

## Examining the Spatial Patterns of Rural Tourism and its Role in Population Growths or Declines at Rural Regions of Khorasan Razavi Province

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### Extended Abstract

#### 1. Introduction

In a general classification, tourism patterns can be divided into two classes in terms of attractions including natural and unnatural environments. Initial assessments of tourism spatial patterns at rural regions of the province undoubtedly requires the identification of the mentioned pattern in these areas. Given the existing data, these spatial patterns can be classified into natural and religious historical tourisms in order to illustrate a more accurate image of these villages which, overall, occupy 37% of the total villages in Khorasan Razavi province (1300 villages). Considering the decline in the rural population of Khorasan Razavi and the increase in migration rates at rural regions on one hand, and the presence of tourism spatial patterns in 37% of rural spots on the other hand, a fundamental question can be posed: to what extent do the spatial patterns at rural areas play a role in rural population changes at the moment? In other words, have these two spatial patterns been able to directly influence the rural population changes of the province? Overall, to what extent have they been able to affect the growth or decline in the rural population? Subsequently, the following hypothesis can be formulated: It appears that rural tourism spatial patterns influence the growth or decline of rural population of the province.

#### 2. Review of Literature

The use of the word “ecotourism” dates back to the late 1970s. While some would associate the use of this word to the late 1980s, this concept has been developed following the emergence of the sustainability paradigm within the development discourse along with the negative impacts of tourism on natural and social environments since 1980. This form of tourism provides the means for humans’ leisure activities in the nature; it is based on purposeful trips, which involve cultural and spiritual perceptions, visiting and studying natural attractions as well

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as utilizing and enjoying diverse natural phenomena. Moreover, there is a significant focus on protecting natural attractions and values. Religious tourism is also considered as one of important tourism patterns at rural regions. Given its roots in religious beliefs, this type of tourism ventures beyond leisure time and significant human geography factors in the formation of travels, and cultural focus and perspective in technical terms. Overall, religious tourism can be regarded as a type of tourism in which tourists exclusively follow religious motives which may also be integrated with alternative motivations to visit sacred places such as churches, mosques, tombs, Imamzadeh monuments, etc.

### **3. Method**

The study was conducted using a combination of a descriptive and an analytical method. To this end, it was conducted in three stages in addition to drawing a framework intended for the conceptual model of the research. In the first stage, with regards to the mixed index of deprivation, two categories of the related indices including the location features of villages (3 variables) and the existing facilities and services in villages (7 variables) were identified so as to indicate homogeneous rural clusters. Consequently, the Geographical Information System was employed and a location database was created for the entire rural regions of the province with respect to mentioned indices. Then, villages were ranked based on multi-criteria decision-making models. In the second stage, villages were clustered and homogenous clusters were identified using the two-stage cluster analysis model.

### **4. Results and Discussion**

In terms of the population average index, villages with both natural and religious tourism patterns had the highest growths. In this regard, the average population of these villages was increased from 925 to 1010 in 2006-2011 period. With a growth rate of 0.19, these villages are at a better position compared to others. In contrast, villages with spatial patterns of either natural or religious tourisms show negative population growths. This is especially the case in villages with religious attractions. Overall, despite the higher population averages of villages with tourism patterns compared to other villages at level one rural areas, data on population growth rate demonstrate the undesirable situation of the population decline rate in the former.

### **5. Conclusion**

The study uncovered an important part of the hidden reality regarding population changes (growth or decline) in rural settlements of Khorasan Razavi, which in fact, is the extent to which such changes are affected by the existing tourism spatial patterns at rural regions. In general, given the overall consequences of population changes in villages of Khorasan Razavi, the presence or absence of tourism spatial patterns do not significantly impact the changes in rural populations. Currently, the rural population change trend is affected by other factors. For instance, increased income and unemployment are effective factors in migration from rural areas. However, despite the presence of numerous tourism patterns at these rural spots, there has yet to be an efficient context for their utilization. As a result, tourism

spatial patterns do not play a significant role in changing rural populations, and thus the first hypothesis of the study is rejected.

Given the second hypothesis, results show the different impacts of tourism patterns with respect to the extent to which rural areas benefit from services and facilities. In this regard, distinct effects can be observed in each pattern. Consequently, the second hypothesis of the study is confirmed.

**Keywords:** Spatial patterns of tourism, Khorasan Razavi Province, Ordinal logistic regression

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