Tourism and Its Role in Sustainable Rural Development

Dr. Sayyed Khalil Sayyed Alipour and Elham Vahabi Varaki
Assistant Professor of Naja research and study organization
Department of Management, branch Central Tehran, Azad Islamic University, Tehran, Iran.

Abstract: Rural tourism as one of the subdivisions of tourism has provided the possibility of integrated and sustainable rural development through preserving the values and beliefs, creating employment opportunities and increasing the earnings of local residents and developing infrastructural facilities as well. Sustainable rural development has various aspects of which one is rural tourism. The prosperity of rural tourism as a contributory factor of development is of prominent importance since expanding rural tourism is regarded as a key factor in equal distribution of income in society facilitating the grounds for national and regional development. Another goal of developing rural tourism is to create and enhance cooperative development. Individual's Participation pertains to decision-making process, projects' implementation, sharing the benefits of development projects and cooperation in assessing these projects. In this study, descriptive and survey methods have been used. Sample villages of Semnan province have been determined. To collect data, questionnaire and interview instruments have been utilized. 410 questionnaires were responded by rural residents, tourists and the experts of tourism organizations. Gathered information was analysed statistically by SPSS software. Furthermore, binominal test was used to evaluate the hypotheses.

Key words: tourism, rural tourism, sustainable development of villages, Semnan province.

INTRODUCTION

Owing to being situated in a complete natural landscape in addition to rural lifestyle that has minimally changed the natural environment, rural environment provides a diversity of activities for rural tourism. Eco-tourists can enjoy the opportunity of indoor and outdoor tourist sights. Incentives of travelling to villages, thriving rural tourism and pursuing rural tourism bring about various alterations in rural areas that if in line with rural development objectives, these goals can be realized. As a valuable and progressive sector and an economic resolution, rural tourism development has lower costs and risks than other tourism projects in terms of the availability of resources with low prices and small scale. Rural tourism spawns economic growth, diversity and stability in employment, dynamic of trade and industry, expansion of opportunities for growing the income of multifarious activities, establishing new markets for agricultural products and developing a basis for a regional economy. One of the features of rural tourism economy is the tendency of private sector to invest in tourism because the projects in tourism are diverse, simple and small in scale. Rural tourism is a fairly efficacious factor of rural development which provides employment opportunities and income for villagers and plays a major role in renovating and rehabilitating rural areas. The role and importance of tourism in rural development process has been proved in many countries. Today, rural tourism is deemed as an industry which potentially possesses sustainability (Khaiati, 2003). Tourism in villages could promote rural economy and is a fruitful step towards rural development. Semnan province encompasses villages with diverse tourist attractions, geographical position and natural factors which can play an effective role in boosting economic activities and provide infrastructural services, welfare facilities and maintain ancient culture and history for rural societies. In this regard, this study deserves to be conducted.

Theoretical Studies:

More serious attention to the villages of Iran and facilitating the grounds for providing appropriate and sufficient services for these villages are inevitably felt through more spontaneous participation of villagers due to a wider range of activities, especially sector one activities or organizing rural places and putting different individuals in appropriate places and finally for smoothing the path towards determination of proper frameworks of planning at different local, regional and national levels (Saidi, 2009).

The term rural tourism has different meanings for each country. Tourism is regarded as a strategy for economic development, as a means of entertainment and a tool for preserving social values as well as protecting natural resources by many rural communities (Bakhshizade, 2008).

Rural tourism offers numerous advantages and could be considered as a suitable option for providing employment and income and making positive changes in rural revenues. Rural tourism is deemed as a tangible need for economic rehabilitation and development of villages, resulting not only in expanding tourism but also in bringing new agricultural methods in rural areas. Tourism and its development are supposed as an essential
tool for rural and development planning. Tourism creates economic prosperity for villages and provides a way for supplying local products and creates value added (Augusti, 1998). What is more, it is an essential source of employment for unskilled workers especially women and poor rural migrants (Dehghan, 2006). Rural tourism is of noticeable concern from two sides: first, as a widespread global activity and secondly, as an emphasis for regional and local development (Saghai, 2003). Tourism is an ancient phenomenon existing for a long time in human societies which has reached its technical economic, social and industrial point through the history (Kargar, 2007). Rural tourism is one of several types of tourism which according to world conference on tourism in 2006 is described as enjoying welfare facilities and services in rural areas along with relishing the chance of living in rural areas beside natural resources and attractions of the nature. (Rezvani, 2008). To achieve sustainable development of rural tourism, taking a society-based or cooperative method is essential. Local societies and villages are at the core of tourist destinations. However positive or negative, the opinions of indigenous residents with regard to tourism development must be applied so as to reach sustainable rural development since they have the best local information, hence their ideas on environmental, social and cultural matters should be considered (Azimi, 2003). Regarding rural tourism attractions and sights, principal expectations of a geographical information system are:

1. Measuring the capacity of the environment (localization)
2. The evaluation of the effects of rural tourism development
3. Back-up system for decision making

Rural tourism capacity as a dependent variable is affected by a set of factors and independent variables. Ecological, environmental and biological capacity in relation to natural environment is defined as the acceptance of numerical indices of tourists prior to emerging the detrimental and unacceptable effects on the environment. The fact is that the capacity of tourist attractions is so diverse that it is not possible to attribute a single number to all places (Tavalai, 2007). As is shown in the diagram below, there are various determinants affecting tourism capacity:

![Fig. 1: Main factors of rural tourism.](image)

**Tourism and Sustainable Rural Development:**

Today, sustainable development has been proposed as a new word in the world. The roots of sustainable development originate in dissatisfaction from the results of development and socio-economic growth in rural and urban societies from ecological viewpoint. This scheme aims to fight against incompatible patterns of production, distribution and consumption with the environment and to prevent from depleting the resources and destroying the environment, and it confirms just a development process resulting in improving the quality of life for all human beings (Navabakhash and Siahpush, 2009). Sustainable rural development looks at the balance and protection of values and the quality of economic ethnics and principles as well as economic privileges all together and attempts to substitute a comprehensive and balanced development for merely economic development.

In this view, tourism development which applies existing resources not only meets economic, social, cultural and legal regulations of society and tourists’ expectations as well but also offers unity and integration, cultural identity, health, protection of the environment, economic balance and local individuals’ welfare. In sustainable development, it is tried to maintain the balance of relationships between host society, the place of tourism, and tourists since these relationships can be constructive and dynamic. In addition, by alleviating the pressures and crisis among these mentioned elements, cultural and environmental vulnerabilities are minimized, visitors’ satisfaction is achieved and economic growth is increased (Mohseni, 2009). Rural tourism diversifies the activities and reduces the agricultural risks and provides the opportunity of comprehensive development (Saghai, 2003). There is an obvious difference between sustainable development and exploring the nature. Nature exploration notes to one branch of tourism industry whereas sustainability principles must be applied in all tourism activities, plans and operations (Kazemi, 2009).
Sustainable development which is the main subject of development and planning discussions is itself the consequence of several opinions about development. Like the concept of development, various perceptions of sustainable development could be inferred. The interface between all these ideas is sustainability and reaching a dynamic and long-lasting development process, capable of satisfying the needs of the present generation without spoiling the abilities of future generations to afford their needs (Jomepur, 2006). The goal of tourism and sustainable tourism is realized on condition that all effective groups in this industry, including tourists themselves, feel responsibility and are trained in their responsibilities to know how to make a better impact to achieve this aim (Ranjbaran and Zahedi, 2007).

Tourism must be sustainably and stably planned and administered as economic system, natural resources and the environment of host society are supported and are not damaged (Parsian, Arabi, 2003). As complementary economy, developing rural tourism is recommended so as to mitigate rural poverty and the pressure on resources to achieve sustainable development. Having been allocated a particular position in development process for their remarkable capabilities, information technology and communication are of the requisites of sustainable development in all societies. The environment is the most important source of industrial tourism. However, industrial tourism has itself a considerable capacity to decrease the long-term efficiency of the environment; therefore, the linkage between sustainable forms of development and tourism is clear and tourism must, in turn, grant the sustainable development (Ziai, 2009). Today, tourism development in rural areas and local societies has gained an increasing importance due to globalization and moving towards global village. Globalization has eliminated traditional cultures, ancient customs and folklores of traditional societies to the extent that these features have been disappeared form cities (Ghaderi, 2004). Sustainable rural development has various aspects of which one is rural tourism. To achieve sustainable rural development, enhancing rural development as a development factor is of importance because it undertakes a crucial role in equal distribution of income in society, preparing the grounds for regional and national development. Another purpose of expanding rural development is to create and reinforce cooperative development. In addition, individuals' participation in decision-making process, implementing the projects, sharing the benefits of different development projects and collaboration on assessing these projects are of other targets of rural tourism (Ruholahzade, 2006). The concept of sustainability in rural tourism in realized by pursing multi-faceted goals and focusing not only on protecting natural resources but also on improving the culture and characteristics of host societies, strengthening the perspectives and residencies, boosting the economy of the village, increasing the awareness and information, creating sustainable tourism plans and etc. (Taleb et. al., 2010). Sustainable tourism is useful to exploit the capacities of natural regions to rehabilitate and improve the productivity of their resources in the future, to recognize the traditions, customs and lifestyle of local people, to acquire the tourism
experience, to accept the equal share of local people of tourism profits and to increase the motivations and incentives of local people which raise the awareness and perception of the role of tourism in the growth and development of the environment and improve host societies’ quality of life and provide distributive and geographical justice in development process. The basis for sustainable tourism development is to take account of the relationship between three constructive parts of tourism environment: tourists, destination and host society (Sharply, 2001). Sustainable regional development is a main aims of tourism. Compared with other activities such as industrial or production activities, exploiting the environment and forests, tourism needs less investment. This apart, ecotourism will not spawn destructive damages to the landscape and the environment and it could even be efficacious in protecting the nature. Ecotourism is, indeed, a principled, logical and considerate exploitation of environmental resources (Jims Eliot, 2004). Reaching sustainable development and growth is of prominent importance for all countries, particularly developing countries (Sarvar and Musavi, 2011). Tourism must be regarded as a positive and constructive activity which for local societies and tourist sights it would be as beneficial as it is for tourists. The relation between tourism and the environment must be organized to sustain the environment in the long-term future. Tourism must not destroy natural resources and take irreversible toll on it and lessen its employment opportunities. Tourism activities and development must respect the nature, scale and the features of the place visited by tourists.

It is logical to put sustainable tourism regulations on rural tourism knowing the fact that village is the source of natural cultural heritage which together with the atmosphere of the village can attract many tourists to rural regions. Nonetheless, a number of intellectuals are suspicious about the concept of sustainable tourism as to whether sustainable tourism supports tourism industry (sustainable development for economic profit) or the environment (no development to preserve it) since they are of the main objectives of sustainable development. It should be noticed that lasting tourism development is a comprehensive process with the purpose of conserving rural environment, rural economy, the structure and culture of local communities in villages as well as providing the grounds for tourists to gain experience and making long-term use of tourist industry in rural areas. Yet, there are controversies about whether sustainable rural tourism is achievable in practice or not, and if so can it be applied for just local small-scale projects? The success of a persistent method takes hostage to a number of factors such as the participation of local society in planning, cooperation in rural tourism development and managing tourists. Sustainable rural development reflects the expansion and preservation of tourism in a region (environment, community) as it results in neither any damage nor any physical or human change in the environment during an indefinite time period (Sharpli, 2001).

**Research Method:**

One of the most popular methods of collecting initial data in social sciences and tourism studies is survey method in which some samples are selected from the population and the result is generalised to the population (Kazemi, 2008). Survey method deals with observing the phenomena in order to understand different aspects of gathered data. In our study, descriptive method has been used along with survey method. Data has been collected through observation, face-to-face interview, filling the questionnaires in some villages and using the opinions of experts and tourists. Questionnaires were distributed among the population members and data was collected. Research method is a purposeful process to find the solution for a question or problem (Asayesh and Moshiri, 2002). Obtained data is compared with the realities and facilities of each place.

**Statistical Population and Sampling Method:**

As statistical population, 32 villages of Semnan province which had the most number of tourist attractions and have been visited most by tourists were chosen from four cities of Damghan, Semnan, Garmsar and Shahrud. 410 questionnaires were dispensed and filled by villagers of these regions. Stochastic sampling method was used in this study in which all the individuals of the population have an equal chance of being placed in the sample (Hafeznia, 2004). Finally, collected data was analysed by SPSS software. With regard to the use of Likert 5-option scale, median was assumed to be 3 and binominal test was applied to prove or reject the hypotheses.

**Research Hypotheses:**

Hypothesis 1: The higher the level of welfare facilities, the higher the level of sustainable rural tourism development.

Hypothesis 2: Natural factors are determinants of sustainable tourism development.

Hypothesis 3: Rural infrastructures lead to the expansion of rural sustainable tourism.

Hypothesis 4: Cultural factors are of contributory factors in the development of sustainable rural tourism.

**Research Findings:**

In this study, 410 questionnaires were distributed in four sample villages including Shahrud, Damghan, Garmsar, Semnan and those organizations working in tourism. The percentage of participants responded to the
questionnaires in terms of gender are 37% females and 63% males. Among all who replied to the questionnaires, the percentage of those who had under diploma degree, that most of them lived in rural areas, was twice as much as those who had diploma degree with 36 % and 18%, respectively. Fairly a quarter of respondents had bachelor's degree, at 28% and 18% of them were associate degree, double the percentage of those with master's degree.

Data Analysis:
In this study binominal test (P<0.60) has been used. Natural factors, welfare facilities, cultural factors and rural infrastructures have been measured in terms of level. To evaluate the validity of the questionnaire, content validity method which is applied to investigate the component parts of a measurement tool has been deployed. In fact, this validity index is the estimate of how much a measure represents every single element of a construct regarding its features, skills, knowledge and what has been measured.

$$z = \frac{\hat{p} - p}{\sqrt{\frac{\hat{p} \hat{q}}{n}}}$$

There are various methods to determine the reliability of a measurement tool, one of which is to measure its internal consistency which could be represented by Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. Although the minimum acceptable value of this coefficient is 0.7, yet the values of 0.6 and 0.55 could be accepted either.

Hypothesis 1:
Welfare facilities of a village, including (water, electricity power, school, mosque, health centre, telecommunication centre, the internet, banks and facilities needed by tourists, hotels, guesthouses, calm and tranquil environment, governmental and private investments, individual's income, being situated closet to the city centres) significantly affect the development of tourism.

Table 1: The results of binominal test for the first hypothesis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Number of answers</th>
<th>Test probability</th>
<th>Significance level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under average</td>
<td>175</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over average</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>410</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Hypothesis 2:
Natural factors such as, geographical place of villages, mineral warm water and fountains, mountainous areas, having access to water in the village, snowy villages, village as the second home for tourists with spectacular and exclusive sceneries and tourist attractions, are effective in rural tourism development.

Table 2: The results of binominal test for the second hypothesis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Number of answers</th>
<th>Test probability</th>
<th>Significance level</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under average</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over average</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>410</td>
<td></td>
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Hypothesis 3:
Rural infrastructures like suitable communication and transaction roads, planning for organizations and institutions, being considered by investors and the government, appropriate and simple accessibility of the village, developing rural small-scale industries, contribute significantly to rural tourism development.

Table 3: The results of binominal test for the third hypothesis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Number of answers</th>
<th>Test probability</th>
<th>Significance level</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under average</td>
<td>177</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over average</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>410</td>
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Hypothesis Four:
Cultural factors such as religious sites and shrines, ancient and historical monuments of villages, rural traditions and customs, Islamic councils of villages, villagers' manners, particular events such as wedding ceremonies or funerals and individuals' beliefs play a prominent role in cultural development of villages. In some events, like Moharram days or Ramadan month, the population of villages increases because many people come back to their villages from cities.
Table 4: The results of binominal test for the forth hypothesis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Number of answers</th>
<th>Test probability</th>
<th>Significance level</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under average</td>
<td>175</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>410</td>
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The second hypothesis measuring the effects of natural factors had the most impact on sustainable rural tourism development, followed by the first hypothesis regarding welfare facilities and the forth hypothesis (cultural factors, religious sites and historical monuments), both at the second place of importance and finally the third hypothesis with respect to rural infrastructures, had relatively the minimum effect on sustainable tourism development of villages.

Discussion and Conclusion:

Biological diversity must be preserved when rural tourism is developed. The beauty and attractiveness of the nature and landscape must be perceived and respected. To stick to moral principles to esteem local cultures, the way of livelihood, traditions and customs. Making use of local individuals’ opinions and their participation in development process is essential. Economic costs and benefits of tourism must be equally distributed between tourism development companies and host society. To develop rural tourism, governmental and private sectors and rural and Islamic councils must propose suitable plans on the basis of villages' positions so that villagers, citizens and tourists can visit the villages and bring employment opportunities and income in villages. Beneficiaries of tourism industry must be committed to the preservation of environment and respect sustainability principles and present and future generations' requests. Thus, national and local entities must place the priority on those tourism plans that concern more about conserving the resources and avoiding the environment pollution and put less pressure on tourist attractions on holiday.

If rural tourism is properly managed and planned, it could act as an impetus for a developed process so as to reach sustainability of rural development and local communities in economic, social, cultural and tourism industry aspects (Sharifzade, 2002). In rural environments, natural landscapes are more interesting than human-built surroundings. Therefore, natural environment is the subject of rural tourism planning and individuals take advantage of the environment on the basis of their techniques, investments, ideology, culture and their management. To achieve environmental sustainability, developing tourism must be planed through the best technology of social organization, and social norms must be consistent and adaptable with the environment.

Recommendations:

- To introduce tourist attractions of Semnan province at national and international levels
- Motivating and attracting investors and the experts of tourism industry to Semnan province.
- Using information technology and communications technology to develop tourism in Semnan
- Radio and television programmes in national and regional channels to introduce natural, historical and ancient attractions and landscapes of Semnan province.
- Holding seminars and conferences in villages that have tourism potentials and introducing their tourist attractions.
- Recruiting well-trained guides at the gates of a city or village to attract more tourists and to create employment and promote the earnings.
- Setting up the camping places at nearby tourist attractions like ski resorts, water treatment centres, historical, ancient and religious places and interesting places of Shahmirzad, Ali Fountain in Damghan, Bastam and etc. of Semnan province.
- Developing transportation and of communication means in rural tourist sites of Semnan province.
- Creating some fields of study at bachelor's and master's degrees in travelling services, tourism, world-exploring management at Semnan University and other universities of Semnan province.
- Offering Employment opportunities for adults and rural unemployed individuals through developing tourist attractions.
- Planning to attract more people enjoying leisure time in rural tourist regions of Semnan province.

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