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How Do People Experience the Alps? Attitudes and Perceptions in Two Protected Areas in Italy

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Abstract: Protected areas play an important role due to their twofold capacity for biodiversity conservation and the provision of many benefits to human well-being. Tourism can be a tool for protecting nature, enhancing people's sensitivity, and a threat to biodiversity management. This study investigates users' attitudes and perceptions and managers' concerns related to the frequentation of two protected areas in the Italian Alps: the Gran Paradiso National Park and the Adamello Regional Park. We carried out 32 semi-structured interviews with park managers and municipalities to identify their perception of tourism and possible threats related to the use of the parks. Thus, we administered questionnaires to 3399 users of the PAs to investigate their attitudes and perceptions. We made considerations on whether there were similarities in the attitudes identified by the park managers and results of the questionnaires. Questionnaires confirmed the managers' perception of mass tourism regarding one-day stays and the purpose of the visits, but we could not exhaustively confirm the increase of new visitors. We performed a binary logistic regression to understand the relationship between short-term stays and attitudes of visitors (origin, frequency of visits, stakeholders' category, and biographical data). Eventually, interviews stated an exacerbation of the growth of visitors due to the COVID-19 pandemic; thus, we investigated if the pandemic changed the assiduity of visits, and half of the users claimed a change in their assiduity of visits, but mostly declared a decreased frequentation of the area.



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Keywords: tourism; Gran Paradiso National Park; Adamello Regional Park; recreational services; alpine areas; mass tourism

1. Introduction

Mountain environments and Protected Areas (PAs) are highly appreciated as tourist destinations for enjoying nature and carrying out outdoor activities [1,2]. The Alps are the most frequented mountain regions in Europe and represent one of the earliest forms of tourism [3], with around 120 million tourists per year. Protected areas have a twofold capacity: they are a tool for biodiversity protection and contribute to human well-being. These areas, in fact, provide many benefits to human well-being including physical health [4,5], mental health [6], and social and cultural benefits [4,5]. In this context, tourism plays a key role as an intermediary between protected areas and human well-being. Tourism is a resource for mountain economies [7], providing an income to residents; however, it can also represent a threat to mountain ecosystems and their biodiversity [8]. Moreover, tourism is also a resource that can lead to the achievement of many of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), contributing to natural resource conservation, job opportunities, and sustainable production [3]. Hence, tourism can contribute to conservancy objectives, helping in building resilience to climate change [9] and spreading environmental awareness through stakeholders. On the other hand, regarding the type of activities related to mountain tourism, as highlighted by the 9th World Congress on Snow and Mountain Tourism (UNWTO, 2016), there is a current tendency of people visiting mountain areas for

the purpose of seeking sport and adventure tourism or health tourism. These practices do not threaten the environment intrinsically, but some activities in particular seasons can affect biodiversity conservation [10], changing the composition of communities [11,12] and threatening terrestrial wildlife [8]; such activities include hiking or climbing. Hence, sustainable tourism in mountain areas is a key concept for conservation strategies, aiming to maximize the benefits while reducing the negative impacts on the environment [13]. Another topic of high interest in this study is mass tourism, but since there are still some uncertainties in its definition, [14] here we define the term *mass tourism* as referring to a huge number of tourists that visits a particular area, generally in short-term stays, and not integrating with local communities (this, in some cases, could also be defined as *speed tourism*, but for clarity reasons we will address this phenomenon using *mass tourism* only). During 2020, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic caused a variation of touristic fluxes due to the travel restrictions and lockdowns, whereas during the summer of 2020 and 2021, the period where our studies were carried out, the safety restrictions were eased, except for local lockdowns. The COVID-19 pandemic offered a widespread possibility of reconsidering the importance of nature and outdoor activities. Despite the general reduction of travels worldwide due to the COVID pandemic [15], that caused a loss of 4.5 trillion \$ of GDP, there is a local effect related to the study areas considered that shows a countertendency with the global one.

The main aim of this research was to detect and monitor users' attitudes at the parks and understand if there were similarities in the managers' perception of the fruition of PAs and the declared use of the parks by different categories of users. Regarding attitudes, we mainly focused on the following topics:

- (1) Tourists' origin, purpose of the visits, and activities carried out;
- (2) Mass tourism, in terms of duration and frequency of the visits, percentage of new visitors, and related activities;
- (3) The effects of COVID-19 on the fruition of the areas.

We aimed to integrate these two sources of information to understand if there was a common ground regarding the PAs between two different categories of PAs, such as managers and visitors, and to monitor the attitudes towards touristic activities to comprehend the trends and the dynamics of tourism in the PAs and to support ideas for the monitoring of tourism in the Alpine environment, which matches with biodiversity conservation objectives. We then tried to suggest some ideas in the discussion for an integrative type of planning and decision making, which considers users as a key point in the process.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Areas

The selected two study areas (Figure 1), the Adamello Regional Park and the Gran Paradiso National Park, both situated in the Italian Alps, belong to a broader study on the evaluation of ecosystem services in alpine-protected areas that we are carrying out. The areas share common features, such as altitude, vegetation cover, and soil types, and are areas with a high naturalistic and conservation value. However, they had a different story and are regulated by two different laws; thus, we can assume that there may be some differences in the management strategies and fruition of the areas.

The Adamello Regional Park was founded in 1983 by the regional law n.79/1983 and is situated in the North of Italy, in the region of Lombardy. The elevation ranges from 390 to 3539 m.a.s.l., representing the peak of its highest mountain, the Adamello. Due to this range and its 51,000 ha of coverage, different types of vegetation cover exist, achieving a great number of patches of vegetation covers and habitats. The park provides a huge number of services from sports activities, such as hiking or climbing, to natural and cultural activities, such as the Museum of petroglyphs. According to the ISTAT data on the touristic density. See <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/247191> (accessed on 7 February 2023) for further details), sixteen out of the nineteen municipalities that are included in the protected area have a touristic vocation. Among these municipalities, the majority is defined as

mountain municipalities with cultural, historical, artistic, and landscape vocation. Eight municipalities have a high (Breno, Edolo, Vione) or very high (i.e., Ponte di Legno, Temù, Cevo, Saviore dell'Adamello, Vezza d'Oglio) touristic density.

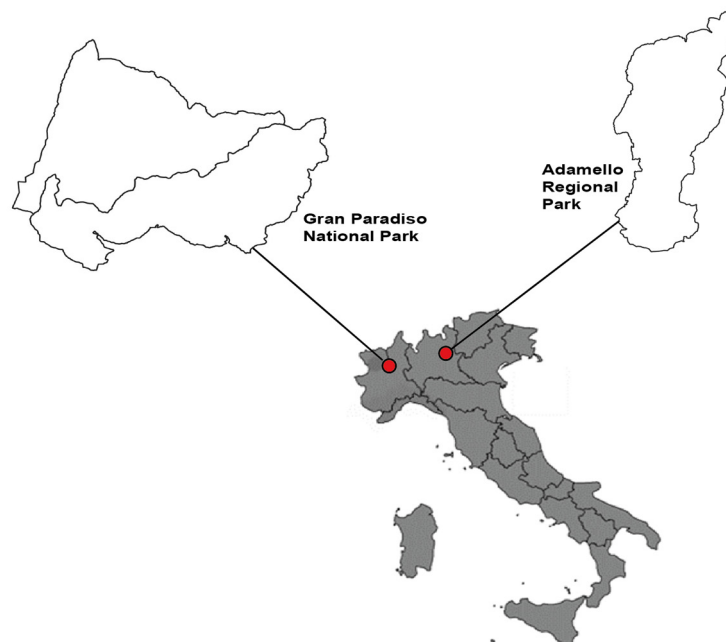


Figure 1. Map of the study areas: on the left is the Gran Paradiso National Park and on the right, the Adamello Regional Park.

The Gran Paradiso National Park was founded in 1922 and is the oldest National Park in Italy. It is regulated under the Framework Law 394/91 and covers an area of approximately 70,000 ha, encompassing two regions (Piedmont and Aosta Valley). The elevation ranges from 800 m to 4061 m, represented by the peak of the Gran Paradiso Mountain, which is one of the most famous European summits. Many activities are provided and supported by the park, covering many possibilities from sports tourism to natural and cultural tourism. The ISTAT indicator on touristic density shows that the municipalities in the Gran Paradiso National Park are very attractive places for tourists. Ten out of thirteen municipalities are ranked as very high touristic places. They are classified as mountain municipalities with cultural, historical, artistic, and landscape vocation. In comparison, the touristic density in the Gran Paradiso National Park municipalities is higher than the Adamello Regional Park municipalities (mean of 3.8 versus 2.2 in an index that goes from 0, no tourism to 5, fifth quintile of touristic density).

2.2. Interviews and Questionnaires

Our campaign was structured in two different steps to investigate the diverse opinions of different stakeholder categories. First, we carried out semi-structured interviews (Table S1) with park workers and the municipalities' representatives. The interviews were 30 min long and encompassed mainly questions about activities offered by the park and municipalities, criticism in the relationship with touristic attitudes, and the effects of COVID-19 on touristic activities. These interviews allowed us to figure out the criticisms related to tourism and protected areas. Additionally, we categorized park users through the compilation of a list of main stakeholder categories after a consultation with each park.

Second, we administrated a questionnaire (Table S2) over two months (July to August 2020) to different stakeholder categories (Table S3), trying to cover all the park's users. We used a random sampling criterion, and we administered questionnaires in the place of interests of the PAs. In addition, the questionnaire was published online [16,17] to collect data from park users remotely. The final sample size contains a total of 3399 re-

spondents (1059 for Adamello Park and 2340 for Gran Paradiso Park), representing diverse socio-demographic groups and different park users' categories. We selected the stakeholder categories considering all the possibilities related to protected areas, ranging from tourism to park workers. The structured questionnaire encompassed a list of closed-answer questions that aimed to describe users' attitudes towards the PAs, considering four main topics: (1) type of stakeholder's category, (2) frequency and duration of visits at the PA and activities carried out, (3) perception of natural areas and changes in the frequency of visits after COVID-19, and (4) biographical data.

2.3. Data Elaboration

The semi-structured interviews were registered and saved in written format, to allow data elaboration. Regarding questionnaires, we first elaborated the provenience of stakeholders using the software Tableau [18]. We clustered the activities carried out in the park into 16 mixed categories, created from the association of the main activities (relaxing, cultural, nature, sport, gastronomic tourism). Then, we standardized data in Zscore [19] to allow better comparison between the PAs.

Concerning frequency and duration of visits, we only analyzed data from users which declared to be tourists to avoid bias, since this type of information was required for correlating results with managers' perception on tourists' behaviors at the PAs. The total of tourist respondents for the Adamello Regional Park (AD) was 896, while for the Gran Paradiso National Park (PNGP), it was 2096. Regarding the topic of short-term stays in tourism, we tried to detect if there were relevant differences in the duration based on the type of activity. We first evaluated the duration of the stay, then we clustered the type of stays into two, considering short-term stays (one or two nights) and long-term stays (one week or more) according to the Eurostat description of tourism trip length [20].

We compared the duration of the stay with the activity carried out to detect which categories were related to short-term stays. To understand if there was a new flux of visitors, we investigated the answers regarding the frequency of visits, with a particular focus on visitors that declared to be on the first visit. Again, we sought to find relationships with the activity categories. We then evaluated if there were changes in the frequency of visits after the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to detect if there were any variations as stated in the semi-structured interviews, and we investigated correlations with the stakeholders' categories.

Thus, we performed Pearson χ^2 Test [21] using the software StatSoft Statistica [22], to investigate the relationship between categorical variables. In this case, we clustered the replies from both PAs in one database and carried out analysis using data from both PAs merged since we aimed for a broader investigation of touristic activities. From the semi-structured interviews, a concern emerged regarding mass tourism, represented mostly by short-term stays. We wanted to explore the impact attitudes of users on the duration of the stays, focusing on short-term stays. We performed a binary logistic regression with the software IBM SPSS Statistics 29 [23] to determine the relationship between the binary categorical outcome of short-term stays (0: long term, 1: short term) and the other categorical variables collected in the questionnaires (frequency, activities, stakeholder's category, and biographical data). The forward stepwise method [24] was used to choose the fitting variables for the model; standardized coefficients (B) and odds ratios $\text{Exp}(B)$ were calculated. We assessed the fit of the model using the Nagelkerke pseudo R^2 and the percentage of correctness.

3. Results

3.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

Concerning activities carried out, in both the PAs, the respondents highlighted a predominance of nature tourism, outdoor activities both for winter season (skiing and snowshoeing) and summer activities (biking, climbing), and cultural tourism related to petroglyphs at the AD, whereas at the PNGP, cultural tourism was defined more marginal

and related to religious events due to the presence of sanctuaries allocated at high elevations. Food tourism was the least considered and mainly related to specific events for both PAs.

Thus, interviewees expressed a concern regarding sport outdoor activities; in fact, even if sport outdoor activities are generally considered sustainable, these can affect fauna during the more fragile seasons (i.e., the breeding season). Due to the perceived huge number of tourists that are approaching mountain environments for the first time, park managers raise the issue of safety during outdoor activities, related to poor knowledge of the environment and inadequate equipment. In both the study areas, we detected that stakeholders perceived an ongoing trend towards an increase of visitors. Here, we found that, generally, municipality representatives consider the growth of tourism more as a relevant source of income. Park managers also pointed out tourism as a possible source of income, but they expressed some concerns regarding the possible effects on biodiversity conservation. At the PNGP, some municipality representatives declared the problem of local infrastructures, deemed inadequate for the growing touristic flux, stating that the larger number of cars circulating across the protected area caused some traffic congestions and led to restrictions and fines. This concern was also expressed by park workers; at the AD for instance, managers stated the need to govern and limit car mobility, promoting the use of bikes and other non-motorized vehicles. However, in both the PAs, managers also expressed a concern regarding the risks of an increase of visitors regarding biodiversity conservation and tourists' behavior. For instance, at the AD, dogs, outdoor activities, and the use of drones were indicated as a possible threat to the fauna of the park [25–27]. At the PNGP, managers also feared the impact of human activities with threats related to naturalistic photography, climbing, and activities with motorized vehicles. In both the PAs, there was a perception that the number of tourists was inversely proportional to the quality of tourism; there was a claim for a higher quality of tourism, in terms of a higher interest in the territory, community, traditions, and the environment, in which the tourist could perceive himself as an inhabitant of the territory. Moreover, some interviewees proposed limiting access to places of biodiversity conservation concerns. At the AD, a park manager highlighted the necessity of park rangers to control tourism activities and, where appropriate, penalize the actions that damage biodiversity. An important difference between the two areas of study is that the PNGP is equipped with a Park Guard, the park rangers, which among its tasks include monitoring and surveillance of the activities carried out within the protected area, while the AD is not equipped with this type of monitoring. Most of the respondents highlighted mass tourism as the biggest issue concerning the PAs, defined generally by the respondents as one-day stays tourism or very short stays, and huge numbers of tourists. Mass tourism was depicted as a high number of cars across the boundaries of the PAs, the consequent disturbance on fauna, and a crowding along the hiking trails. At the PNGP, some interviewees indicated the quality of tourism as declining, mostly because of the one-day stay trips, which, in some cases, led to a more stressful working condition for some touristic and restoration workers due to pretentious and nervous behaviors of visitors. Furthermore, an issue emerged related to the expectancies that tourists can have concerning park services, and the contrast between the more relaxed rhythms of mountain areas and the faster rhythms of cities. The lack of knowledge of the correct behavior to be adopted in the mountains was a trait highlighted by all the interviewees.

However, there was a consensus in the fact that there was a new sensitivity towards natural areas above all, after the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to many people having their first visit to mountain areas; the concern here was to appropriately inform the new visitors of basic background information to properly tackle the mountain, act carefully, and behave appropriately for safety purposes. At the AD, park workers highlighted the responsibility of PAs in helping new visitors in developing the appropriate behavior in mountain environments. Eventually, all the interviewees agreed with the fact that after the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of visitors increased exponentially. At the AD, municipality representatives distinguished winter from summer tourism; in fact, during winter, there were a lot of travel restrictions, thus tourism was completely blocked with

huge economic consequences, whereas during the summer season, the travel restrictions were related to foreign countries, allowing only short-distance trips, thus many tourists spent the holidays at the AD. At the PNGP, the municipality representatives stated that the COVID-19 pandemic boosted the already existing positive trend in tourism. For both PAs, the perception of this increase of tourism led to the concern of its duration; in fact, interviewees wondered if the trend was permanent or only a temporary effect of the international travel restrictions, which led tourists to visit PAs as a recovery plan related to COVID.

3.2. Questionnaires

3.2.1. Origin, Purpose of Visits and Activities Carried Out

A total of 3399 questionnaire interviews were collected, 1059 at the Adamello Regional Park and 2340 at the Gran Paradiso National Park. Concerning the Adamello Regional Park (Figure 2), 78% of the respondents were residents in Lombardy, the region in which the park is situated, whereas the PNGP had significantly lower values ($p < 0.0001$), with tourists coming from outside the regional boundaries of the PAs, mainly from Lombardy (32%) and Piedmont (32%). The international tourists were just an irrelevant part of the sample: 4 at the AD, from France, Portugal, and Germany, and 8 at the PNGP, from Germany, Austria, Vietnam, Belgium, France, and the Netherlands.

At the time of the survey, international travel restrictions were implemented in many places, affecting the presence of foreign tourists in Italy.

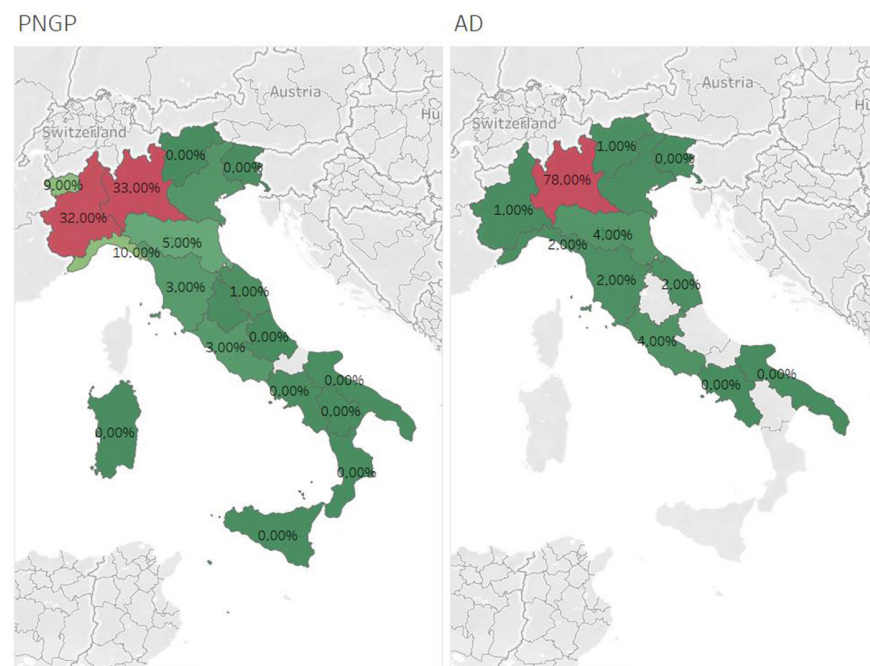


Figure 2. Provenience and percentage of the totality of users at the Gran Paradiso National Park (left) and Adamello Regional Park (right).

Concerning socio-demographic information (Table S4), in the Adamello Regional Park, the highest number of responses came from the age classes <20, from 21 to 30 and from 41 to 50, with little higher values in the female gender (55% of the responses). In the Gran Paradiso National Park, the highest response values came from the age classes of 41 to 50 and 51 to 60; the female gender (54% of the responses) was slightly higher than males.

Concerning the Adamello Regional Park (Table 1), most users (48%) declared carrying out activities encompassed in the “all categories” group. Thus, the remaining 62% is mostly represented by tourists which look for natural and sport tourism (10%), sport tourism (8%), and cultural, naturalistic, and sport tourism (8%). The gastronomic tourism reached

7% of the total, only if aggregated with nature and sport tourism. Considering the single categories, sport tourism was the most considered, confirming the perception of the semi-structured interviews, while gastronomic was the least considered. Concerning the PNGP, as for the AD, most users declared to do all type of activities, but reaching only 25% of the total. Nature and sport tourism accounted for 21% of respondents, whereas the third most considered type was cultural, naturalistic, and sport tourism (16%). Sport tourism itself reached 11%, while nature tourism 5%. The least considered was cultural tourism itself, together with the relaxing tourism, reaching less the 1% of replies.

Table 1. Activities carried out by tourists at the PAs.

What Are Your Recreational Activities in the Park?	AD (n° of Replies)	AD % of the Total	PNGP (n° of Replies)	PNGP % of the Total
All categories	428	48%	519	25%
Cultural and gastronomic tourism	3	0%	3	0%
Cultural and nature tourism	30	3%	7	0%
Cultural and sports tourism	21	2%	56	3%
Cultural tourism	7	1%	4	0%
Cultural/gastronomic/naturalistic tourism	31	3%	3	0%
Cultural/gastronomic/sports tourism	16	2%	37	2%
Cultural/naturalistic/sports tourism	75	8%	331	16%
Gastronomic (food and wine tourism)	3	0%	26	1%
Gastronomic and naturalistic tourism	13	1%	2	0%
Gastronomic tourism and sports	21	2%	50	2%
Gastronomic/nature/sports tourism	59	7%	277	13%
Nature and sports tourism	87	10%	443	21%
Nature tourism	19	2%	95	5%
Relaxing	7	1%	4	0%
Sports tourism	76	8%	237	11%

To disentangle the activities and to carry out a comparison between the PAs, we evaluated the number of replies containing each of the activities mentioned; thus, we standardized in Z scores to better compare the PAs (Figure 3). On the one hand, the AD had more homogeneous values for the categories, with sport and nature tourism as the predominant purpose of visits, and relaxing purposes as the category that was least considered. On the other hand, in the PNGP, sport tourism was predominant, followed by nature tourism, while gastronomic and cultural tourism were less considered compared with the AD. This can be explained by the fact that Adamello Park is a smaller and relatively little-known park, while Gran Paradiso Park is a notorious protected area known to the general public and especially to climbers and mountaineers, who find there very renowned climbing walls and peaks. For instance, the Gran Paradiso Peak is considered a notorious destination for alpinism, since it is the only 4000 m peak entirely within Italian borders [28]. Furthermore, these differences emerged during the semi-structured interviews, where at the AD, stakeholders stated the presence of many sources of tourism, encompassing natural, outdoor and sport activities, and cultural, above all related to the presence of petroglyphs. At the PNGP, we observed a higher preference for sport tourism; thus, we can assume that given its high reputation as a destination for outdoor mountain lovers and relevance as the first Italian park, the type of tourism was more targeted towards sport tourism carried out in nature.



Figure 3. Type of activities carried out at the AD (ZAD) and PNGP (ZPNGP) standardized in Z scores.

3.2.2. Mass Tourism: Duration of the Stay, Frequency Related to the Purpose of Visits

Most interviewees affirmed that the duration of their stays was one day long, with a common trend in both the PAs. This data (Figure 4) matched with the results of the semi-structured interviews, where municipalities and park managers stated the issue of short-term stays in the PAs. The Adamello Park had higher values of one-day stays (37%) compared with the Gran Paradiso (34%), but this category had the highest values in both PAs. The Gran Paradiso National Park resulted in higher values for longer stays than the Adamello Regional Park, with 19% of users stating that they stay more than two weeks, compared with 10% at the AD. The least considered type of permanence was the two-week stay, with a value of 10% for both PAs. Here, the results matched with the interviews; in fact, the category of overnight stays was much higher than all the others, reaching values almost twice that of longer stays (e.g., two weeks stays or more).

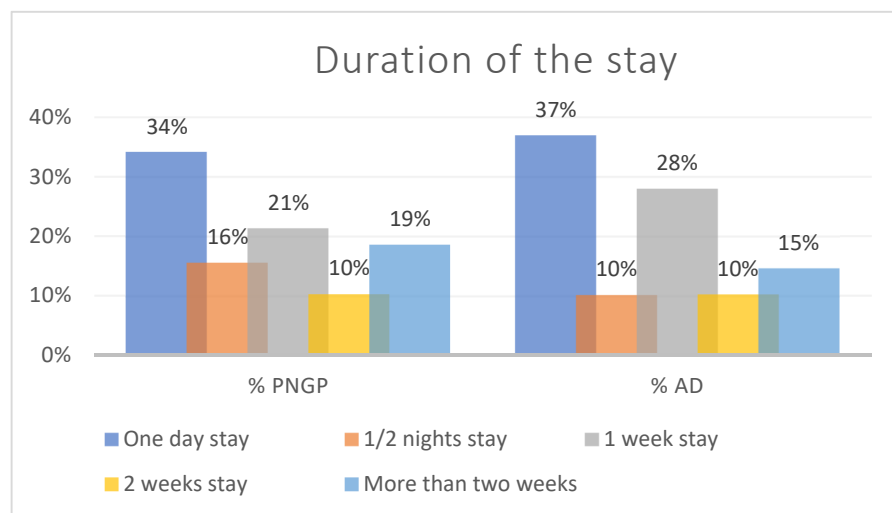


Figure 4. Duration of the stays in percentage at the PAs.

The AD showed a total of 55% respondents on short-term stays, whereas the PNGP had 50%. We can assume that this could be related the different origin of visitors, which were mostly related to a local tourism at the AD, whereas at the PNGP, we detected a tourism with a longer range of distance, suggesting that people spend more time in accommodations at the PAs due to the longer trip (for clarity purposes, we did not consider the mixed category encompassing all the activities, which could be misleading for the detailed

description of categories and duration). Among the categories that showed a preference for longer term stays (Table 2) were those related to cultural/naturalistic/sports tourism (57% AD, 60% PNGP) and relaxation tourism (50% at PNGP, 56% at AD). At the PNGP, the categories of tourists that reached the highest percentages declaring to do short-term stays were gastronomic/nature tourism (67%), gastronomic tourism cultural/naturalistic tourism and cultural/sport tourism, both reaching 60% of respondents, cultural tourism (56%), and nature tourism (55%). At the AD, the categories that showed higher response rates for short-term stays were cultural/gastronomic tourism, cultural tourism, and gastronomic tourism, reaching 100% of responses each; this was followed by gastronomic/sport (77%), gastronomic/nature tourism (71%), and cultural/sport tourism and cultural/nature tourism, reaching 67% of respondents. Even though the percentages were slightly different, we encountered similarities between the PAs in the categories which declared shorter term stays. The sport tourism category only reached similar values in both the study areas, with 56% of respondents at the AD and 55% at the PNGP, suggesting that the perception that emerged from the semi-structured interviews, in which stakeholders declared a relationship between sport activities and short-term stays, could be confirmed mainly if we consider it along with the percentages of mixed categories encompassing sport tourism (e.g., cultural/sport tourism for both PAs). Since we were considering natural protected areas, we also focused on activities related to nature; for both the PAs, we obtained similar values, with a higher percentage of short-term stays with visits for nature purposes only, showing higher values of short-term stays at the PNGP (63%) than the AD (59%). From the Pearson's chi-square test, we detected a significant relationship ($p = 0.0000$) of long-term stays with the category of cultural/nature tourism. Nature tourism resulted in the category with the highest percentages of short duration of visits for PAs merged, showing a tendency of overnight stays only, whereas the category cultural/nature/sport tourism showed the opposite tendency.

Regarding the frequency of visits (Figure 5), the majority of the respondents were recurrent visitors in both the PAs. Similar values between the areas also emerged in the first-time visitors (19% of replies rate in both the PAs). The PAs showed some slight differences in respondents that have visited the PAs less than 3 times, with values higher for the Adamello (27%) than the Gran Paradiso (17%). However, the PNGP had higher values compared with the AD regarding recurrent visitors, both for the category "more than three times", having 4% more respondents than the AD, and "recurrent destination", with 7% more than the AD.

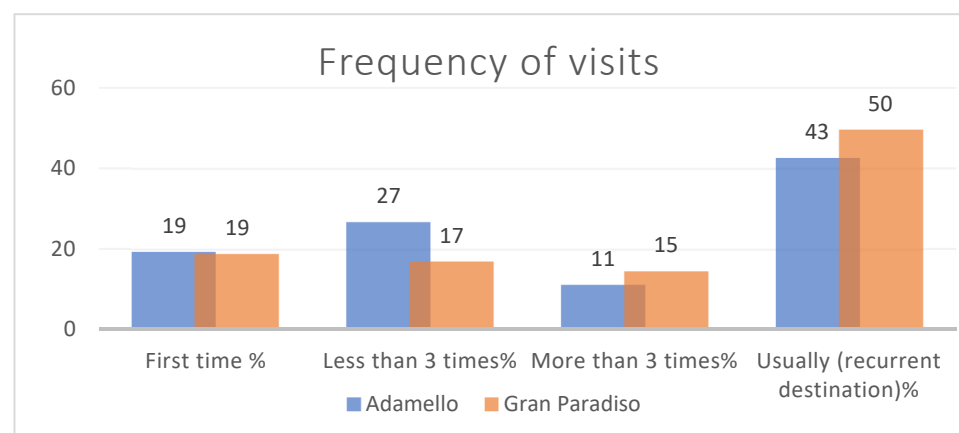


Figure 5. Frequency of visits at the PAs in percentage referring to the total answers of visitors.

Table 2. Duration of the stay related to the type of activity carried out at the PAs.

	Short Term Stay				Long Term Stay			
	Gran Paradiso		Adamello		Gran Paradiso		Adamello	
	Number of Replies	% of the Category	Number of Replies	% of the Category	Number of Replies	% of the Category	Number of Replies	% of the Category
Cultural and gastronomic tourism	2	50	3	100	2	50	0	0
Cultural and naturalistic tourism	6	60	20	67	4	40	10	33
Cultural and sports tourism	38	60	20	67	25	40	10	33
Cultural tourism	5	56	7	100	4	44	0	0
Cultural tourism/gastronomic/nature	2	67	19	54	1	33	16	46
Cultural/gastronomic/sports tourism	20	44	13	62	25	56	8	38
Cultural/naturalistic/sports tourism	141	40	39	43	214	60	52	57
Gastronomic and nature tourism	2	67	10	71	1	33	4	29
Gastronomic tourism	16	55	3	100	13	45	0	0
Gastronomic and sports	31	52	17	77	29	48	5	23
Gastronomic/nature/sport tourism	147	49	33	46	153	51	39	54
Nature and sports tourism	246	50	57	53	248	50	51	47
Nature tourism	64	63	13	59	37	37	9	41
Relaxation	2	50	4	44	2	50	5	56
Sports tourism	157	55	48	56	130	45	38	44
Total	879	50	306	55	888	50	247	45

We highlighted for both PAs (Table S5) that the category of visitors related to cultural tourism was the one with the highest percentage of new visitors (57% AD, 60% PNGP), while relaxation activities had the highest percentages in the assiduity in the visits at the PAs (78% AD, 100% PNGP). Sport and nature tourism were mainly related to recurrent visits, with values close to 50% for both PAs, and were evenly distributed in the frequency in the remaining categories. This general trend could be counterintuitive if compared with the previous semi-structured interviews, where interviewees declared an increase of new visitors that visited the areas, but we must state that there was an overall 20% of respondents of both PAs that declared that it was their first time visiting the PA, partly confirming the perception of new visitors, but with a different purpose as stated from the managers. We performed a Pearson χ^2 test for the relationship between the variables of the frequency of visits and activities; we observed significant evidence ($p = 0.00001$) to conclude that there is an existing relationship between the recurrent assiduity of visits and the categories of enogastronomic/nature/sport tourism, nature tourism, nature/sport tourism, enogastronomic tourism, cultural/nature/sport tourism, sport tourism, enogastronomic/sport tourism, “all categories” and cultural/enogastronomic/nature tourism.

Since the short-term stays were pointed out as one of the main concerns of the semi-structured interviews, we carried out a binary logistic regression analysis (Tables 3 and 4) to test the relationship with the other attitudes detected. The significant variables identified with the forward stepwise method for both the PAs include recurrent visits, origin, natural activities, stakeholder category, and senior visitors. In the case of the PNGP, cultural activities and first-time visitors were also considered, while at the AD, sport activities and young visitors were chosen. The pseudo- R^2 at the AD was 0.31 and 0.30 at the PNGP, indicating that 30% of the variance in the outcome variable can be explained by the predictor variables. Even though we recognize that this is not perfectly fitting, we assume that our variables fit our model moderately well, due to the huge complexity of a variable as the duration of stays, which could be related to many other variables that

were not encompassed in the questionnaire. The percentage of correctness, indicating how much the model correctly predicted the outcome, was 72% at the AD and 71% at PNGP. The results of the binary logistic regression showed that both areas resulted in a significant positive relationship ($p < 0.001$) with the stakeholder category of residents outside the PA, whereas a negative relationship ($p < 0.05$ *; $p < 0.001$ **) was detected for recurrent visitors *, interregional visitors *, senior visitors **, and sport activities *, suggesting that these categories were less likely to result in a short-term stay. It was interesting that at the PNGP, the activity categories negatively related to short-term stays were cultural activities and sport activities, whereas at the AD, they were nature and sport activities. Food and relaxation categories were excluded from the forward stepwise due to their low significance. Moreover, at the PNGP, we also encountered a positive relationship ($p < 0.001$) between new visitors and short-term stays.

Table 3. Results of binary logistic regression analysis using the binary dependent variable of short-term stays (0: long term; 1: short term) as dependent variable at PNGP.

Independent Variables	B	S.E.	Wald	gl	Sign.	Exp(B)
Recurrent	−1.153	0.122	89.997	1	<0.001	0.316
First visit	0.589	0.139	17.851	1	<0.001	1.801
Interregional origin	−1.428	0.117	149.692	1	<0.001	0.240
Cultural activities	−0.378	0.103	13.341	1	<0.001	0.685
Senior visitor	−0.331	0.121	7.450	1	0.006	0.718
Resident outside PNGP	0.813	0.223	13.267	1	<0.001	2.255
Owner second house	−0.962	0.161	35.841	1	<0.001	0.382
Sport activities	−0.431	0.206	4.389	1	0.036	0.650

Table 4. Results of binary logistic regression analysis using the binary dependent variable of short-term stays (0: long term; 1: short term) as dependent variable at AD.

Independent Variables	B	S.E.	Wald	gl	Sign.	Exp(B)
Interregional origin	−0.526	0.178	8.714	1	0.003	0.591
Nature activities	−0.823	0.209	15.545	1	<0.001	0.439
Sport activities	−0.986	0.249	15.724	1	<0.001	0.373
Recurrent visitor	−1.489	0.185	64.857	1	<0.001	0.226
Young visitor	0.806	0.166	23.511	1	<0.001	2.238
Senior visitor	−0.535	0.239	5.028	1	0.025	0.586
Resident outside AD	1.880	0.535	12.374	1	<0.001	6.555
Owner second house AD	−0.502	0.235	4.553	1	0.033	0.605

3.2.3. The Effects of COVID-19 on Attitudes

About 40% of respondents claimed a change in the frequency of visits after COVID-19; despite this not representing the majority of respondents, it shows a tendency of change of almost half of the respondents. Users who indicated a change in the frequency of visits to the parks were asked if the variation was in a positive (more visits) or a negative way (less visits). About 65% of users at the PNGP and 70% of those at the AD stated that there were changes in their frequency in terms of less frequent visits.

The categories (Table S5) that mostly experienced a negative change in frequency (Figure 6) at the AD were “naturalistic associations”, along with workers and tourism workers. At the PNGP, the major changes were in the categories of owner of a second house and tourists. The AD had higher percentages of variation (50%) for the category of

craftsman and producers than the PNGP (15%), and for tourism workers and employees of the park, with a 20% difference compared with the PNGP. On the other hand, residents and researchers changed more the frequency of visits at the PNGP than the AD. Investigating if the changes were towards more or less frequent visits (Table S6), we observed an overall reduction of visits in both PAs. Similar percentages of changes were found for most of the categories, with the exception of: (1) employees of the parks, which showed a complete opposite trend, with a total reduction of visits at the PNGP; (2) researchers, which declared unanimously to have more frequent visits at the AD, rather than the PNGP with only 57% of the total; and (3) tourism workers, with a total 100% of less frequent visits at the AD and 88% at the PNGP.

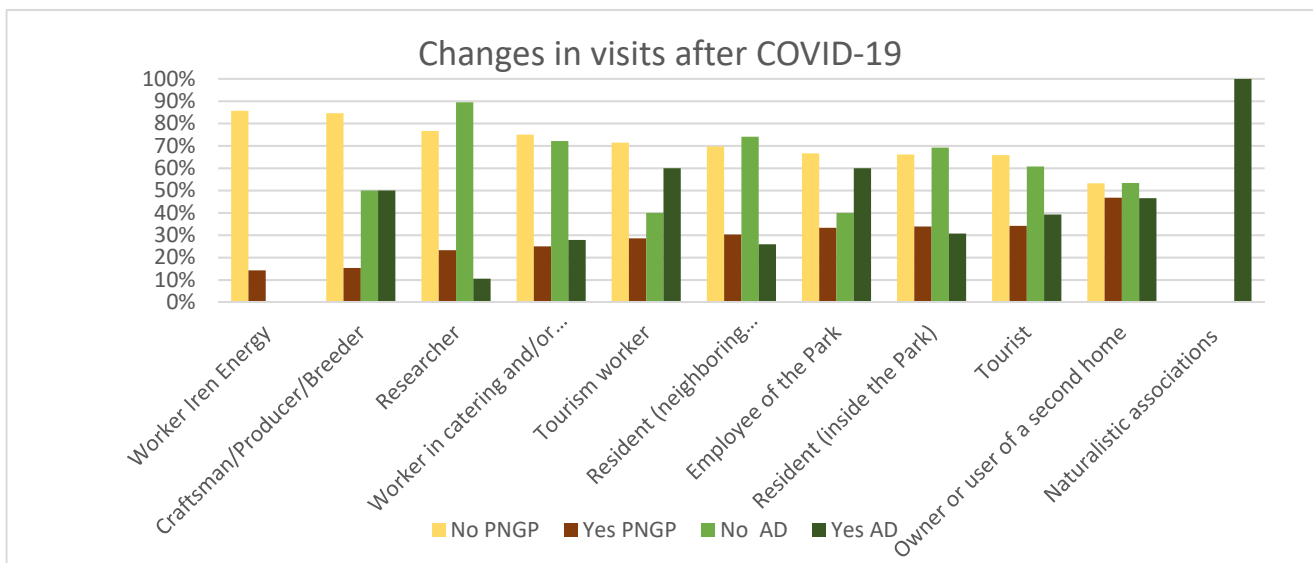


Figure 6. Percentages of the changes in users' frequency of visits after the COVID 19 pandemic at the Adamello Regional Park; no changes in frequency of visits were indicated with "No", while any type of change was indicated with "Yes".

4. Discussion

4.1. Origin of Visitors and Activities Carried Out

Concerning the origin of the visitors, we detected a significant difference between our study areas, having a local tourism centered inside the regional boundaries at the AD, and an interregional tourism at the PNGP. This was an expected result, due to the diverse tourist vocation of the two areas and the fact that the PNGP is more publicly known, due to its relevance as the first Italian National Park. Concerning activities carried out, we found many confirmations of interview statements in the questionnaire results. From both the PAs emerged a common trend of a predominance of the selection of "all categories", in particular at the AD, where almost half of respondents selected this option. This difference could be due again to the diverse history of the PAs; in fact, the PNGP has a strong background as biodiversity conservation area and for mountaineering activities [29,30], and could lead to a more targeted type of tourism towards nature and sport, whereas the AD is a more recent and smaller PA, and could result in less focused touristic attitudes. The semi-structured interviews highlighted the importance of nature and sport tourism and cultural tourism as an additional category. Questionnaires confirmed this perception, having nature and sport tourism as the second most represented category.

It was interesting that the questionnaire results highlighted the tendency of using the PAs for sport activities only, more than natural purposes only, which we expected to be the main purpose for visits at natural protected areas due to the biodiversity conservation service, as highlighted in similar studies [31–33]. This could be due to an ongoing trend related to sport tourism, which is predicted to increase in the following years [34], and

likely linked to the growing desire to perform sport in “clean” environments instead of in cities both for air purity and landscape appreciation [35], and also for an interest in nature and wilderness [36], which could be the motivation for visitors to practice sports at the PAs. Rural and developing areas of the PAs could take advantage of this trend, using it as a key strategy for local development, by promoting sustainable and attractive sport events such as biking paths in nature, hiking or canyoning [37], as also stated in the semi-structured interviews. According to the semi-structured interviews, slow outdoor tourism should be developed to couple the need for a rest from the speed of cities and the respect for nature, also supporting physical activities in nature [38]. Outdoor activities in the PAs have a century-long tradition [39] which must also be taken into account in PA management strategies. Human activities of any type, in particular sport events in nature, must be respectful of biodiversity and phenology, planning accurately each activity to avoid disturbances to species and ecosystems, and respecting the vulnerable seasons. Due to this intrinsic value of PAs, related to the protection of nature, we expected results with a higher percentage of nature-related activities. Despite this, natural activity reached lower values compared with the other main categories. At the AD, tourism only for naturalistic purposes reaches 2% of responses, whereas at the PNGP, it reaches 5%. However, this result is still quite low, especially considering that sport tourism only reached percentages that are twice as high as those of nature. We assume that there was an overlap in considering outdoor experiences, encompassing both recreational and educational activities (e.g., watching nature) and adventure experiences [40]. This was confirmed by clustering the type of activities and standardizing using Z-scores; we then detected that nature and sport tourism were the main categories identified, but the results were spread in mixed categories. Even if both the PAs have cultural attractions, for instance petroglyphs and museums, the cultural value only was poorly detected. The same happened for the enogastronomic value only, which resulted in it being less represented at the AD, and reaching 1% of replies at the PNGP, confirming the semi-structured interviews. Eventually, as the results highlighted, gastronomic and cultural activities resulted in higher percentages if experienced together with other types of activities, such as sport and natural activities.

4.2. Mass Tourism, in Terms of Duration and Frequency of the Visits, Percentage of New Visitors and Activities Categories

From the first interviews the main problem that emerged was “mass tourism”, explained as short-term stays which do not contribute to the development of the park and overexploit parks resources. The tourism quality was indicated as declining, referring mainly to this trend of exploitation, the presence of traffic in PA roads, and the huge number of tourists above all for one-day stays. Thus, we asked people attending the park about the duration of their stay; this could be an indicator of the phenomenon described. Both PAs confirmed the perception of the semi-structured interviews; in fact, more than 30% of the respondents declared doing a one-day stay, whereas longer stays did not reach 20%, apart from one-week stays, which was the second category that emerged at the AD overall, reaching almost 30%. Here, we have to consider as a possible factor the decline of the duration of stays that occurred all over Europe in 2021, in which the regions of Lombardy, Piedmont, and Aosta Valley recorded more than a 50% reduction of the number of nights spent in a touristic accommodation compared with 2019 [41]. Considering the clustered categories of the durations of stays, the categories showing longer stays were related to cultural/naturalistic/sport tourism, relaxation, and cultural/gastronomic/nature tourism. Nature tourism only reached higher percentages of short-term stays, even if the highest values were related to cultural and gastronomic tourism at the AD and cultural/gastronomic/nature and gastronomic/nature tourism at the PNGP. Thus, we must keep in mind that almost 40% of the respondents from both PAs stated doing one-day stays, which reflected the phenomena of mass tourism in our interviewees’ perception. A lot of attention should be given to this point, creating opportunities for longer term stays and increasing the attractiveness of slow tourism in these particular PAs, above all in the

AD, where the overall value of short-term stays was higher than the PNGP. The results of the binary logistic regression for each PA indicated some positive relationships with the attitudes we collected. The Pseudo- R^2 of 30% suggested that other factors beyond the variables included were likely to contribute to the model related to such a complex variable as the duration of the stays in a PA, for instance, income, type of accommodation, attractiveness of the area [42], and personal preferences. Our aim was the presence of some relationship to give a first explanation of short-term stays, pointed out from the interviews as a main issue in PAs' touristic fluxes management, above all relating to the increasing number of visitors. The results of the regression indicated that there was a relationship between frequency and length of the stay, which could possibly be related to the familiarity of the visitors with the area [42]. First visits at the PNGP were correlated to shorter term stays, perhaps because of the desire to explore rapidly new areas [43]. For both the areas, people recurrently visiting the PA were less likely to stay for short-term stays; this could be due for instance to the familiarity of visitors to the area [44–46], which leads to perform different type of activities and could develop a preference for visiting the area. For both areas, visitors coming from interregional origins were less likely to stay for short-term stays; it is therefore likely that this trend was related to the expenditure of trips (in terms of economic costs and time expenditure), which led to the preference of longer experiences related to long distance trips [43]. Moreover, we found that senior visitors were less likely to stay for only a few days; from our perspective, these results were reasonable, and the relationship with senior tourism and long-term tourism is widely discussed in the literature and is also correlated with seasonal migration in touristic areas [47,48]. The owners of a second house were positively correlated with longer term stays; this could be reasonably correlated with the lack of extra monetary expenditure for an accommodation [49]. Eventually, users performing sport activities at both PAs, nature tourism at the AD, and cultural tourism at the PNGP were less likely to stay for short-term stays. It was interesting to explore these categories and see that both PAs share the same trend for sport tourism, which was related to longer stays; this could be also related to an economic expenditure of visitors. In fact, outdoor sport activities reduce the expenditure of a trip [50], and this could lead visitors to undertake longer visits. Interestingly, we found a relationship with longer term stays at the PNGP and cultural tourism, the area in which the cultural tourism was indicated as marginal compared with nature and sport tourism, and mostly related to sanctuaries situated in the mountains. We presume that there could be a correlation with the fact that these sanctuaries are situated in natural environments and people can freely access them while hiking, but further studies should be carried out to better understand this variable.

We were interested in the changes and attitudes of the frequency of attendance of the PAs; thus, we studied the question related to the assiduity of visits. We considered this as a possible explaining factor of the increase of visitors, a factor that was stressed by the park managers during semi-structured interviews. Since there are no data available on the number of tourists that visit the specific PA we were interested in each year, we could not perform comparisons with the previous situation, but assume that this could be considered as a first step towards the description of the new visitors trend. Most respondents stated an assiduity in the visits. Moreover, the chi-square test showed a significant correlation between recurrent visitors and long-term stays, as explained below. The categories of activities with the highest values for recurrent visits were relaxation, nature, and sport tourism. Nevertheless, 19% of respondents for both PAs declared being at their first visit. We analyzed this reply considering the type of activity carried out and we could not point out a significant relationship with first-time visitors and activities. Even though visitors for nature and sport tourism were predominant, in our opinion, park administrators could encourage a shift towards a new perception of the PAs and new practices that go beyond naturalistic and sport purposes, comprising also cultural and less explored types of tourism (e.g., enogastronomic), which could also be related to longer duration. The regular visitors were strongly related to relaxation purposes and to mixed categories, encompassing nature and cultural/enogastronomic purposes. PAs have been an effective tool for raising

environmental awareness and for showing the importance of natural heritage [51]. Perhaps cultural heritage value, linked to food traditions and cultural attractions, could also be valued in PAs.

During the decision making, stakeholders should also be aware of the current demographic trends, considering that it will be very likely to have an increase of visitors due to the global demographic growth [52]. This was already partially confirmed by our results: the semi-structured interviews highlighted this trend and our questionnaires resulted in 19% of respondents that declared to be on their first ever visit to the PA. We thereby assume, considering the responses of the semi-structured interviews, that decision makers were already aware of the issues that can emerge in the future, and strategies of sustainable transportations are already taken into account. The issue that emerged from the interviews related to the users' fluxes was related to traffic, pollution, and relatively small awareness of new tourists of the responsible behavior to have in mountains. It is reasonable to hypothesize that the growing fluxes of tourism may lead to the exacerbation of the issues that stakeholders stated, such as car traffic and pollution. The Alps are a destination for millions of people every year [53] and there could be the need for reducing the GHG emissions with the improvement of the mobility sector by, for instance, strengthening and improving the public transport, e-mobility or shared vehicles, and stimulating walking or cycling [54]. Moreover, due to the advances in travel availability and the reduction of costs, it is likely to have an increasing number of visitors that come from more distant areas [52]. This research showed that the tourism was still related to local, regional, and national trips, but this could be one of the possible changes of the future, and one of the future issues for a sustainable mobility, considering tourism related to PAs in a broader sense also includes the impacts of traveling towards the destination. Public transport or other sustainable options should be affordable, attractive, widely advertised, and efficient, including both travel from the starting point to the destination and internal mobility inside the PAs [55]. Eventually, these considerations should be checked within different time periods with other questionnaires, to test if there is a relationship between the new visitors and the travel restrictions related to COVID-19 [56], which could have driven the tourism fluxes in different paths afterwards, and to monitor visitor trends.

4.3. COVID-19: Changes in Numbers of Visits

Since our data collection was carried out *during one of the first waves* of the COVID-19 pandemic, we assumed that users' attitudes and perceptions could be influenced due to the particular period, thus, in this study, we encompassed some questions regarding the frequency of visits after the pandemic, to test whether the semi-structured results could be a perception or an effective trend. The semi-structured interviews stated a growing trend of visits after the COVID-19 pandemic and from the questionnaires, it emerged that almost 40% of users changed the number of visits to the PAs due to the pandemic. It is therefore reasonable to assess that a change in the PAs' visits had occurred. Surprisingly, the majority of users declared having less visits, rebutting the interview statements. This could be due to many factors; one of these could be the fact that during 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic was still ongoing and there are no clear boundaries on when it has stopped, thus people could have misunderstood the question. Furthermore, considering the stakeholder categories separated, we obtained AD naturalistic associations and park workers were the only ones experiencing more visits. This could be linked with the travel restrictions that occurred during the pandemic; in fact, during the summer, the restrictions were eased but not removed, and summer was believed to be a relatively safe period. Despite this ease of restrictions, people could not feel safe in traveling, fearing the possibility of contamination [56,57], and thus rearranged their travels due to safety reasons [58]; moreover, local restrictions could have been applied, which in some cases completely blocked the mobility. For instance, the Aosta Valley, where part of the PNGP is situated, was considered a "red zone" during May 2021, thus all travels were forbidden, with restrictions even inside the regional boundaries. The stakeholder categories that experienced more

changes were the AD users related to naturalistic associations, employees of the park, and tourism workers, whereas for the PNGP, they were owners of second houses and tourists. We presume that second-home tourism could have been considered as an opportunity of overcoming fears of contamination and travel restrictions, and to travel safely even with the pandemic ongoing [59], instead of doing trips in other touristic areas. At the AD, the most affected categories declared a change in terms of less frequent visits, whereas at the PNGP, we have for both categories 30%, which increased the number of visits. The majority of people belonging to the category of tourists declared that they did not change their frequency because of COVID-19, and only one-third of tourists who changed the frequency of their visits said that they visited the PAs more often.

5. Conclusions

This paper aimed to understand if the managers' and municipalities' perceptions of users' frequentation of the PAs matched with the users' replies, and to get some information regarding the use and frequentation and attitudes towards the PAs, also considering the tourists' point of view.

- In most cases, we confirmed the responses of the semi-structured interviews, with an emerging trend of short-term stays and an attractiveness of the areas related to sport outdoor activities, as the majority of respondents were encompassed in sport and nature categories. The visitors' origin differ between the two protected areas: at the AD, we detected a more local tourism, whereas the PNGP, possibly due to its broader fame, had more interregional visitors.
- The perception of tourism in the semi-structured interviews had some ambiguities. Even though there was a common agreement in the importance of tourism as a possibility for economic development and biodiversity awareness, managers and municipality representatives expressed a concern regarding the quality of tourism, which was perceived as declining. In particular, they were concerned about mass tourism, which was mainly related to the short-term stays. Mass tourism was deemed as a practice that overexploits the resources of the PAs instead of supporting the local development. With the questionnaires, we could confirm the perception of a predominance of short-term stays, in particular of overnight stays. We found a relationship between short-term stays and other attitudes (frequency of visits, activities, origin, biographical data), and we found that users performing activities such as sport tourism are less likely to stay for a few days. We also found a relationship between longer stays and particular categories such as age group of seniors (61 to <70) and recurrent visitors. Since fluxes of users in protected areas are still an estimated number, we could not carry out any comparison with the previous years to confirm the managers' perception of an increasing tourism, but we estimated a value of almost 20% of new visitors in both the PAs; further studies need to be carried out to better understand the magnitude of this trend.
- Eventually, managers and representatives identified an exacerbation due to the COVID-19 pandemic of the already existing trend of new visitors. From questionnaires, we identified 40% of users that declared a change in the frequency of visits after the pandemic, but mainly the variation was towards less frequent visits, thus we could not confirm the interviewees' perception. However, it would be interesting to monitor the variation of fluxes after the pandemic; in fact, one of the concerns of managers was whether the variation was a temporary effect of the lockdown or a permanent trend.

From the literature, there emerges a challenging issue related to tourism in the European Alps; some changes in the use of these areas were forecasted. For instance, variation related to a forecasted increase of summer touristic flows, due to the more frequent heat waves and the need of people to look for cooler places, with an increase of mountaineering activities and alpine lakes [60], and a drop in winter tourism trends [61], for instance, due to the reduction of snow cover. Hence, it is fundamental to start collecting data on the visits to the PAs to monitor, together with biodiversity data, data on user flows of the

PAs to understand how fluxes of visitors change across seasons and years, the consequent human impact on biodiversity, and to develop specific management strategies according to users' fruition of the areas. A further step, along with touristic flux monitoring, would be to engage people in longer stays. This could be facilitated by raising awareness on the opportunities offered by the areas, which will go further than the sport activities only, including cultural traditions and historical habits and behaviors for nature conservation in the PA.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/su15043341/s1>, Table S1: Questions of the semi-structured interviews. Table S2: Questionnaire administered to users (example at the Adamello Regional Park). Table S3: Stakeholders' categories identified through surveys with Park's managers. In bold, the main categories used for the analyses. Table S4: Number of replies and percentage of biographical data. In columns gender, in rows age classes. Table S5: Description of frequency of visits at the PAs and type of activity carried out. Table S6: Detailed table of how the frequency of visits changed in percentage, considering more or less visits, at the Adamello Regional Park. Percentages for Naturalistic Associations at PNGP and Iren Energy workers at AD are not available, due to the lack of the category at the specific PA. Figure S1: Agreement (in percentage) of the development of a new perception of the PA as a place of leisure and well-being after the COVID-19 at the PNGP. Figure S2: Agreement (in percentage) of the development of a new perception of the PA as a place of leisure and well-being after the COVID-19 at the AD.

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