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Planning the Cultural Tourism and Ecotourism Industry for Economic Development: A Case Study of Iran

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Abstract

Planning and development are important concepts in the tourism (and ecotourism) industry and one that has several sides. Striking a balance between the requirements of these and viable economic development planning for local tourism and ecotourism is an important task. The objective of his paper is to consider the planning and development of cultural tourism and ecotourism – two significant types of niche tourism for Iran - in such a way as to derive the maximum benefits from it while incurring the minimum negative impacts. In its case study this paper considers the strengths and weaknesses of Iranian tourism planning and in less extended ecotourism and makes recommendations as to the best way to develop Iran's potential in the field of cultural tourism and ecotourism. This study has been outlined as follows: tourism planning, ecotourism planning, carrying capacity as an important tool for planning and a case study of Iran.

Keywords: Planning, ecotourism, cultural tourism, carrying capacity, development, sites, handicrafts.

برنامه‌ریزی توسعه صنعت گردشگری و اکوتوریسم برای توسعه اقتصادی مطالعه موردی برنامه‌ریزی در ایران

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چکیده

برنامه‌ریزی و توسعه صنعت گردشگری و اکوتوریسم موضوع مهمی است که طرف‌های متفاوتی در آن وجود دارد. برقرار کردن تعادل بین نیازهای هر طرف و برنامه‌ریزی توسعه اقتصادی پایدار برای گردشگری و اکوتوریسم محلی یک وظیفه بسیار مهم می‌باشد. این مقاله قصد دارد به بررسی برنامه‌ریزی و توسعه گردشگری و اکوتوریسم به نحوی پردازد که فراهم کننده حداکثر منافع و حداقل تاثیرات منفی را داشته باشد. در مطالعه موردی، مقاله به بررسی نقاط قوت و ضعف برنامه‌ریزی گردشگری و به میزان کمتری به برنامه‌ریزی اکوتوریسم در ایران می‌پردازد و سعی می‌کند تا بهترین راه کارهای توسعه گردشگری و اکوتوریسم با توجه به توان بالقوه ایران را توصیه نماید. این مطالعه شامل قسمت‌های زیر: برنامه‌ریزی گردشگری، برنامه‌ریزی اکوتوریسم، ظرفیت‌سازی پایدار بعنوان مهمترین ابزار برنامه‌ریزی و مطالعه موردی ایران می‌باشد.

کلمات کلیدی: برنامه‌ریزی، اکوتوریسم، گردشگری، اکوتوریست، توسعه سایت‌ها، صنایع دستی، ظرفیت‌سازی پایدار.

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Introduction

Developing tourism sites of all kinds for economic and commercial use has increased during last four decades. In the wider literature in this area, planning is regarded as an important tool for the management of cultural tourism and ecotourism destinations in coordination with private and public sector interests in relation to the tourist experience. This is where a managing agency with a view of the tourist experience of ecotourism can be important in ensuring that some of the potential interactions are correctly managed. Yet, there are also examples of the private sector taking the lead when the public sector is not effective. There are a number of beneficiaries in any given destination who and which can impact upon the tourism and ecotourism industry, ranging from the different businesses supplying goods and services, tourists and local residents who also impact upon the environment and the overall experience of ecotourism. It is to be noted that this paper treats both eco-friendly and cultural tourism together since (a) they share many characteristics with regard to sustainability and (b) they are of particular interest to Iran in view of its tourism resource base. (McCool, 2001)

Finding the correct balance between each of their needs and the viable development of the local eco- and cultural tourism industry is a challenge. Therefore, managing tourists and tourism is a complex duty and there are good reasons why the public sector is generally charged with this activity in most destinations. There are two reasons for this: first, the public sector is legally responsible for tasks that are generally in the wider public good, and is geared towards consider the sustainability of the resource base; second, in theory, these bodies should be able to take a holistic perspective which assesses the wider issues for a destination. (Theobald, 2004) This is a strategic perspective that has a medium- and long-term (5- to 10-year) time frame to consider the outcomes of any continued tourist development. Therefore, it is important to distinguish between the management roles of different agencies in this field. In this respect,

it is useful to consider what is meant by planning, who performs it and what it involves in a tourism context.

Tourism Planning

Writing in 1989, Pearce argued that unplanned, uncontrolled tourism growth when taken to the extreme can destroy the very resource on which it is built. Hall (1991) believed that demands for tourism planning are a response to the effects of unplanned tourism expansion. Tourism planning is usually considered as planning for tourism, a traditional view that focuses on planning for tourist developments. It places great emphasis on providing destination attractions and facilities in order to attract tourists and increase economic development. During the late 1980s a sustainable development approach to tourism planning was advanced by a number of authors (Inskeep, 1987, 1988; Gunn, 1987, 1988; Pearce, 1989; Romeril 1989a, b). It was suggested, for example, that tourism planning cannot be carried out in isolation but must be integrated into the total resource analysis and development of the area with any possible land and water conflicts resolved at an early stage (Inskeep, 1988). It was also noted that recently prepared tourism plans gave much emphasis to socio-economic and environmental factors and to the concept of controlled development. This was supported by Goodwin (1996) who suggested that policy-related actions are increasingly required to ensure that tourism development is consistent with the needs both of local communities and of their surrounding environment. In order to ensure that the needs and aspirations of the local people are met, local participation in eco- and cultural tourism developments is essential (Garrod, 2003).

If we correctly understand the notion of sustainable tourism development, it suggests a form of tourism development with ecological and social (including cultural) responsibility (Murphy, 2005). Its aim is to meet the needs of present tourists and destination regions while protecting and improving environmental, social and economic values for the

future. Sustainable tourism development should lead to the management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be managed while also taking care of cultural integrity, essential ecological processes and biological diversity. (McCool, 2001; Frank, 2007) Such approaches assert that there must be social and environmental planning components to any tourism planning which lay additional emphasis on its potential contribution to human welfare and environmental quality (Gunn, 1988; Inskip, 1988, 1991; Murphy, 2005). These approaches advocate that tourism planning must have the following aims: tourist satisfaction, rewards for owners, the conservation of the resource (whether natural or cultural) and community integration.

The other important concept in contrast with traditional tourism planning is that it is not just planning of the destination zone. Rather, it requires the planning of a number of elements including attraction clusters, the service community, circulation corridors and travel linkages between the service area and the attraction. A number of planning concepts which are an integral part of any tourism planning process can be identified: tourism planning should be a continuous process that is systems oriented and integrated within the overall planning of an area; it should include environmental and community considerations, and be pragmatic in its application (Inskip, 1991). An important aspect of this approach from an environmental viewpoint is that tourism should be planned, developed and managed in such a manner that its natural and cultural resources are not depleted or degraded but are maintained as viable resources on a permanent basis for continuous future use. (McCool, 2001) This, of course, reflects directly the balance between environmental and developmental considerations that is central to sustainable development as expressed in Principles 3 and 4 of the Rio Declaration (1992). Inskip (1991) also proposed that any tourist development policy, plan or recommendation should include an action programme

or strategy which clearly identifies how it will be achieved.

The effective management of tourism requires special organizational elements. The most important of these in a planning context are organizational structures, which include government agencies and private sector interest groups as well as the involvement of local and regional government bodies in planning for tourism activity and any legislation and regulation relevant to tourism (Inskip, 1994). One also needs to have appropriate marketing and promotional programmes together with sources of capital and finance. When a government agency engages in tourism planning, a set process is usually followed which involves a series of steps.

Page and Thorn (1997) present the case of the development of sustainable tourism planning in New Zealand. Here, while some local authorities may have plans for tourism, the absence of any regional or national plan for tourism to spread and distribute the benefits of tourism shows the need for integration of planning between the three levels at which it commonly occurs: the national, regional and local.

Even within cities with a multitude of planning organizations and different city councils, it is necessary to achieve some degree of consensus on managing the tourist experience given the significance of tourism to the wider regional economy. However, parochialism and vested interests and a certain degree of tunnel vision often mean that destinations fail to adopt a strategic perspective with a vision of the future shape and form which tourism will assume in a city-region context. This is often a failure at management level where leadership skills are required to adopt a vision of how tourism should develop over the next five years that cannot easily be put in paper plans (Liu, 2003).

What planners are belatedly realizing is that tourism destinations require more than simple notions of land-use planning which has remained a central and permanent feature of urban and regional planning where local and global processes of tourism

development are recognized. Yet, in the real world, tourism plans of whatever kind are frequently incorporated by the public sector into wider planning considerations which influence tourism development (Theobald, 2004). It is often hard to monitor the impacts of tourism because of the structural and service characteristics of the tourism sector (Hull, 2000). Whatever form of management or planning is developed for tourism in a given locality, it must take a strategic view in order to recognize and develop a range of tourism resources and environments (Frank, 2007). This strategic vision will need to satisfy the long-term provision of tourist experiences that are compatible with the locality, environment and resources available to planners and managers of the tourism.

Carrying Capacity and its Use as a Planning Tool

The discussion of carrying capacity planning here focuses on environmental-resource planning and use issues and how the carrying capacity concept is central to the debate. Carrying capacity is an idea originally developed in the 1970s and 1980s (Lime and Stankey, 1972; Bouchard, 1973; Lindsay, 1980) and the carrying capacity approach used in tourism planning comes from its application in determining wilderness use (Stankey, 1978). This, in turn, was drawn from range and wildlife management (Dasmann, 1945), hence underlining its relevance to environmental conservation and management considerations in relation to tourism planning. In essence, it is concerned with considering the level of use beyond which the impacts exceed acceptable levels defined by evaluative standards (Shelby and Heberlein, 1984). It focuses on one particular management parameter, namely the consumption level. It assumes a fixed and known relationship between the level of use and impact parameters; the carrying capacity of a site will change if other management parameters alter that relationship. It is a markedly simple approach to the issue in its equation of use to environmental degradation; if this is accepted, then the higher the use

of an area the more damage to the natural resource will occur. By extension, then, it should be easy to analyse the tourism resource base and the level of tourist use in order to deduce the maximum number of people who can use a site without any unacceptable alteration in the physical environment (Murphy, 2005). Wearing and Neil (1999) have argued that carrying capacity is fundamental to sustainable tourism development, since it aims for the maximum use of a site without resulting in negative effects for the resource, reducing visitor satisfaction, or exerting any adverse impacts upon the society, economy and culture of the area.

In cultural tourism and ecotourism planning, the major components of the process are to define both environmental and tourism development opportunities and constraints. Once these factors have been identified, considered and reviewed, the next phase is systematically to determine the upper limits of development and visitor use as well as the optimum utilization of tourism resources (Inskeep, 1991). However, Lindberg and McKercher (1997) question the validity of such an approach to ecotourism. In the past, carrying capacity as a management tool has often been applied to site-specific developments. A wider view is also possible that can take account of regional aspects, cumulative effects, the spectrum of uses and activities, as well as the concept of development clustering. Ethical guidelines for these situations include the size and scale of a tourism development being planned carefully from the outset with the environment as a critical, limiting component. It is essential to view the environmental implications and consequences of large developments from a regional perspective as well as in the light of their cumulative effect. In its purest form, Ayala (1995) has advocated resort ecotourism as embodying such a planning concept to an entire resort area.

Eco- and Cultural Tourism Planning

Although there are many environmental planning models as well as numerous tourism planning models, there are few planning frameworks designed

specifically for the development of eco- and cultural tourism (Lindberg *et al.*, 1998a). Among the few planning processes for environment-friendly tourism at the regional level that have been proposed, are the ecological approach of Van Riet and Cooks (1990) and the regional strategic tourism framework of Gunn (1988). Underlying these frameworks for tourism and the environment was the intrinsic belief that tourism developments must not only maintain the natural and cultural resources but must also *sustain* them. To achieve this target, strategic regional land-use planning should take full account of such components as resource protection, agriculture, pastoral use, urban areas and mining in a carefully planned and controlled manner which sets conditions on their growth and maintains or enhances environmental quality. Outstanding cultural and natural features and sites can continue to be significant tourist attractions only if they are conserved. If there is any doubt that the natural environment cannot be protected or enhanced then tourism development should not be allowed to proceed.

Eco- and cultural tourism planning involves different aspects of both environmental and tourism planning which include the need for the integration of tourism into area development. However, there are fewer approaches which advocate the need for the integration of environmental protection and tourism (Liv, 2003). Yet a real need exists for this to take place if the symbiotic link between the two is to be transferred from concept to reality. Inskip (1987) argues, for example, that the tourism planning of a natural attraction should be closely coordinated and integrated with park and conservation planning at the national, regional and local levels with respect to both the geographic distribution and intensity of the tourism development. Achieving environmental-tourism compatibility in natural areas is best undertaken at the regional level where it is suggested that tourism planning can provide one of the best opportunities for attaining environmental goals (UNDP and WTO, 1986).

Many similarities can be identified between the goals and approaches of environmental and tourism planning. First, the goals of environmental preservation and tourism development are able to meet in the nexus of conservation and sustainable development. Second, models in both approaches include the same general planning steps, namely: setting goals, followed by data collection and analysis, synthesis, recommendation and implementation. A third is the heterogeneous nature of the two planning approaches, i.e. built into the different planning approaches is the recognition that not every place has the same environmental attributes or tourism potential. In spite of their different goals, both environmental planning and tourism planning share a common spatial framework. Within their environmental planning approach, Smith *et al.* (1986) identified cultural activity centres, hinterland and corridors while, in the tourism destination zone approach, Gunn (1988) identified attraction clusters, the service community and linkage corridors. A final similarity concerns the integration of social values in each of the two planning approaches. The role of people as part of the ecosystem is central to emerging ecological approaches just at the incorporation of social values forms part of more recent tourism planning processes.

In the next section we will review cultural tourism and ecotourism planning in Iran and propose the best practice for preserving and safeguarding her ecological, social and cultural values.

Cultural Tourism and Ecotourism in Iran

Iran has one of the largest resource bases for cultural, natural and historical sites of any country in the world and this places Iran among the leading countries in the world in terms of its potential for attracting different types of tourists (ITDC, 2006). The size of her tourism industry – including cultural and ecotourism as major components of it – is estimated as having the potential to create jobs for 2.5 million people and to have a 3 percent share in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which would be highly comparable with other sectors

of the economy. According to forecasts from the World Tourism Organization, the increasing number of tourists world-wide will reach one billion people by 2010 and their estimated expenditure on this activity will cost about 1,000 billion US Dollars. Economists believe that 70% of this amount will rely upon labour-intensive activities (40% of it spent on handicrafts) and the remaining 30 percent on capital-intensive ones (ITDC, 2006).

Iranian handicrafts play an important role in developing the economic, cultural, social infrastructure for tourism in Iran (job creation, attraction of tourists, etc.) alongside traditional arts, with about 300 different types including carpets, kilims, jajim, glassware, ceramics, pottery, miniatures, inlaid work, wooden work, engraving and embossing. (IRCICA, 1999) The merging of Iran's Handicrafts Organization with the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization provides excellent conditions for handicrafts and tourism industry to develop and for accelerating the growth of these two sectors with the help of each other. (ICHHTO, 2005) If the idea of establishing Handicrafts Parks (satellite towns)¹ is fulfilled, these could serve as international centres for the production, exhibition, packaging, selling and export of handicrafts as well as tourism sites.

Although our tourism industry has not shown any significant development throughout previous years because of unwanted problems following the Islamic Revolution, the imposed Iraq-Iran war and overdependence on an oil-based economy (despite the absence of facilities), decision makers have always been aware of the need of removing the obstacles in its path. According to surveys and available statistics, today the tourism industry is a major kind of export and business in both developed and developing countries (Theobald, 2004). The income resulting from job opportunities and the tourist industry in general, which differs in its economic characteristics from revenues from the sale of oil and raw materials, can lead to a big growth in productivity and national income and has its own specific dimensions.

If we compare Iran with countries like Turkey and India in Asia, and Morocco and Tunisia (in Africa), which are similar in terms of the available facilities and infrastructure, a glance at Iran's ancient roots, history, strategic situation and climatic conditions shows that we need to revise the infrastructural elements of our tourism industry in order to take full advantage of these potentials (Harrison, 1995; McCool, 2001) Study and analysis of current strengths and weaknesses with a view to strengthening the positive aspects and lessen the negative ones, it would appear to be necessary to make changes to the present situation. An initial and fundamental step in addressing these and related problems must be to learn from the experiences of those countries which, despite their lack of advanced facilities, have been successful in providing such good conditions that they create a safe and sound environment for tourists and give them the opportunity for site-seeing.

A decrease in governmental interference down to the lowest possible level through supporting the private sector, especially NGOs, involved in developing the tourism industry, will not only strengthen the thinking and the ideas underpinning the question of tourism expansion and ensure a more eco-friendly approach (Garrod, 2003), but will also pave the way for foreign investment and expansion of the tourism industry. Furthermore, encouraging effective cooperation between the relevant government organizations such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Customs Office, Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization, Health Services and the Transport Ministry is the second step in this approach.

Studies have shown that, in view of its tourism attractions, Iran is well-placed globally in terms of its potential for attracting different types of tourists but, in terms of the number of tourists entering the country it is placed at about sixty. (ITDC, 2006) In contrast, according to the World Bank, 2.9 million Iranians spent 4.3 billion dollars travelling overseas in 2004. It should be noted that, also based on this same report, only one million persons travelled abroad as tourists

from Iran in 1995 and spent only 247 million dollars (World Bank, 2005). On the basis of the amount of Iranian tourist expenditure in 2004, Iran was placed 23rd in the world; the USA was placed first with 93 billion dollars, Germany was second with 78 billion dollars while Japan, with 48 million dollars, was third. This strongly suggests that a central plank to Iran's tourism development strategy should be the development of attractions and infrastructure for domestic tourism as well as for the international market. This should also allow for the establishment of a tourism infrastructure conceived around small-scale projects that are, by their nature, more eco-friendly. As this paper suggests, a focus on cultural and ecotourism is also advisable in view (a) of the rich cultural and natural resource base in Iran and (b) the possibility of developing such types of tourism in environmentally-sustainable ways, bearing in mind the planning approaches outlined above.

The deep gap between the number of Iran's tourist attractions and the number of tourists entering in our country shows that there should be a serious, scientific and realistic review of the issue. Having overcome the great difficulties caused by the Imposed War and our neglect of this profitable job creating industry, it is now our duty to apply all our knowledge and ability to managing and exploiting this resource fully to the advantage of our country and in a truly sustainable manner. To this end, having an awareness of and studying the strengths and weaknesses of Iran in terms of tourism set out below can be very beneficial.

Positive points and attractions of Iran as a tourism destination

In the writings of both Muslim and non-Muslim sightseers such as Moghadasi, Ibn-e-Hooghel, Ibn-e-Batoote, Abudelf and Angel Burt Campfer we find indisputable evidence of Iran's great attractions in terms of her strategic situation, historical background, ancient civilization, tourism attractions etc. Added to this, Iran's natural beauties, geographical phenomena, sea and coastline, climatic conditions, mountains,

mineral hot springs, winter resorts, historical and artistic monuments, museums, antiques and all its other natural and man-made endowments have created an outstanding and unique situation for Iran. Furthermore, the tendency among Muslims of the world to travel to Iran as pilgrims, paying a visit to the holy shrines and also enjoying its natural gifts (particularly the northern region of the country) which suit their Islamic customs also provide a suitable basis for attracting and inviting our co-religionists to visit Iran.

On an intangible level, Iranian people are famous for their hospitality and all those who visit Iran recognize it. Is a well-known characteristic of our people of which the accounts of great world travellers provide ample evidence. Moreover, among all the various types of tourists who visit foreign countries, tourists who are interested in discovering different cultures tend to have a desire to study and consider the intellectual and cultural aspects of the host countries. We should give sufficient importance to this fact and we should regard such tourists as potential advocates for our country on their return home. In this way, fostering cultural and ecotourism (that tend to attract such tourists) can provide intangible benefits for Iran as well as material ones.

During recent years, a devaluation of the Iranian Rial against foreign currencies has caused local prices to decrease in hard currency terms. Since tourists generally prefer to visit less expensive countries and pay less for their accommodation, food and amusement, this fact also gives us a great opportunity to provide them with attractive services during their stay in our country. However, it is important that these services should be of sufficiently high quality to satisfy tourists' requirements.

Challenges facing tourism development in Iran

Over the last two decades, Iran has been presented by the global media to the world as a strict and religious country. This, of course, makes it improbable that recreational tourists will choose this country as a

destination, rather than travelling to other places that are apparently much less 'difficult'. Good inter-cultural communication, a clear understanding of tourists' needs and modifying our own attitudes towards tourists and tourism must necessarily be considered as vital elements for paving the way to providing them with sense of ease. At the same time, we should concentrate our efforts on attracting foreign tourists who value the cultural and natural advantages specific to Iran. Such tourists are much less likely to be deterred by the negative propaganda against the country. Equally importantly, these types of tourism generally have much less negative impact on the natural and cultural resource base since (a) they are specialist, niche types of tourism and do not place such pressure in terms of tourist numbers as does mass tourism and (b) they attract a type of tourist who is more likely to respect the cultural and natural environment. Indeed, well-managed and planned eco-cultural tourism has the potential not only for economic benefits but also to enhance the tourism resource-base itself (World Heritage Centre, 2007).

Beyond a weak strategic approach for tourism planning in Iran, staff training in the tourism sector is also lacking. This leads to the employment of unqualified staff in tourist resorts who behave unskilfully and inappropriately towards tourists, especially foreign ones, has had further negative impacts on the visitor experience. Infrastructural weaknesses can also be identified that are important obstacles to tourism development in Iran. Nowadays, tourists are not looking for very expensive and luxurious accommodation. Rather, most of them are willing to pass their time in less expensive but comfortable and tranquil places. Therefore, the shortage of three-star hotels as well as clean and friendly motels presents many difficulties. Moreover, considering the current limitations of the transportation network accompanied by sharp growth in the population rate, there is a great shortfall in transport available for moving tourists to tourism resorts and around the country. As the experience of

the Scotland – itself mainly a nature-based and cultural tourism destination – has shown, it is vital to develop domestic tourism around cultural attractions as an initial step in order to provide the infrastructure needed for foreign visitors too. This also allows for consideration to be given to the type of planning approaches set out above and the sustainability of the tourism projects planned.

Conclusion

Development of the tourism industry can provide cities, regions and countries with the opportunity for economic growth. However, this cannot be achieved in a sustainable manner unless there is a sound balance in the planning for cultural tourism and ecotourism at all levels of society. If correctly and appropriately conceived and planned, it has the potential for providing new and exciting tourism experiences, promoting excellence in tourism, protecting and enhancing natural areas and historical sites, benefiting local communities and encouraging commercially successful and environmentally-friendly tourism operations. A regional vision for cultural tourism and ecotourism development planning must identify, encourage and promote a range of unique tourist and recreational experiences which can be sustained environmentally, socially and economically while meeting the needs of both visitors and the local community. This vision reflects the desire to have managed growth which maintains the lifestyle and environment for people who live in the region.

In the case of Iran, it is a country with a wealth of social, cultural and natural attractions such as its historical and religious sites and many different land and climate types, from desert to forest and from mountains to coastal areas. However, these strengths have not been properly exploited in a way that leads to the development of the tourism industry and an increase in the number of overseas visitors to Iran, especially through building up cultural tourism and ecotourism which are both highly appropriate to the country's resources and culture as well as more likely

to be sustainable. Moreover, the weaknesses that have been identified such as the lack of a marketing industry, software problems, limitations in appropriate accommodation in most tourist destinations, even in large cities, a shortage of tourism services and information centres and unsatisfactory air and road transport networks still need to be addressed. What is required, then, is for a strategic tourism development vision, preferably on a regional scale, that takes account of the planning and management approaches set out in the first part of our paper. Iran, as has been demonstrated, has enormous potential to develop as a cultural and ecotourism destination and a great opportunity to avoid the pitfalls faced by countries such as Spain and Turkey that sought to build mass tourism and that now face significant environmental and cultural problems as a result of faulty planning.

Note

1- As proposed by the Vice-president for Traditional Arts & Handicrafts shortly after joining the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organizations.

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