability, finance/insurance, product development) on effects and adaptation revealed primarily one thing: The awareness and readiness for necessary adaptation to the climate change is still half-hearted and marketable sustainable products are still rare. And all the participants – apart from insurance companies – even more pin their hopes on summer products.
Nature workshop (moderation: Tanja Hanslbauer, Munich University of Applied Sciences, Dr. Thomas Probst, Alps research institute): The participants see good approaches to climate change adaptation and protection among those playing an active role in tourism. Nevertheless, awareness is still in its infancy. Only this awareness can help create a real “willingness to adapt”. According to the participants, there is a special need for action at the local level. Here, more foresighted thinking, more guiding principles actively lived are needed. However, often there is not enough room to take action in most local communities. According to Thomas Bausch, as an example between 60 % and 80 % of local areas are protected in the administrative district of Garmisch-Partenkirchen. Many experts see chances for sustainable regional development through higher temperatures – palms in the Inn Valley – and prolonged summer seasons. This also requires tourism companies, tourists and carriers to start being active. Since fewer areas will be available for use, conflicts among agriculture, forestry, transport and tourism are bound to occur.

Finance/Insurance workshop (moderation: Prof. Dr. Kolbeck, Munich University of Applied Sciences): The finance and insurance sector must arrange for increases in climate change risks being reflected in prices and provide security. This will lead to price increases in products. A quality push, new insurance products and a clear innovation impulse would offer new chances. Cost increases, maybe even an “alpine Ballermann”, better transparency and an intensified feeling of security – these are the challenges. Insurance companies seek transparency in matters of risk while service providers fear to deter guests by being too open about that issue. Insurers have to cater for higher sensibility to risks connected with nature. There is possibly a conflict of interests between insurers and the finance industry: investors write off projects after 10 to 15 years whereas for insurers the risk increases the longer the investment lasts. For the finance industry summer tourism is safer while in the view of insurers winter tourism bears fewer risks.

Product development (moderation: Prof. Dr. Thomas Bausch, Munich University of Applied Sciences): Fortunately, tourism experts taking part in this workshop regard the Alps as double winners of the climate change in summer tourism. This is because flights in the source market of Germany are getting less attractive for consumers, proximity wins and the Alps develop a strong appeal thanks to their authenticity. Moreover, some tourism experts assume that flights to the Alps from more remote source markets will increase. On a wide base there is not yet a real inner conviction or strong demand for climate friendly tourism products. This does, however, not go for high priced niche market products. Climate change seems to be a welcome opportunity for all to wake up and take a chance on innovations which are long since necessary. Replacement investments by mountain railways should also be suitable for summer business and should enhance great mountain experience. According to CIPRA, many new investments are planned – about 100 development projects at high mountain levels in the whole alpine region. Destinations should concentrate on
summer products and diversify their winter products. Spring and autumn campaigns are already the order of the day.

The lesson is clear: Sensitive and close consideration as well as individual adaptation are necessary. Altogether, project manager Felix Kolbeck recommends to go for a positive change climate instead of raising discussions about climate change characterized by pessimism, catastrophe scenarios and short-term reactions; a climate for new chances, strategic adaptation and economically and ecologically sustainable products.

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