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How can ecotourism be managed so that tourists' visits are compatible with the protection of species and their habitats? In a new study, researchers developed a tool to calculate the trade-off between tourism and the protection of an endangered bird in an Austrian national park, in order to optimise conservation and visitor management.

As an alternative to standard commercial (mass) tourism, ecotourism describes visitors travelling to enjoy natural areas with a minimal impact on the wildlife. Some researchers argue that ecotourism cannot be beneficial to conservation, as it always involves a certain level of habitat disturbance. However, some studies have suggested that a trade-off may be possible: while visitors can have a negative impact on a species through habitat destruction, such as foot trampling, and disturbance that affects the species' breeding success, from noise and camera flashes, they can also contribute to funds that might be used to protect species.

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The study used a mathematical model to calculate the trade-off between ecotourism and conservation from the viewpoint of a park manager for the endangered rock partridge Alectoris graeca saxatilis in the Hohe Tauern national park, Austria. The partridge is a protected species and is unintentionally disturbed by visitors to the park, mainly hikers.

The model analysed how a national park manager can balance the money for conservation generated from visitors with disturbance to the rock partridge in order to ensure that the species is not negatively affected.

In this case study, when conservation is prioritised over tourism, i.e. the number of visitors is restricted, 'high quality tourism' is achieved. Lower numbers of visitors to the national park are willing to pay more to visit a site in better condition. Therefore, the same amount of money may be raised as for a poor quality site, where more people are allowed to visit and pay a lower entry fee. The results suggest that managers should therefore consider keeping national parks in good condition, as this means tourists will pay more to visit them. In other words, the credibility and effectiveness of nature conservation policies are essential in ensuring public support, and willingness-to-pay, for protected areas.

The model also suggested that it is very important to reward parks when they meet their conservation targets, so they remain committed to their goals. Visitors pose a threat to conservation efforts when they are not interested in, or aware of, the endangered species present. This can be remedied by providing more information to visitors at the site, through signposts and information panels, for example. The researchers also suggest that public financing is necessary to kick-start national park conservation work, until revenue from visitors can contribute a larger share of the park's budget.

The 'two-edged' effect of ecotourism, whereby visitors provide revenues for costly conservation efforts, whilst at the same time potentially affecting endangered species, can be managed to ensure species' population levels are not affected. Three types of measures were specifically highlighted by the model: visitor control, i.e. limiting visitors; habitat conservation measures, i.e. expanding buffer zones or creating quiet zones with the help of signposts; and species conservation measures, such as species restocking.

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