

International Summary Evaluation Report  
on the Via Alpina

Summer 2007 Evaluation Campaign

- COUNTRIES INVOLVED: AUSTRIA, GERMANY, ITALY, FRANCE, SWITZERLAND AND  
SLOVENIA -

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## **METHODOLOGY:**

The results illustrated in the following document derive from an evaluation campaign that was carried out throughout the Alpine space in summer 2007. They stem from a more general campaign that was launched in 2004 by grouping together regional development and tourist development research teams from the six countries involved in the initiative (Austria, Germany, Italy, France, Switzerland and Slovenia). A common methodology was defined and then reviewed after a first survey campaign launched in 2005 and during four years of group work to better study the perception and effects of the actions that had been implemented. On the one hand, research is based on questionnaires to hikers directly on the field and, on the other hand, on semi-structured interviews with local actors. In 2005 surveys to local actors had been made in a few test areas representing the various levels of tourist development; whereas in 2007 research focused on the "Via Alpina pilot projects" development sites, as strengthened action areas, with the aim to observe the maximum impact of the project (likely to further guide the transfer of pilot experiences to other locations). Unlike 2005, rather than referring to test areas, it is thus more appropriate to think in terms of projects or actions under study. The same survey methods used in 2005 have been applied to the hikers' profile evaluation, except for the questionnaire, which has slightly been changed. This survey methodology has been designed and agreed upon in order to be in part directly comparable between the various countries involved. It has finally led to: **37** interviews with local actors and **584** field questionnaires (cf. in 2005: 117 interviews and 680 questionnaires, in 2006: 41 interviews and 84 questionnaires in Austria only).

This document provides a summary of the more thorough and complex results obtained at the national level, at a wider international scale. More detailed national summaries as well as a methodological guide can be made available by the evaluation team or by the researchers involved in the project. Their contacts are reported in the Annex (at the end of the document).

## **VIA ALPINA AND HIKERS:**

The results illustrated in this section concern only: Germany, France, Italy, Slovenia and Switzerland. Since an evaluation campaign was carried out in 2006, the Austrian team did not repeat the investigation among hikers in 2007.

Far from providing a comprehensive and thorough framework, this study has the merit of collecting data covering the whole Alpine space as well as a remarkable number of practitioners (584). In order to allow the comparability of results, surveys have been carried out during the same summer season on more occasions in order to cover different peak and off-peak periods, along the week and on week-ends and along the Via Alpina, i.e. on route portions of comparable difficulty. Hence, the survey provides a rather comprehensive framework concerning the profile of hikers, of their habits, expectations and knowledge about the Via Alpina. It can serve as a basis of reference to redesign projects, actions or marketing of products starting from the Via Alpina route.

## → Itinerant Hiker's Profile

	A few trends	Analysis
<b>No young people, but yes for equal opportunities!</b>	<p>&gt; <b>In France:</b> total absence of 25-35 year-old people and 74.6% of people aged 50 years and more. The sample is made up of 50% of men and 50% of women.</p> <p>&gt; <b>In Italy:</b> average age of hikers is 44 years. The sample is made up of 59% of men and 41% of women.</p> <p>&gt; <b>In Slovenia:</b> an almost total absence of people under 20 (less than 2%). The sample is made up of 53.1% of men and 46.9% of women.</p> <p>&gt; <b>In Switzerland:</b> average age of interviewed hikers is 42 years. People under 25 years account for 7.2% of the sample. 55% of men and 45% of women.</p> <p>&gt; <b>In Germany:</b> a majority of 40-50 year-old people (approx. 22%) and people under 20 account for less than 5%. With almost a perfect balance between men and women.</p>	<p>In spite of a slight variability in figures, hiking is a practice that attracts active adults rather than young people, as this survey has pointed out.</p> <p><b>&gt; It remains to be seen whether the initiatives around the Via Alpina route may benefit from this observation or whether on the contrary an effort should be made to let the situation evolve ...</b></p> <p>On the other hand, an almost perfect balance is achieved between men and women hikers.</p> <p><b>&gt; It remains to be seen whether they have the same habits and expectations.</b></p>
<b>A relatively present cultural mix?</b>	<p>&gt; <b>In France:</b> 17% of hikers out of the interviewed sample are foreigners.</p> <p>&gt; <b>In Italy:</b> similarly, 20% of hikers are foreigners</p> <p>&gt; <b>In Slovenia:</b> 56.2% of hikers are foreigners and come from 18 different nationalities (no country by itself reaches 10%).</p> <p>&gt; <b>In Switzerland:</b> the Swiss people are the majority and account for 67.9%. France is the second nationality with 11.9%.</p> <p>&gt; <b>In Germany:</b> About 90% of interviewed people are German, 70% of them coming from Bavaria.</p>	<p>Except for Slovenia, the nationality of hikers represented here is mostly referred to the place under question. On the other hand, more generally speaking, data show a real propensity of hikers from foreign countries.</p> <p><b>&gt; Hence, the crossborder mobility challenge launched by the Via Alpina seems to be realistic even though it requires further strengthening.</b></p>
<b>Regular and experienced hikers</b>	<p>&gt; <b>In France:</b> 35.6% of hikers make more than 40 hikes per year and 30.5% between 20 and 40 per year. About 30% of hikers make long itinerant hikes (+ 7 days) as against 51 % of short or medium hikes (2-7 days).</p>	<p>If this study confirms the essentially elitist character of long hiking choices, it also points out the existence of a true « community » of relatively expert and regular hikers. It also clearly emerges that the number of potential hikers declines as the</p>

<p><b>Regular and experienced hikers</b></p>	<p>&gt; <b>In Italy:</b> 53% of people think that the ideal duration per hiking is 6h.</p> <p>&gt; <b>In Slovenia:</b> about half of hikers go on an itinerant short or medium hiking at least once a year. The ideal duration per hiking is 4h according to 33% of hikers.</p> <p>&gt; <b>In Switzerland:</b> generally speaking, the ideal hiking duration is between 4 and 6 hours (71.6%). Day-long hiking is the most practiced activity with an average of about 13 times per year.</p> <p>&gt; <b>In Germany:</b> 25% of hikers make between 11 and 25 one day-long hikes every year, as against 33% of hikers with 3 to 10 short hikes per year. To most of them (52.2%) the ideal duration per hiking is 4 hours.</p>	<p>hiking difficulty level increases (in terms of hiking duration and length of stretches).</p> <p>&gt; <b>Given this consideration, what is the position of the supply based on the Via Alpina route?</b></p>
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> **Analysis:**

A relatively old age of hikers can be pointed out, with a slightly larger number of men than women, and mostly experienced people.

This highlights the acute need for action to renew the customer basis.

Furthermore a relatively short hiking duration can also be observed, which leads towards shortening the hikes.

Finally, a presence of foreign visitors in the various countries varying between 10 and 30% can also be observed, except for Slovenia where it is even much higher.

## → The hiking practices?

### ↻ Itinerant hikers, are they independent tourists?

#### > A few trends:

Hiking is organized via a tour-operator has been observed only in Germany and where it accounts for 10.7% of hikers and in Slovenia, for 4.4%. The rest of hikers are self-organised. The solitary hiking practice accounts for 23.3% maximum of hikers (in Switzerland) and 1.9 % minimum (in Germany). Hiking with one's family, in couple and with friends are the favourite modes for this kind of practice.

#### > Analysis:

As already pointed out, the survey points out the overwhelming presence of expert and independent hikers who use the Alpine trails. What about the others? Are they absent because they are not informed or because there is a lack of services suited to meet their expectations? **How can this absence of TO (Tour Operators) be explained?**

If hikers are independent, they are not necessarily lonely: sharing this activity with other people would indeed be an important element that characterizes this practice. This aspect might be enhanced further especially with reference to "young" users.

### ↻ Hikers' logistic requirements: from preparation to accommodation

#### > A few trends:

Internet is the main information source that is most used overall for planning one's trips (57.6% in France, 33% in Italy, 38% in Slovenia), even though it should be pointed out that in Germany it accounts only for 1.9%. This trend can be explained by the fact that the hikers who were interviewed in Germany mainly came from the region that was visited.

Informal information sources (knowledge of the region, by word of mouth, friends' advice) are also very much in use.

A few examples:

In Italy: hikers know the place: 29%

In Germany: they have already visited the place: 44%, by word of mouth: 31.2%

In France: it has been observed that the use of different information sources is not uniform according to the type of practice. For instance, for one-day-long hikes, the main source of information that is reported is the knowledge of the region (27.7%) whereas, for itinerant short or medium hikes, Internet is the main source (26.9%).

Once the destination has been chosen, the car is the main means of transport used to reach one's destination in almost all cases: 72.9% in France, 80% in Italy, 80% in Switzerland, 87% in Germany and 88.6% in Slovenia. In France, the car, which is the only means of transport that is used by day-long hikers, is not chosen for long hikes (> 7 days); in this case only the train (58.8%) and the airplane for the return (41.2%) are mentioned.

The map remains the most used orientation means in the field (in France 84.7%, Slovenia 79.4%, Germany 76.1%, Switzerland 84.4% and Italy 63%), then generally followed by a guidebook. GPS is used only by 10.2% of hikers interviewed in France, 8.6% in Slovenia, 5% in Italy, 5.6% in Switzerland and 2.6% in Germany. Once again, based on the study that has been carried out in France, the type of practice may affect or even change the ways in which this activity is practiced: GPS is almost totally absent as a means of orientation for long hikes, whereas the guidebook is largely used there (in more than 50% of cases).

**> Analysis:**

***As for the choice of the destination, the informal information sources must be enhanced***

The awareness of the twofold importance of Internet and of the informal sources in choosing ones' hiking destination confirms the relevance of the creation of a forum for the exchange of experiences, future projects, etc. among hikers on the new Via Alpina website.

***Is the car a means of transport that is actually chosen or is it a necessary choice due to the lack of other alternatives?***

Can we consider here also that it is the type of practice that is chosen (day-long hiking, short or long hiking), given a few intrinsic constraints (limited time for short hikes, more time and arrival and starting points remote from each other for longer hikes), that dictates the means of transport to be used, or is it a lack of structured transport services that affects this choice?

***The guidebook, is it still an indispensable tool?***

Based on this study, the traditional orientation tools (map, guidebook) remain the most frequently used tools that are generally preferred to GPS. This remark plays down the excessive excitement that has recently been aroused around GPS data and confirms the pertinent choice to publish a Via Alpina guidebook.



→ **What are the expectations as against the present supply?**

	<b>A few trends</b>
<b>Hikers with a single center of interest</b>	<p>&gt; <b>In France:</b> Hiking is the main activity chosen during holidays for 98% of the interviewed people. The hikers who have been involved in this study were interested neither in the other nature sports (42.9% non priority and 16.3% low priority) nor in the cultural sites (32.1% non priority and 26.4% low priority).</p> <p>&gt; <b>In Italy:</b> Hiking is the main activity chosen during holidays for 61% of interviewed people. The other activities have only a medium to low priority for hikers (low priority).</p> <p>&gt; <b>In Slovenia:</b> in spite of uncertainty in the stance taken up by hikers about this question, a certain importance is attached to nature sports and cultural sites.</p> <p>&gt; <b>in Switzerland:</b> Hiking is the main activity chosen during holidays for 92.2% of interviewed people; on the other hand, the other nature sports are not regarded as a priority (37.3% non priority and 24% low priority) by these hikers; whereas they attach a great importance to R&amp;R (rest and relaxation).</p> <p>&gt; <b>In Germany:</b> Hiking is the main activity chosen during holidays (67.1% high priority, 27.2% priority); whereas the presence of other nature sports is not a quality criterion (8.1% high priority, 19% priority).</p>
<b>Different types of expectations vis-à-vis trails...</b>	<p>&gt; <b>In France:</b> The variety, length of trails and signing are the most important criteria that determine the level of interest and the quality of a route. As a matter of fact, priority or high priority is attached to them by 89.5% (47.4% + 42.1%), 73.1% (23.1% + 50.0%), and 64.9% (38.9% + 25.9%) of interviewed hikers.</p> <p>&gt; <b>In Italy:</b> the four criteria that have been suggested (variety, length of trails and signs) receive a medium to high priority, in particular signs (high priority) and variety (high priority). Positive opinions are expressed about the service quality, except for signing (priority) that need to be improved.</p> <p>&gt; <b>In Switzerland:</b> The interviewed hikers do not give a high priority to the route difficulty (approx. 25% high priority). But on the other hand, signs are a high priority to them (approx. 64% high priority).</p> <p>&gt; <b>In Germany:</b> Surprisingly, most hikers (71.5%) prefer challenging trails rather than easy ones! Similarly, hikers prefer long hikes (86.8%).</p>

<p><b>Comfort and hospitality!</b></p>	<p>&gt; <b>In France:</b> The interviewed hikers in the framework of this survey have high accommodation expectations (high priority and priority): comfort (71.4%), service (75%), and food quality (76.4%). Due to these high expectations, a low satisfaction rate has been recorded (45.5%, 44.4%, 52.9% respectively), which points out a poor quality in the range of services that are offered.</p> <p>&gt; <b>In Italy:</b> The quality of hospitality (high priority) and food (high priority) prevail, whereas services and comfort receive medium to high priority. The service quality that is provided is slightly lower than the expectations with reference to the three most important criteria.</p> <p>&gt; <b>In Switzerland:</b> No statistically significant value emerges. It can nevertheless be noted that hospitality is regarded as one of the highest priorities and it is often mentioned among the aspects of rather poor and poor quality.</p> <p>&gt; <b>In Germany:</b> among comfort, services, food and hospitality quality, the latter is the most important element for hikers (59% very important and 39.6% important).</p>
<p><b>Hot shower first and foremost?</b></p>	<p>&gt; <b>In France:</b> hikers have been asked to state their expectations concerning the 5 types of services related to hiking: luggage transport, shuttle bus service, take-away picnics, hot shower facilities, multilingual personnel. Only the hot shower service has clearly been defined as a priority service (60.4% high priority and 22.6% priority). The satisfaction degree associated to it is not very high or indeed low (18% good quality, 30% rather good quality). The interviewed hikers do not clearly express their stance vis-à-vis the priority that they would like to attach to the other services that are offered. It can be assumed that they have not experienced them and that is why they cannot judge them as interesting.</p> <p>&gt; <b>In Italy:</b> first of all hikers expect a few basic services such as: first and foremost hot shower facilities (high priority). This demand is not fully met (satisfaction: 2.8/5 i.e. satisfied). Among the other services, a shuttle bus service could be a relatively acceptable element (1.9/5 i.e. low priority), this service being quite rare at a local level (1.1/5 i.e. low priority).</p> <p>&gt; <b>In Slovenia:</b> The food quality and hot shower facilities are the two services that receive the highest priority.</p> <p>&gt; <b>In Switzerland:</b> luggage transport is regarded as a non-priority; whereas hot shower facilities are considered to be a high priority. It can be observed that most people who replied stated that the luggage transport service is of poor quality.</p> <p>&gt; <b>In Germany:</b> Only hot shower facilities are identified as an important aspect (19.7% high priority, 31.4% priority) that affects the quality of services that are offered.</p>

**> Analysis:**

It can be observed that hikers are almost exclusively centered on the hiking activity with a certain preference (in particular in Germany ) for long hikes and challenging trails. Furthermore, as far as accommodation is concerned, hikers have expressed high expectations in terms of comfort and hospitality. Finally, it might be surprising to see that expectations are poor or non-existent in terms of luggage transport and shuttle bus service. Whereas a clear and unanimous need has been strongly expressed for better hot shower facilities!



## → What is the perception and knowledge of the Via Alpina?

### > *A clear progress in awareness:*

#### In France:

In 2005, the Via Alpina awareness rate was only 21.7%, whereas today it reaches 53.4% among the interviewed hikers. Taking into account all types of practices, the Via Alpina is now mostly well known. It is still mainly known by the most experienced hikers (80% of knowledge of the Via Alpina among the interviewed people in the framework of a long itinerant hiking as against 20% in the framework of day-long hiking).

#### In Slovenia:

30.2% of visitors were aware of hiking along the Via Alpina. On the other hand, 18.5% of hikers who knew about the Via Alpina were not aware of actually walking along this trail. In 2005, the awareness rate of the Via Alpina was 20%, whereas now it can be noted that this rate has slightly increased. Most interviewed people (60.4 %) have discovered the Via Alpina either by word of mouth or through the Internet.

#### In Germany:

35% of interviewed hikers were aware of the Via Alpina. 42% of these have realized that the places visited by them during their hikes are part of this route. Half of them have learned about the Via Alpina through guidebooks, two people following their previous hikes and two more people by word of mouth, on a basis of 161 people.

#### In Switzerland:

Only few hikers (10%) stated that they knew about this hiking route, mainly through guides or brochures (4 out of 8 responders, namely half of them) and through the Alpine Club (2 out of 4 responders namely a quarter of them).

#### In Italy:

60% of people were aware of the fact that they were hiking on a portion of the Via Alpina, whereas 72% of other people stated that they knew it. People learned about the Via Alpina in many different ways, especially by word of mouth, secondly through tourist offices, thirdly through the Internet and CAI, then by means of brochures and guidebooks, without forgetting the discovery of the Via Alpina during their stay in the region.

### > *Via Alpina, a route that is not much used:*

If a better knowledge of the Via Alpina can be regarded as a true progress, its use still remains relatively modest:

In France: only 3.6% of interviewed hikers stated that the Via Alpina was the purpose of their hike, i.e. only two hikers among all those who have been interviewed.

In Switzerland: Very few hikers were aware of the fact that they were on the Via Alpina (~10%) and in all cases, that was not the purpose of their hike.

In Italy: Only 15% of people who knew about the Via Alpina stated it was the purpose of their hike. They stated that they wanted to discover two day stages of the route on average.

In Slovenia: 22 out of 211 visitors (i.e. approx. 10%) defined the Via Alpina as the main purpose of their trip and 16 hikers expressed the wish to discover it fully.

In Germany: only one interviewee had chosen his "hiking destination" thanks to or in function of the Via Alpina.

**> The objectives of the Via Alpina, what is the perception of people?**In Slovenia:

Visitors did not identify a strong economic potential for the Via Alpina, at least in *comparison with its impact on awareness raising about the cultural and natural heritage*. This might be due to the lack of tourist products (such as cultural, local or wellbeing products, etc.). The potential will increase only with the development of commercial packages along the Via Alpina route in Slovenia.

In Switzerland:

The main characteristic of the Via Alpina that emerges from the replies given by hikers is the protection of the Alpine environment (with almost 40 % of opinions).

In Italy:

The characteristics of the Via Alpina that have been highlighted by questionnaires mainly concern the Alpine natural environment and culture, that are taken into account from the point of view of the environment protection and promotion and economic development. As pointed out by replies, it does not seem that the Via Alpina is a factor likely to build an identity as well as cultural exchanges.

**>Analysis**

It seems that a positive repercussion emerges from the communication actions on the Via Alpina, since a substantial increase of awareness has been highlighted by the evaluation campaign 2007. On the other hand, the use of the route still remains modest and requires further improvement.

At any rate the Via Alpina has succeeded to serve as an awareness-raising initiative focusing more on the enhancement of the natural and cultural heritage rather than being a sports challenge. On the other hand, though, hikers are not so interested in the issue of building an Alpine identity and intercultural exchanges. It would be interesting to analyse more specifically the importance attached by them to the crossborder dimension of the Via Alpina. We would expect that it is still not negligible but it is expressed more in terms of an exotic image rather than a real cultural investment.

**VIA ALPINA, THE PILOT PROJECTS AND THE LOCAL ACTORS:**

The results that have been achieved in this part concern only: Germany, Austria, France, Italy and Switzerland. This aspect has not been investigated in Slovenia since no pilot project has been launched singly here.

**→ Positioning and awareness****> Are Pilot projects an effective means to raise the awareness about the Via Alpina among local actors?**

The 37 people who were interviewed during the 2007 evaluation campaign work for tourist, institutional facilities and associations that are either located in an area where Via Alpina pilot projects have already been launched over the past few years or that have been directly involved in the implementation of a pilot project.

In comparison with the 2005 results, which pointed out a poor knowledge of the Via Alpina by local actors, a greater awareness has now been raised, even though this result is not homogenous along the whole Alpine space.

Hence,

- *in Austria*, **almost all local actors that were interviewed knew about the Via Alpina** and were able to describe the main principles of the project. Austrian evaluation experts have reported an **impressive level of knowledge about the Via Alpina**.

- *In Italy*, interviewees were all involved in this phase of the Via Alpina project, at different levels of implementation. First of all, they have shown **a special attention to this initiative**, which is regarded as a potential means for triggering off communication and promotion actions and, to a certain extent, local product marketing activities.

- *In France*, people who had been involved in Via Alpina initiatives for youth (French pilot projects) acknowledge the presence and legitimacy of Via Alpina being themselves the local actors of the Alps. Some of them have even referred to Via Alpina as an **indispensable actor of the Alps at the same level as CIPRA or Mountain Wilderness**. Even though the Via Alpina initiatives for youth reach a limited target group (in terms of number of people involved), they allow to raise the awareness in key structures at the Alpine scale and thus enhance the awareness about the Via Alpina within a wider circle of potential partners and within facilities that are engaged in the promotion of alternative Alpine tourism.

- *in Germany*, one of the local actors who were interviewed stated that the **promotion of the Via Alpina has effectively increased**, and that it has now become an integrated part of the local projects and the hiking guidebooks.

More shaded opinions have been expressed in:

- *Switzerland*: only one person among the interviewed people had already heard about the Via Alpina, in particular thanks to the stickers on signposts, but she did not know what the project objectives were. **Nobody knew the website [www.via-alpina.org](http://www.via-alpina.org)**.

- *Germany*: if promotion at a local level is considered to be satisfactory, a few people desire a **stronger promotion of the Via Alpina through the supra-regional media**.

#### **> Are pilot projects less effective in leading to a more thorough knowledge of the Via Alpina?**

On the one hand a better awareness about the existence of the Via Alpina project has been achieved; yet, on the other hand, some adjustments are required concerning the quality and depth of this awareness. In general, if it is true that pilot projects allow people to learn about the Via Alpina, they do not necessarily translate into a sufficiently thorough knowledge to promote the sense of belonging of this initiative by local actors. It seems that the higher the degree of involvement in the design and implementation of the pilot project is, the deeper the perception of the potentials provided by the Via Alpina initiative will be.

#### A few examples:

- In France, the Via Alpina actions for youth have not allowed to sufficiently identify the "niche" target of the Via Alpina. Even though the combination of the three aspects *trail, Alpine space and environment education* could serve as a basis for targeting the project, the challenge still remains and it becomes ever more urgent to clarify and enhance the image of this initiative and to avoid the dispersal sometimes observed and criticised today.

- In Germany, according to one of the actors who were interviewed, cooperation between the Via Alpina, DAV and tourist organisations must still be developed and the municipalities and local actors do not show sufficient interest in the Via Alpina initiative.

- In Italy, the actors that are already involved in a pilot project - like in the case of the Tanaro High Valley - see the Via Alpina as a good opportunity to promote the project and make it visible at an international level, and as a positive factor that allows the networking of local offers around the hiking and "soft" discovery themes.

## → Operation and organisation

All national surveys do not necessarily contribute to clarify this aspect, but a few criticisms about the operation and organisation have often been raised. From this point of view, it is worth underlining them, even though some of them are specifically addressed neither to the second programming phase nor to pilot projects:

- The implementation time necessary, concerning organisation, funding and implementation of actions is considered to be too long. Local partners don't always grasp the complexity of the operation of a European project of this scale.
- The local actors competent in the field are not sufficiently involved in the decision-making process. As a consequence, local actors sometimes feel that they are contacted on a one-off basis; i.e. they are exclusively involved in the implementation rather than in the design of an action. Hence, they sometimes feel frustrated and complain about a lack of continuity and overall consistency in their involvement (from the point of view of the most involved partners) and feel that actions are imposed on them by Via Alpina (from the point of view of the most remote partners).
- Partners have sometimes complained about not enough networking between the local actors of the different pilot projects, which might contribute to developing a sense of belonging of the Via Alpina initiative among actors. These elements strengthen the feeling expressed by some of them who complained about not really knowing when and how they could be involved in the action. An example might be the "Seigle" ecomuseum (Italy), that has expressed a certain scepticism claiming that if it is true that Via Alpina must serve as a hinge to link together different initiatives, during this phase of the project, yet it can be defined as: "not very functional if one thinks of the development of actual products", and that it will be necessary to "better explain the principles underlying the Via Alpina".
- Given the complexity of the initiative and the multiplicity of its objectives, the project requires time for it to be well understood. Yet, potential partners do not always have enough time for that. As a consequence, in order to guarantee a better involvement, it seems that it is absolutely necessary either to simplify the initial message, or to consider the explanation of the idea underlying the project and the setting up of the potential network as a priority action, or to raise additional resources to be allocated to the time and work required in the participation in this network.

## → Expected effects and perceived results

The diversity of actions that have been put in place through pilot projects (ranging from « awareness-raising towards the environment» to the "development of tourist packages" and to the "study workshops") point out the wide range of possibilities that are offered by an initiative such as the Via Alpina. The actors who have been interviewed do not have the same expectations, or the same perception of results according to the type of pilot project that they have developed to take part in the Via Alpina initiative.

Three main categories of expected effects and perceived results can be identified:

### > *Attendance and marketing of the trail:*

From this point of view, the Via Alpina initiative is perceived as a tool, i.e. a hiking trail throughout the Alpine space. The main expected result is the increase in the number of hikers along this trail, but also and above all in the use of tourist facilities along the trail (for example accommodation facilities). The service providers expect to benefit from the international visibility of the route (the so called *shop-window* effect) that might lead to an increase in their turnover. Unlike 2005, the majority of interviewed people were aware of the more or less long time that will be necessary to become sufficiently known by the public at large. From this point of view, high expectations have been expressed, on the one hand, in terms of marketing of this initiative and, on the other hand, of the networking of different providers.

For example:

*In Italy:* High expectations have been expressed in terms of greater tourist flows, with higher degrees of satisfaction, thanks to a better visibility of different natural and cultural heritage aspects. The Consortium, that has been set up by operators around the pilot project known as "Tasting trails along the High Tanaro Valley", expect economic returns for the operators themselves, namely the accommodation facility managers, tour leaders and guides, even though they understand that it takes time for these initiatives to give rise to visible cost-effective results.

*In Switzerland:* The actors involved hope that they can benefit from the fact that the Via Alpina is an international project and as such it can attract new hikers. Two operators think that this new trail will lead to an increase in the number of nights spent in accommodation facilities (camping sites, inns, mountain huts, etc.) with better returns and repercussions also for the local economy, such as restaurants, bakery shops and ski lift facilities, etc. The third operator was more sceptical in the sense that according to him hikers do not spend a lot of money during their holidays, apart from accommodation and breakfast. So far, the three operators who have been interviewed have never been asked any questions concerning the Via Alpina by their customers.

*In Germany:* A favourable opinion has been expressed concerning the economic potential of the initiative, yet two concerns have been raised: the compatibility of this trail with the already existing local supply and the very limited niche that such a trail represents.

A second result that is expected from the project concerns the sale of tourist packages centered on the Via Alpina route by local tour operators and other tour professionals. Here, the success of the Austrian pilot project in developing a common Via Alpina tourist package, with the sale of 22 trips during its first year, should be underlined. In France, it seems that tour leaders and guides regard the Via Alpina as the opportunity to develop new products, since long-distance hiking makes the difference and gives sense to the development of their activity. Yet, it seems that they are the most neglected operators in the framework of Via Alpina actions, just like tour operators had been at the beginning of the project. They probably deserve being more automatically (and officially?) involved in the project.

**> A link between the enhancement of hiking trails and of the natural and cultural heritage.**

Even though the Via Alpina is regarded as a product by the interviewed people, it is often perceived as a *product unlike any other*. Local actors often express their interest in Via Alpina well beyond the fact of being a "mere" product, but more in terms of quality reference. It is also considered to be a way to raise the public awareness towards the charm of hiking throughout the Alpine space, or put in other words, as stated by one of the interviewed people: *"The Via Alpina should promote the beauty of walking in the mountains and inform about all the opportunities of discovering the Alpine space on foot. Its task does not consist only in developing and promoting products, since this is the role that should be played by a local organisation, in liaison with the Via Alpina"*.

A few results emerging from national surveys illustrate the goals that are pursued by the project:

*- In Italy:* given the characteristics of pilot projects, the main highlights are the link between hiking and the local stakeholders coming from the different cultural and environmental domains, as well as agriculture, wine and food sectors. Discovering the mountains on foot is perceived as a way to get in touch and learn about aspects that other forms of tourism would not allow people to appreciate.

*- In France:* Via Alpina is also considered as a special project, a real challenge, reconciling sustainable development and local work. Its objectives, which are difficult to define, are not only confined to its geographical boundaries, but they also encompass other cross-sectoral aspects. From this point of view, Via Alpina is seen as a way to promote a different attitude and spirit attaching a certain importance and quality to the programme that has been designed around it. For instance, according to UCPA, there is no juxtaposition between their image and that of "VA jeunes", to the contrary it is an "additional logo" that highlights the value and enhances the quality of the services that are offered to young people.

*- In Austria:* the consistency between Via Alpina and the local environment protection measures is not called into question by interviewees. Indeed, they recognise the further effective contribution provided by the Via Alpina in raising the public awareness towards the natural and cultural heritage.

### > **Networking, or networkings?**

On the one hand, given its complexity (the number of countries and partners involved), the Via Alpina project can be regarded as difficult to be fully understood and implemented by potential partners; on the other hand this complexity is a powerful tool that brings together a whole multitude of partners around the same project, thus providing them with several networking opportunities. The French evaluation results highlight three different types of networkings that are also in part found in the other countries concerned by the Via Alpina initiative:

- Via Alpina as a local dynamic catalyst: in this case, the added value of the initiative consists in fostering the mutual identification among different local partners present in the same territory, which is a fundamental step towards the design and development of joint local projects. Hence, it is an external project, such as the Via Alpina, that has paradoxically allowed local entities to know each other and work together to design new future joint projects.

In other words, as can be read in the Italian evaluation summary: *A further added value of the Via Alpina consists in fostering contacts and co-operation between local actors, that are not so much used – especially in the private sector – to work together in a network. On the other hand, the international dimension of the project is less well perceived: efforts are mainly focused on triggering off the mechanism at a local level, whereas the rest, at least for the moment being, seems to remain in the background.*

- Via Alpina, accelerating partnerships; identification of needs and design of new ideas: In this case the added value of the Via Alpina consists in its ability to give rise to, relaunch and even formalise co-operation agreements for business development purposes, both on the demand side (customers) and on the supply side (promotion office, accommodation, etc.).

Hence, in Italy, the local actors engaged in the pilot project called “Tasting trails along the High Tanaro Valley” have judged the Via Alpina project positively. Even though it has been designed in an institutional context, it has provided private actors with an opportunity to get in touch with a tour operator, and thus to set up a partnership. “The Via Alpina has been able to fully take into account the local mountain needs. Had it confined itself to merely setting up a mountain trail along a few kilometres, everything would have stopped there. Instead, its underlying idea is perfectly in tune with our needs”.

- Via Alpina as a source of inspiration for the Alps of tomorrow

In this case, the direct contribution that is expected from this project is neither in terms of actions nor of partnership, but it is to be found in its ability to take a certain distance and to give rise to a reflection. Hence, in Switzerland, one of the interviewees replied that the pilot project can undoubtedly become part of other similar hiking initiatives, especially in the framework of the UNESCO Aletsch project (world natural heritage), with which there is a strong complementarity. Another interviewee underlined the opportunity to work with schools to provide students with the possibility to spend a day walking along this trail and learning about the surrounding environment and heritage (as was already the case in the framework of pilot projects carried out in Italy and in Austria).

## CONCLUSIONS:

The investigations that have been carried out with hikers outline a few general trends on the present itinerant hiking practices in the Alps and allow us to take into account and validate certain actions that have been developed during the implementation of the Via Alpina and Viadventure projects:

- The importance of informal sources in the choice of hikers' destinations confirms the importance and opportunity to create an (interactive) forum addressed to hikers on the new Via Alpina website;
- The validity of traditional orientation means (maps, guidebooks) shows that the publication of a Via Alpina guidebook in different languages would contribute to raise the public awareness and use of this trail.
- The increased awareness is an evidence of the effective marketing and communication activities that have been undertaken and strengthened over the past year, even though these results are still relative and the attendance of the trail is (still) insufficient.

The increase in awareness is even greater within the circles of local actors, as could be expected since specific actions have been undertaken in these pilot project areas. On the other hand, according to the survey that has been carried out among the local actors, the actions that have been developed in the framework of pilot projects have allowed the identification of actual leads for actions to be pursued according to two types of partnerships:

- Actions to be developed possibly without Via Alpina but among the local structures,
- Actions to be developed with Via Alpina.

In both cases, pilot projects have actually served as identification and experimentation phase for local initiatives in the framework of the Via Alpina project. Even though in certain cases, the pilot projects have not yet allowed to acquire a thorough knowledge of the Via Alpina, the actions or projects that have been launched so far should pave the way for the conception and structuring of future Via Alpina actions or local partnerships.

The project shall however only meet its expectations if the criticisms that have been raised in terms of operation and organisation (lengthy implementation, insufficient co-ordination, management and dynamics of the network) shall be taken into account and if the expected effects (trail attendance and sales, liaison between the enhancement of hiking trails and the natural and cultural heritage, networking) are strengthened over the next few years.

**ANNEX:** Contacts of the participating research groups

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