
SUSTAINABILITY OF SKIING REGIONS

1. Introduction:

Sustainability has been the guiding principle of "European forestry" for many generations.

A definition from the perspective of forestry: "Naturally renewable resources may only be used to the extent as they grow back".

While over time many definitions of sustainability have been created, they have in common the preservation of a system or certain characteristic features of a system, respectively, including all pillars of sustainability (ecology, social aspects / society, economy). Sustainability and business activities are inseparably linked with each other, striving for preservation and protection for future generations.

The term "sustainability" was mentioned in a 1972 study on the future of economic growth published by the Club of Rome (The limits to Growth, Meadows et. al, 1972) as, in a broader sense, a "state of global balance". The key conclusions from the report were: "If the current growth of the world's population, industrialisation, environmental pollution, food production and exploitation of natural resources continues unabated, the absolute limits to growth on earth will be reached in the course of the next one hundred years (Meadows et al., 1972)". The report has made a decisive contribution to trigger a new dimension of thinking. It was a wake-

up call to the world and has significantly contributed to the emergence of an "environmental economy".

What is also remarkable is that there is a general understanding of sustainability aimed at reducing the concept to ecological contexts only. In most cases, this approach is too narrow, as a loss-making, subsidised skiing area, for instance, can be in no one's interest.

The three areas of sustainability - environment, social aspects / society, and economy - are in an unstable balance in many places, which may have major negative effects even if the disturbances are minor: A disaster in a skiing area, for instance, may

- ruin heavily indebted businesses,
- force part-time farmers to give up their traditional way of land use,
- entail high rehabilitation costs for the general public
- block investments in the future development, and
- reduce the attractiveness of an area.

Alpine areas respond rather sensitively and promptly to disturbances, which is why social, cultural and economic impairments can hardly be compensated there.

Sustainable development is achieved when people living today can satisfy their needs in a way that gives future generations a chance to fulfil their needs as well - at least on today's level.

2. Sustainability model for skiing regions:

Apart from complying with all legal requirements, skiing regions used intensively for tourism have to prepare a sustainability strategy specific to their region in order to preserve ecological balance, economic security and social justice, the 3 pillars of sustainability.



3. The pillar of ecology:

Skiing areas generally open up a sensitive natural space or cultivated landscape. When developing alpine regions through lifts including the associated infrastructure (parking lots, hotel beds, ski slopes, artificial snow equipment, other leisure facilities, ...) for tourist purposes it makes sense to conduct an overall review prior to building such facilities. This review should include all parameters relevant to the natural area and identify whether or not the area or extension of the area can be used permanently for the planned tourist utilisation. Implementation / technical realisation can start only after the review has produced a positive result and has to be

in line with state-of-the-art requirements. Impacts caused by traffic, mobility and energy consumption in and around the area concerned (environmental / climate protection) must also be analysed.

Using an ongoing environmental monitoring / auditing process can help existing tourism and skiing regions to see

- how they deal with environmental issues,
- how they are used for optimisation efforts,
- how saving potentials for water, energy, etc. can be utilised and
- therefore, how resources can be used in a deliberately sustainable way.

For instance, ecologically responsible use of skiing areas without optimised artificial snow equipment does no longer make sense due to current requirements, as the pillars of sustainability could not always be achieved in such a case.

Under the applicable legal provisions, skiing areas have to assume their ecological obligations and responsibility and preserve the natural and cultivated landscape. Natural and cultivated landscapes need strong and skilled people to represent their interest in day-to-day dealings. Excellently trained employees are the basis of sustainable action. Ecological sustainability is nothing but an empty phrase if not practiced in everyday life.

4. The pillar of social aspects / society:

Going to skiing regions must be fun for tourists and users, as this is the only way to make them come to those areas reliably. Sustainable utilisation of skiing regions serves as a basis of securing many jobs in the rural area.

Increasing employee professionalism and their responsibility and commitment are the main prerequisites as well as adequate remuneration in order to live up to social responsibility. Continuous training and strong customer orientation of employees are indispensable to maximise the welfare effect.

Careful and sustainable utilisation of the natural areas is what skiing areas have to ensure to demand a more cautious approach from guests and users as well.

There is a tendency showing that people increasingly want to spend their time in natural and cultivated landscapes and experience nature. Ensuring social uses or utilisation for recreation purposes, experiencing the landscape, sports activities etc for the next generations needs open communication for companies. Skiing areas as well as forest management operators and other users of natural / cultivated areas are constantly in the focus of many interests and target groups. A dialogue between operators and users, communities, policy-makers, associations, the general public and press is gaining more and more priority. Only a transparent and open company can live up to its social sustainability.

5. The pillar of economy:

Sustainability is often reduced to "ecological sustainability" only. This view is too narrow to be in the best interest of users, operators and the regions. Skiing regions must be able to earn money on a sustainable basis. Loss-making and subsidized businesses cannot secure the pillars of ecological and social sustainability.

Only consistently profitable companies will secure overall ecological conditions and jobs in the region through their own efforts. Entrepreneurial actions and activities in all segments – seizing market opportunities, professionalisation of employees, cost reductions, innovations, marketing, etc – ensure economic sustainability and thus ecological and social sustainability.

6. Summary:

If the pillars of sustainability are taken into account in entrepreneurial thinking and action, which is a natural thing in forestry operations in Europe, the needs of skiing areas (operators, infrastructure facilities, ...) and users will be secured today and in future – a contract between generations.

The key issue has to be the efficient, innovative and constantly state-of-the-art and needs-oriented use of all resources involved, while fulfilling legal provisions is an absolute must. Skiing area monitoring or auditing in terms of environmental / sustainability management, for instance, could help to meet the requirements of

transparency, dialogue and open companies. Careful use of all resources ensures that users will find a well-functioning ecological system, smoothly running companies and secure jobs on a sustainable basis – a contract between generations.

Users / consumers of skiing areas also have to enjoy this experience, fun and pleasure in recreation, otherwise they will not come there. Abandoning the concept of action and fun for soft tourism does not necessarily have to be a sustainable step, but may also involve a step back, if fewer or no users at all will find their way to an already existing infrastructure.

In Austria, some of the larger skiing areas are already developing their region-specific sustainability and environmental management strategy. Sustainable economic activities involving all pillars of sustainability and a responsible approach to all resources to safeguard fun and great experiences for future generations as well is indispensable. More and more skiing areas should follow the example of leading businesses / benchmarks and invest more in their region-specific sustainability so as not only using sustainability as an empty phrase but rather apply it in practice. This is all about wise and fair use of the resources needed and further development on all levels of economic life, which should be communicated professionally to customers / users and residents.

Only skiing areas making long-term and continuous profit will stay or become permanently sustainable by their own efforts and attractive to consumers and residents in the rural areas.

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