Theme trails and sustainable rural tourism – opportunities and threats

K. Meyer-Cech
Department of Spatial, Landscape and Infrastructure Sciences, Institute of Spatial Planning and Rural Development, University of Natural Resources and Applied Life Sciences, Vienna

Abstract

Theme trails are networks of attractions which are typical for a region and which are marketed together under a certain theme. In Austria the implementation of theme trails has become a popular means of sustainable tourism development in rural areas, for public authorities as well as for cultural and agricultural regional initiatives. The main objective of theme trails is to attract potential visitors into the region to raise the regional added value. At the same time they contribute to the preservation of the cultural heritage of the region - be it the diversified farm landscape, historic monuments or traditional handicrafts - and they are considerate to the natural environment, because they hardly call for the construction of any new facilities or infra-structures.

Based on the examination of Austrian case studies this paper identifies the conditions under which the implementation of theme trails can contribute to the development of sustainable tourism and where respective insufficiencies lie. Most theme trails represent a form of tourism that complies with the concept of sustainable development concerning social aspects as well as the natural environment. Yet great shortcomings can be found on the economic and organisational level: the development of theme trails in Austria must be called inflationary, in many cases the input of financial resources is inefficient and the quality of the tourist product is inadequate. This paper ends with a list of necessary measures on the national and regional levels to improve the implementation practise of theme trails, e.g. the need for national coordination of theme trails or the establishment of a seal of approval for theme trails which may only be awarded to initiatives that fulfil certain quality standards.

Keywords: theme trails, rural tourism, regional networks and co-operations.
1 Introduction

Sustainable tourism aims at increasing the economic welfare of the inhabitants as well as contributing to their subjective well-being and cultural identity. It also wants to fulfil the needs of the tourists and to preserve the natural resources while at the same time maintaining the options of action of future generations (Müller et al. [1]). Theme trails seem to comply with several characteristics of sustainable tourism. They are networks of attractions which are typical for a region and which are marketed together under a certain theme. The main objective of theme trails is to attract potential visitors into the region to raise the regional added value. At the same time they contribute to the preservation of the cultural heritage of the region and they are regardful of the natural environment, because they hardly call for the construction of any new facilities or infrastructures.

In the last 20 years theme trails have become a popular means of promoting sustainable tourism for public authorities and regional initiatives in Austria, especially in economically less favoured rural areas. Since the end of the 1980s about three theme trails per year have been established in Austria. Today there are about 70 theme trails – be it heritage trails like the Iron Trail, be it trails based on products of the region like the famous Austrian wine roads – and still their number keeps on growing. But only a few actually are effective means of sustainable tourism development, because many theme trail initiatives find themselves in economically adverse circumstances. Reasons for this lie in the fierce contention of theme trails among each other and in shortcomings on the level of business management.

This paper identifies the conditions under which the implementation of theme trails can contribute to the development of sustainable tourism and where respective insufficiencies lie.

2 Methodology

The clarification of the terms sustainable tourism and theme trail is followed by an overview of theme trail networks in Austria concerning organisational structure, size and topics dealt with by the initiatives. The overview was sought through undertaking telephone interviews with tourist boards and regional development corporations. Five case studies were chosen for deeper examination, because they appeared to be the most economically promising, and according to the following criteria: being of average size for an Austrian theme trail (i.e. concerning an area of approximately 25 municipalities), having different themes, and presenting inter-sectoral networks (i.e. that stakeholders come from different economic branches and the cultural sector) (Meyer-Cech [2]). The focus of the examination lay on organisational and socio-economic matters. Aspects of tourist demand and ecological issues were not explicitly dealt with. The main sources of information were explorative interviews based on structured questions posed to managers or project leaders of the five case study theme trails. In addition to literature on sustainable tourism and regional
development as well as regional co-operations and regional marketing, a further source of information was statistical data on the socio-economic situation of the five regions where the theme trail initiatives operate.

The listing of the results that theme trail initiatives strive for - to a large extent these comply with the requirements of sustainable tourism - is followed by an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of theme trails concerning the sustainable regional development of tourism. The paper ends with suggestions for measures on the national and regional level to improve the implementation practise of theme trails.

3 Clarification of terms

3.1 Theme trail

Theme trails are regional initiatives that come into being around typical regional features. The implementation of a theme trail should contribute to valorising special regional assets, to increasing appreciation for them and to their preservation while making use of them commercially at the same time. From the organisational perspective theme trails are inter-sectoral networks of regional actors such as cultural initiatives, enterprises, semi-public and public authorities. According to the viewpoint of the tourism industry theme trails mainly are marketing instruments that should help to brand a region and to increase the number of potential guests. From the viewpoint of regional development theme trails should also have positive impacts on other economic sectors aside from tourism and should help to increase the regional added value. Further it is hoped that the implementation of theme trails contributes to immaterial goals such as strengthening the regional culture and identity (Meyer-Cech [2]).

3.2 Sustainable tourism

The question of tourism and sustainable development is closely linked to the concept of sustainable development that became part of international politics with the Brundtland report in 1987. Further milestones were the United Nations Conference for the Environment and Development in 1992, the World Conference on Sustainable Tourism in 1995 and the statement of international tourism organisations on how to apply the Agenda 21 to the travel and tourism industry in 1997. In 1999 the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development also dealt with the issue of tourism and sustainable development.

Sustainable tourism is a form of tourism that strives to realise the principles of sustainable development. (The term sustainable tourism is used in this paper even though strictly speaking it is a confusing term, because tourism is just one branch of economy whereas the concept of sustainable development emphasises the fact that it encompasses all sectors of economy and all spheres of life.) (see Baumgartner and Röhrer [3])

Sustainable tourism aims at increasing the economic welfare of the
inhabitants as well as contributing to their subjective well-being and cultural identity. It also wants to fulfill the needs of the tourists and to preserve the natural resources while at the same time maintaining the options of action of future generations (Müller et al. [1]). Murphy [4] specifically stresses the fact that tourism development needs to contribute to the well-being of the host community and that it is just one of several options of self-determined community development.

Baumgartner and Roehrer [3] follow these definitions in general, but they explicitly address issues of sustainable tourism on the regional level (this is relevant concerning theme trails, which are defined as regional initiatives in this paper), such as strengthening the cultural identity of the region, increasing the rate of people employed in the region, embedding tourism in the regional economic structure and creating new institutional structures for different forms of collaboration.

4 Theme trails in Austria

4.1 Dimensions

The term “trail” cannot be taken literally, as many theme trails are a network of attractions rather than a linear route. A theme trail symbolically connects tourist attractions, municipalities and other actors, and it helps to brand and market a region. Due to the netlike structure of theme trails in Austria it is hard to tell their average length. If one takes the greatest distance between two tourist attractions or two involved municipalities the average length lies between 20 and 100 kilometres. Of the approximately 70 theme trails in Austria 90% cover a region of up to 30 municipalities. The remaining 10% are either national trails that spread over the whole country or even cross national trails.

The five case studies cover an area of approximately 25 municipalities and 60,000 inhabitants. The administrative units theme trails have to work with are small, which adds to the challenge of managing them. The level of local government is organised on a small scale in Austria: there are 2,355 municipalities, 97% of them have less than 10,000 inhabitants. Almost 40% of municipalities have only 1,000 to 2,000 inhabitants.

4.2 Covered themes

The themes covered by Austrian theme trails can be divided into two main categories. Almost two thirds of theme trails are food trails. The remaining third are trails that deal with aspects of cultural history. Food trails focus on such aspects as an agricultural product with its typical cultural landscape including regional architecture, on special methods of cultivating agricultural products and processing them into foods and drinks, as well as on regional traditions that are connected to the agricultural product, e.g. the festive cattle drive from the alpine pastures into the valley in September. The most prominent sub-group of food trails in Austria are wine roads. Other agricultural products dealt with by food trails are apples, cider, pumpkins, milk and cheese.
The cultural history trails may focus on castles, historic trade routes, such as the Amber or the Iron Road, or on traditional industries as is the case in the wood or textile trails.

In some cases the classification of food and cultural history trails is not clear. Some cultural history trails for instance feature associations of restaurants that offer regionally typical dishes, e.g. the Iron Trail restaurants or the restaurants of the Weavers’ Road.

Summing up one can say that the eponymous theme is the uniting bracket for a set of tourist attractions and it helps to improve the marketing efforts and the successful positioning of a region. Yet the uniting effects of a common theme will not manifest if the theme is occupied too often on the over-regional level due to imitators or if it does not fulfil the expectations it arouses, i.e. when the theme cannot be experienced by the tourist due to a lack of visibility and entertaining elements.

4.3 Theme trail networks

Theme trails are networks of actors that come from different sectors of the economy as well as from the cultural sector. The analysis of those organisations that are in charge of the theme trail lead to the following results:

Cultural initiatives are often the main actors in cultural history theme trails. For example the origin of the Austrian Iron Trail, an initiative that interprets the history of mining the ore and processing iron, can be traced to local historians who prevented the demolition of old forges in the course of a construction project. Another important factor in cultural history theme trails are museums, whose efforts in preserving and interpreting the cultural heritage coincide with the goals of the theme trail.

Farm enterprises are strongly involved in food trails. Many theme trails, such as the Cheese Trail Bregenzerwald (Bregenzerwald is the name of a region in the West of Austria) or most wine roads, originated from producer and marketing associations for agricultural products that established a link to the tourism sector.

Potentially tourism enterprises are important partners in theme trail networks. Gastronomic enterprises usually are among the members of the network. In many cases they are not just a complement to the thematic tourist offer but rather an integrated part of the theme trail concept, e.g. they process the name giving product to special dishes, often according to historic and regionally typical recipes, and market them effectively. Surprisingly accommodation is involved in theme trail networks only in exceptional cases, e.g. when a theme restaurant rents out rooms. Usually the point of contact between theme trail members and accommodation is limited to the membership of accommodation in the tourist board, one of whose tasks it is to support the marketing efforts of the theme trail. This fact disagrees with the aim of theme trail initiatives to prolong the length of stay of the visitors and to increase the amount of overnight stays.

Trade and industrial enterprises are the main actors in theme trails that focus on a regionally important industry or trade, such as the textile industry or wood processing.

In some cases a regional development association, i.e. an association of
municipalities on a voluntary basis with the goal to improve the quality of life in the region, is the organisation in charge of a theme trail initiative. This usually is the case when the reason for tourist development is more a matter of public concern rather than of managerial economics, for example because it is an economically less favoured area and tourist infrastructure is lacking.

Regional tourist boards play an important part in the marketing of theme trails, as their main responsibilities lie in communicating the image of the region, in stimulating a positive attitude towards tourism among the inhabitants and in developing a tourist offer. Regional tourist boards are formed according to the provincial tourism legislation, they are financed by contributions of the municipalities of the respective region. In some theme trails the regional tourist board is the main contact for potential guests, other trails have a clear division of tasks between the tourist board, which hands out information, especially about accommodation, and the organisation in charge of the theme trail, which looks after the guests as regards content.

5 Target results

The great variety of actors in theme trail networks reflects in the different results that they wish to achieve by their involvement. The main target results that theme trails are hoped to contribute to are listed below. They correspond to the above mentioned criteria of sustainable tourism.

Economic welfare of the inhabitants: The thematic offer of theme trails should help to create a marketable image for the region, induce visitor flows and create economic impacts in the region due to expenditures of the tourists. The underlying concept of theme trails is to enable benefits for a large range of actors, of municipalities, enterprises and individuals. From the viewpoint of business economics a concentration of tourist attractions would make more sense than spreading them along a route, but theme trails should help to develop a whole region and thereby contribute to reducing regional disparities.

The extent of economic impact induced by theme trails may vary. The distance visitors come from and their length of stay vary, often depending on the dimensions of the theme trail and the budget available for marketing activities. Some theme trails try to position themselves on the international market and aim at increasing the number of overnight stays whereas others merely focus on day tourism and local recreation.

Most theme trails in Austria can be found in economically less favoured areas, where it is hoped that they will have positive effects on the employment situation, not just in the tourist sector. Tourism helps to secure existing jobs, perhaps even create new ones. Promotional money for theme trail initiatives, e.g. for the renovation of historic buildings, and private investments lead to an increase of economic activity in the regional hospitality and accommodation sector as well as in other sectors.

As yet hardly any research has been done concerning the economic effects of theme trails. Some insight can be gained by the evaluation of a provincial exhibition on the topic of iron that was organised in 1998 by an association
belonging to the Austrian Iron Trail (Baaske et al. [5]). The authors of this survey found out that the employment effects of the exhibition were about 1,300 person-years excluding honorary work. Further they could prove that the two obvious sectors tourism and the construction trade (many historic buildings were renovated) benefited a lot (these sectors contributed 15 to 20% each to the regional value added), but that also other sectors had economic benefits.

**Strengthening the cultural identity of the region:** Cultural history theme trails aim at preserving precious cultural heritage, be it the diversified farm landscape, historic monuments or traditional handicrafts, and to increase the appreciation for it among inhabitants and visitors. Leaders of theme trails state that often the special regional feature which later becomes the centre of marketing activities is viewed as something quite normal or even of minor value by the inhabitants. The attention regional assets receive through tourist activities and the efforts in interpretation can enormously improve their public image and thereby foster the self-confidence of the inhabitants of the region and develop an appreciation of sense of place. Two examples for the initial disregard and later pride can be found concerning the hard cheese in the Cheese Trail Bregenzerwald as well as concerning iron and the history of mining in the Austrian Iron Trail.

**Creating new institutional structures for different forms of collaboration:** Theme trail networks are examples of new structures that enable collaboration between actors of different economic sectors, cultural institutions and public authorities. Heintel et al. ([6] p.6) states that cooperation or non-cooperation on location are signs of the functioning or non-functioning of regional development. Those theme trails that actively contribute to the social and economic life of a region and that hold entertaining experiences for the potential visitors, are usually based on networks of various actors. In contrast there are many tourist routes that are promoted as theme trails, but that are in fact only route descriptions in a brochure or a sign posted trail of attractions without an underlying network of actors. In general these routes do not contribute to the tourism development of a region.

Another finding is that inter-sectoral theme trail networks seem to have more impact on the socio-economic regional development than theme trails whose actors come from only one economic sector or from only one field, such as monument conservation.

**Preserving natural resources:** The ecological dimension of sustainable tourism is not prominent with theme trails, but food trails do contribute to the preservation of special cultural landscapes with their scenic and biological diversity, for example alpine pastures like in the Cheese Trail Bregenzerwald or orchards like in the Cider Trail. Theme trails usually are small scale forms of rural tourism with scarce visitor flows, and which make use of already existing resources and infrastructure. That is why the impacts of theme trails on the ecosystem are comparatively low. From an economic point of view this fact may represent a disadvantage, e.g. if the length of stay cannot be increased due to lacking accommodation capacities.
6 Conclusions

Theme trails can contribute to the development of sustainable tourism in rural areas, but not all theme trails do so automatically. Austrian theme trails comply with the criteria of a sustainable tourism development in varying degrees, one of the reasons being strong differences in the quality of the offered tourist product. The evaluation of Austrian theme trails lead to the following results.

6.1 Strengths

*Bundling of existing regional resources*: Theme trails make use of endogenous resources and activate them. Regional resources can mean the cultural landscape with its agricultural products, cultural assets or special skills of the regional populace. Theme trails bundle them and give them a direction of impact by providing a common theme.

*Imaging of a region*: Theme trails contribute to the positioning of a region, helping the region to distinguish itself from other regions and to create a unique tourist offer.

*Increasing the regional value added*: The thematic offers of theme trails bring many day and weekend tourists into the region, which has positive effects on the tourism industry. Consumption of services in the area of the theme trail leads to direct and indirect impacts on the regional value added and employment situation.

*Compensation of competitive disadvantages*: Theme trail cooperations help to compensate the competitive disadvantages that result from the ownership structure of the Austrian (tourism) economy, in which small and medium sized enterprises dominate - for example 70% of the accommodation facilities are privately run, 70% of the farms are smaller than 30 hectares. By collaborating actors reach the critical mass that is necessary for the theme trail to be noticed by potential guests and to become attractive for longer stays. Working together in a network also makes marketing activities more effective.

6.2 Weaknesses

*Inflationary appearance of theme trails*: Too many regions have “discovered” theme trails as an instrument of sustainable tourism development. Since the end of the 1980ies about three theme trails per year are being implemented per year in Austria. This extremely dynamic development can only be called inflationary. The range of theme trails has become quite unclear for potential guests, decision-makers and entrepreneurs. As a result there is increased competition among municipalities and regions, because the competitive advantage a branding of the region usually brings compared to other rural areas has been lost due to the oversupply of theme trail initiatives. Another result of this development is a levelling of the tourist offer.

*Lacking minimum standards*: Quite differing tourist products are offered under the term “theme trail”. Almost 25% of Austrian theme trails are just route descriptions in a brochure and of these not even all have been sign posted. Aside
from very few exceptions theme trail initiatives do not follow any common quality standards. Therefore many theme trails lack professionalism concerning the components of the tourist offer as well as concerning the interpretation of the theme.

**Inefficient use of resources:** There are two main reasons why public authorities and entrepreneurs do not use financial as well as human resources efficiently. Firstly, the life span of theme trails is often closely linked to the duration of the public subsidies. When the public support measure ends relevant activities of the theme trail often cannot be kept up anymore. Secondly, each theme trail initiative, metaphorically speaking, reinvents the wheel. An organised exchange of experience does not take place between the theme trail regions.

**Tension and conflict:** Collaboration in a theme trail network brings along tension and conflict among the network actors that impair the quality of the tourist offer. Difficulties in collaboration may result from economic competition, personal conflicts and political or administrational barriers.

### 6.3 Recommendations

Especially for rural areas the implementation of theme trails could be an opportunity to develop a sustainable form of tourism. Yet the following points have to be taken into consideration and implemented, otherwise the theme trail boom might backfire resulting in a wasteful and therefore unsustainable use of resources and in dashed hopes.

**Nationwide coordination – establishment of a round table for theme trails:** There is an urgent call for action concerning the development and implementation of a national strategy and general normative guidelines for theme trails. The establishment of a round table for theme trails is recommended at this point, which should host experts from the economy, the environmental sector, culture, politics, administration and science on the one hand and from the theme trail regions on the other hand. Further it has to be clarified which public authority or which institution - e.g. ministry of the environment, ministry of commerce, national tourism organisation - should take the leading responsibility concerning support and coordination of theme trails.

**Formulating minimum standards:** Theme trails should meet a minimum standard concerning the quality of the offered products and services and concerning entertaining and educational elements. The criteria defining the minimum standard should pertain to the concept of sustainable tourism, which means that aside from aspects of business economics also those of environmental and social compatibility have to be taken into consideration. There must be a superordinate institution, such as the above mentioned round table, that is in charge of developing a set of minimum standards and checking if these standards are abided by.

**Defining eligibility - bundling of resources:** Parallel to the formulation of a set of minimum standards criteria for the eligibility of theme trails concerning public support measures have to be defined in order to guarantee an efficient use of resources. Aside from criteria relating to quality it is important to name spatial criteria. It does not make sense to implement a theme trail in every region. In
accordance with the integrative approach of sustainable development inter-sectoral theme trail networks should be favoured.

Making the management more professional: Conflicts and tension in collaboration can only be alleviated by a more professional management of the theme trail, e.g. establishing a permanently operating and adequately staffed head office.

Establishing the term “theme trail” as a seal of approval: If theme trails are supposed to contribute to the development of sustainable tourism the term “theme trail” must become a seal of approval, that will only be awarded to those regional initiatives that meet a minimum set of quality standards. Awarding the theme trail title must follow strict rules and a scheme that has been harmonised nationwide. Establishing an umbrella brand name, such as “theme trail Austria”, could also help small initiatives with limited budgets to position themselves on the international tourism market. But similar theme trails have to look for different thematic focus points under this umbrella brand name, so as not to harm each other by too fierce competition.

References