

Identification of Criteria and Assessment of The Level of Sustainable Ecotourism Development in Tourism Poles of Lorestan Province

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to identify and weigh the criteria for assessing the Sustainable Development of Ecotourism (SDE) and measure the level of SDE in the tourist poles of Lorestan province. The criteria were extracted by reviewing previous studies and weighted by AHP analysis. The statistical population consisted of 31 tourism experts from the center of the province and the cities that all of them were selected by census method and the required data were collected regarding the weighting of criteria and the determination of seven eco-touristic areas. Data were analyzed using Expert Choice and Excel softwares. According to the results, seven criteria for measuring SDE were important in cluding security of tourists (relative weight of 0.255), natural condition (0.169), recreational attraction (0.163), social acceptance and participation of local people (0.133), the existence of tourism infrastructure (0.110), governmental support of the region (0.087) and creation of economic opportunities for the region (0.083). Also, based on the sum of criteria, the most susceptible areas for the SDE in Lorestan province were respectively Gahar Lake, Bisheh Waterfall, Absefid Waterfall, Nozhian Waterfall, Grit Waterfall, Wark Waterfall and canyon of Shirz. Although Gahar Lake and Bisheh Waterfall have the highest average in terms of criteria, other areas also have capabilities that, with the support of the government and the private sector, can be possible to reduce weaknesses in order to SDE.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Sustainable Development, Tourism Infrastructure, Lorestan

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Objectives

The number of tourists in the world will reach 1.4 billion by 2020, and another 400 million will be added by 2030. According to international tourism receipts in 2014 were \$1.245 billion worldwide. These numbers clearly indicate that the tourism sector has grown faster than other sectors. This sector has become an active industry for economic development, as well as an essential factor for economic growth and job-creation. In other worlds, tourism contributes enormously towards the economic development of host countries. Globally, many developing countries rely largely on tourist's spending which accounts for significant contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of those countries. Among the categories of tourism, ecotourism has the characteristics of poverty reduction, economic improvement, biodiversity conservation, and environmental protection. Based on the most important definition of ecotourism, this type of tourism is responsible travel to nature that conserves the environment and promotes the well-being of local people. The purpose of this study was to identify and weigh the criteria for assessing the

sustainable development of ecotourism (SDE) and measure the level of SDE in the tourist poles of Lorestan province.

Methods

This research is an applied study in the terms of purpose, is field research in terms of data collection, and is exploratory research according to extract the indicators. The criteria were extracted by reviewing previous studies and weighted by AHP analysis. The statistical population consisted of 31 tourism experts from the center of province and cities that all of them were selected by census method and the required data was collected regarding the weighting of criteria and the determination of 7 eco-touristic areas. Data were analyzed using Expert Choice and Excel softwares.

Results

According to the results, seven criteria for measuring SDE were important including: security of tourists (relative weight of 0.255), natural condition (0.169), recreational attraction (0.163), social acceptance and participation of local people (0.133), the existence of tourism infrastructure (0.110), governmental support of the region (0.087) and creation of economic opportunities for the region (0.083). Also, based on the sum of criteria, the most susceptible areas for the SDE in Lorestan province were respectively Gahar Lake, Bisheh Waterfall, Absefid Waterfall, Nozhian Waterfall, Grit Waterfall, Wark Waterfall and canyon of Shirz. Although Gahar Lake and Bisheh Waterfall have the highest average in terms of criteria, other areas also have capabilities that, with the support of the government and the private sector, can be possible to reduce weaknesses in order to SDE. The results of the weighting of the criteria based on the AHP analysis showed that the criterion of tourist safety is most important in measuring sustainable ecotourism development. According to the results, the second criterion for measuring sustainable ecotourism development is the natural condition of the region. This criterion includes the sub-criteria of rainfall, slope, temperature, ecosystem health and the period of use of the area during the year. The next criterion in terms of importance that was ranked third with minor differences is the recreational attractiveness criterion, which includes wildlife, water resources, tourist attractions and landscapes in the region.

Discussion

As we know today, the security criterion is one of the criteria that is very important in determining a tourist destination. The importance of regional security to attracting more tourists to tourist areas has been proven in some studies, and researchers have emphasized the importance of security in the tourism area for sustainable development in the area. Any natural area to attract Eco tourists must have the least aesthetic and climatic conditions, as nature travelers visit such areas to visit pristine and natural attractions.

Nowadays, tourist acceptance and development of tourist activities by locals is one of the most important issues in tourism management. Thus, among the criteria examined, the next criterion, which ranked fourth, was social acceptance and participation of local people. In fact, local people in these areas can gain economic benefits using their indigenous knowledge and ability to attract tourism and strive to become more involved in the sector so that they can achieve Facilitate sustainable income in rural areas. Creating economic opportunities for the region is also one of the criteria that although lower in this study than other criteria, is one of the most important criteria in sustainable ecotourism development. Provincial authorities in Lorestan province need to pay attention to other deprived tourism areas and provide more suitable financial and managerial support to other tourism areas to develop sustainable ecotourism in these areas. Overall, it should be noted that although the study found that Gahar Lake and Bisheh waterfall had the highest average of criteria, respectively, each of the other regions had capabilities that were Government support and officials can step in to address their weaknesses and plan for the development of sustainable ecotourism in them.