

## THE DIVERSIFICATION OF THE SUPPLY OF TOURIST ACTIVITIES IN A MID-ALTITUDE SKI RESORT: THE CASE OF LA CHAPELLE IN THE NORTHERN FRENCH ALPS

*André Suchet*

a.suchet@wanadoo.fr

*Dominique Jorand*

*John Tuppen*

Universidad de Grenoble, Francia

The diversification of tourist activities in small, low altitude resorts has long been a major concern for these locations, especially since the 1990s (Bourdeau, 1991, 1993; Messador, 1996; SEATM, 1991, 1993) and currently it is still an important policy issue (Bureau d'études Dianeige, 2003; Jorand *et al.*, 2009; Sorbé, 2010). In France, most of the small, low altitude resorts are considered as first-generation resorts, dating from the early part of the 20th century. As a rule, they were developed at an altitude of 900-1500 metres in locations which had previously been alpine villages and small towns, based on agriculture. Compared with their high-altitude counterparts, many such resorts might be considered as intrinsically more diversified, benefiting from both a summer and winter season. However, the risk of inadequate or irregular snow-cover in winter has proved a limiting factor on development. In contrast the inherent beauty of the natural landscape and the attractiveness of traditional villages, surrounded by forests and pastures, provide a setting particularly conducive for outdoor recreational leisure activities. Taking account of these factors, many resorts have attempted to reinforce their family image, catering for a wide age-range and a variety of interests of which many do not have a sporting character. Activities and facilities for young people (such as safe ski-lifts) have become especially popular.

La Chapelle is a small ski resort in the northern Alps, France. This paper explores the diversification of the supply of tourist activities in mid-altitude mountain areas. The research is based on a field survey carried out in the village resort of La Chapelle.

From a theoretical point of view, using the sociology of organizations (Crozier y Friedberg, 1990; Friedberg, 1993), and geographical literature on the diversification of tourist areas (Bourdeau, 1993, 1991; Mermod, 2001; SEATM, 1991; ASADAC y SEATM, 1989; Messador, 1996; Hélicon, 1999; Rech, Mounet y Briot, 2009; Prudent, Marcelpoil y Boudières, 2008; Sorbé, 2010), and a series of previous observations, it is possible

to consider a five-point approach (see inset). This theoretical work is directly related to a research methodology (five points correspond to five sections of an interview and analysis grid). This theoretical framework should be considered as an evaluation grid of diversification strategies in middle mountain areas.

**1) Is there is a diversification of tourist supply?**

a/ Presence in reality of activities other than winter sports: observation of the site, billboards along the roads, posters, leaflets, presence of hirers of sports' equipment, construction of roads, footpaths for climbing, festivals and fairs, rural activities, opening of a museum, botanical garden or geological site...). Presence of this offer in national and international catalogues devoted to the resort, on flyers distributed locally in the resort.

b/ Location of activities: reception desks for activities other than skiing (in the centre of the resort and/or in peripheral areas). Concentrated tourism (site of geomorphological interest, museum ...) or diffused (hiking, mountain biking ...).

**2) What is the nature of this diversification? «In what ways can we diversify?»**

Mountain biking using the lifts *versus* canyoning in surrounding area; sports activities *versus* farming related activities; tourism developed from existing activities on the site (logging, agro-tourism, museum of hydropower , iron mine visits...) *versus* new business creation; commercial enterprise *versus* non-commercial activity; permanent *versus* seasonal tourism; uniquely local attractions *versus* common leisure activities.

**3) Who are the actors responsible for this diversification?**

Endogenous *versus* exogenous actors, actors originally linked to winter sport activities *versus* non ski-related actors; individual initiatives *versus* collective commitment; private *versus* public actors; current *versus* retired employees.

**4) What is the degree of formalization of the «concrete action system» producing tourist supply?**

Links between actors, the presence of a charter, a text or local regulations. Tourism stakeholders. Formalization of a concrete action system: in particular formal organization or local order (Crozier y Friedberg, 1990; Friedberg, 1993). Are there conflicts or not? Situation regarding the local powers in the town.

**5) What are the present forms of development?**

In subsequent studies of Corneloup and *al.* (2001), it is possible to examine different forms of development at different mountain tourism sites. What are the ecological references (visions of nature, relationship with the environment), the economics (ethics, rationalities) and political motivations (human conventions, decisions) of the key players in the production of cultural and social organizations in the domain in question. Is development by players in the outdoor recreation field limited to traditional management philosophy or is it based on divergent or even opposing cultural models and ethics? Using theoretical and empirical approaches, the functioning of tourist resorts combines a number of management models and logics for action that are specific to the different categories of players. Referring to the work of Boltanski and Thévenot, these authors establish several forms of development: a republican

and anthropocentric form; a technocratic and normative form; a form of republican educators; a form of marketing of services; a entrepreneurial form with productivity logical thinking; a traditional and conservative form; a form of local development; a form inspired by deep ecology; or even a libertarian-libertine form highlighted recently by Mao y Corneloup (2005).

Theoretical framework

In the Abondance valley, as in many other French ski areas, tourism officials engage in the production of artificial snow and mountainside planning (profiling slopes, artificial water reservoirs, new chairlifts, *etc...*) at a price of questionable impact on the environment (Paccard, 2010; Tschertcher y Cantaloupi, 2007; de Jong, 2007). Following recommendations for mountain tourism diversification during the 1990s (quoted at the beginning of the article), currently «everybody is talking about diversification», but results have yet to be seen (François, 2009). As written by Sorbé (2010) emphasizes, within the resort lies «a deep cultural attachment to solely the skiing industry». At La Chapelle, rather than seeking its own unique identity, elected officials and local tourist leaders seem to consider Châtel and other major resort an example to follow.

The results show that: first, despite the low altitude ski area (1000-1800 m), the commune's development policy is still heavily in favour of winter sports; secondly, the summer activities on offer appear to be primarily developed by the ski-lift group (Portes du Soleil) rather than local public policy makers. Thus, the Portes du Soleil group has developed outdoor sports (e.g. mountain biking, devalkart, rollerherbe) thereby creating the need for ski lifts during the summer. Finally, agritourism, rural activities and cultural development appear neglected.

