

The Ecotourism Potentials of Golestan Province

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Abstract: Tourism is an industry with high productivity that provides a significant number of job opportunities around the world. Ecotourism is one of the branches of the industry, which deals with landscapes and natural attractions. Golestan province with the surface area of 20438.7 km² is located in the northern part of Iran and because of having an appropriate geographical state and also ecotourism attractions is one of the main parts of Iran in this respect. Here, on the basis of documents and library searches as well as field surveys at the regional scale, we introduce the ecotourism potentials of Golestan province and appropriate strategies for attraction of tourists, and ask national and local policy makers to consider this socioeconomic capacity and provide more accurate programming in this sector.

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1. Introduction

Among the different approaches of tourism, ecotourism is of great importance; such that the year 2002 was named as the international year of ecotourism by United Nations Organization. This type of tourism makes passing the leisure time in the nature possible. It is based upon goal-oriented traveling with cultural and spiritual aspects, visiting and studying natural attractions, and enjoying various natural phenomena (Mansuri, 1381: 38). Ecotourism with the aim of expansion of tourism industry without damaging the environment is mostly related with sustainable development and its functional performances. Intelligent implementation of ecotourism can be an approach against damaging natural resources and can be transformed into protecting biological diversity by people and local communities (Ghafari, 1386: 15).

Having many terrains and diverse natural phenomena such as mountain, spring, gulf, lagoon, waterfall, island, and peninsula and different animal and plant species, hunting ground, forest resources, and the particular forest, coast, and desert landscapes, Golestan province has many ecotourism potentials. This can provide many economic advantages for the province. It can also be considered as an ecotourism center of the country. Therefore, identifying the potentials and capacities of Golestan province with respect to ecotourism is essential.

At the global level, Iran is one of the five countries with the highest environmental and geographical diversity and is considered as one of the main resources of biological diversity on the earth. With a great environmental diversity, Golestan province has a great potential for ecotourism. Thus, introduction of the capabilities of the province with

respect to ecotourism as a tourism center in northern Iran and increasing the awareness of policy makers and native people about the item can provide a foundation for programming on different economic aspects of the province. This is one of the aims of the study.

2. Research methodology

The study was carried out by library documents search method and field research, which was carried out at the regional scale on identification of the natural aspects of Golestan province from the viewpoint of ecotourism.

Geographical, historical, and social status of the province.

Golestan province, with Gorgan as the capital city, is one of the northern provinces of Iran, located in the range of 36° 30' to 38° 8' N latitude and 53° 51' to 56° 22' E altitude. The area of the province is 20438.3 km², which accounts for 1.3% of the country's area, is the 21th province of the country with respect to the area (Budget and Program Organization, 1385: 5). The province is bounded on the north by Turkmenistan, on the west by Mazandaran province and the Caspian Sea, on the south by Semnan province, and on the east by North Khorasan. The climate diversity of the province is noteworthy, as the southern parts have mountainous climate, central and southern west regions have moderate Mediterranean climate, and the northern parts have arid and semi-arid climate (Hashemabad Meteorological Center, Gorgan, 1387: 14).

Locating in the northern part of the Elburz Mountains, the province is divided into three regions; mountainous, submontane, and flat regions. The mountainous region has the altitude of 500 to 3000

meters above the sea level and is covered with forest and grassland coverings. The submontane region includes small hills, mounds, and heights covered by forest species. The height of flat and low lands in the neighboring of the Caspian Sea and the Gorgan Gulf is lower than the sea level and as we approach the east, the height would increase (Golestan Province Planning Association, 1387: 5-6).

In 2006, the population of the province was 1617087, 49.17% of which lived in urban areas. It is a young population, and the highest percentage of the population is in the age range of 15-24 (Budget and Program Organization, 1385: 5).

The Golestan province was the largest and most prosperous region in the northern Iran during the early centuries of Islamic era and before that. Until the 7th Hijra century, it was called the Gorgan State and from the 7th to the 14th Hijra century, it was called the Astarabad State. The history of civilizations in the area goes back to six thousand years ago and it is in fact one of the most ancient states of Iran and is one of the major centers of Arians in northern Iran (Manager of Cultural Heritage of Golestan Province, 1380: 18).

Ecotourism

Ecotourism is a form of tourism, which is related to nature and outdoor environments. The first ecotourists were those who visited Serengeti or the adventurers who climbed Himalaya (Rezvani, 1387: 21). The beauties of nature, visiting wild nature, wild life, and adventures have attracted tourists to many parts of the world; from the South Pole to the equatorial forests. Some authors have considered the history of using the term tourism by the end of the 1970's or the end of the 1980's. However, it is evident that the term "ecotourism" was used in the second half of the 20th century and found its way to sustainable development. There are many different definitions and viewpoints about ecotourism, such that until now more than 80 definitions have been provided for the term and each of them addresses one of the aspects of the term (Fenel 1385: 19). Ecotourism is a kind of tourism that interacts with the natural attractions (rivers, lakes, mountains...) as well as the life and norms of native people, who are related to the above-mentioned attractions (Ashtari Mehrjerdi, 1383: 77). Ecotourism is the goal-oriented and responsible travelling in the nature, such that it preserves the environment, without disturbing the life of native people (Zahedi, 1380: 12).

Ecotourism include all travels that are performed with the aim of enjoying nature and in such travels preservation of environment and sustain of natural attractions is greatly important (Saghaei, 1382: 34).

World Tourism Organization considers ecotourism as a controlled type of natural tourism. According to the ECO definition, tourism can include

visiting rural and farming areas (World Tourism Organization, 1379: 34). All the available definitions emphasize that this activity occur in natural areas; regardless of being a protected area or having private or public ownership. The basic criteria for ecotourism are carrying out environmental acts and considering the cultural sensitivities, and enjoying direct protection and visiting life of native people in their natural living places.

Regarding the increasing growth rate of ecotourism in recent years, new terms have been proposed; including sensitivity to environmental issues, environmental- friendly, environmental residences, environmental techniques, environmental ethics, and environmental certificates (Rezvani, 1387: 23).

Ecotourism (natural) attractions of Golestan province.

Climate diversity, heights and terrains, water resources (springs, permanent rivers, waterfalls, lakes, seas, and gulfs), flora, wild life, coasts, islands and lagoons, and caves are considered to bring a high tourism potential for the province. Golestan province has invaluable and unique sources of ecotourism (Hamoon Adviser Engineers, 1389: 9).

1- Waterfalls

Because of having the snowy parts of Elburz, heavy rainfall, and steep and gentle slopes, Golestan province receives one of the largest amounts of the rainfall among the provinces of Iran. Large rivers, with many tributaries in their path to the Caspian Sea and the Gorgan Gulf have led to development of many small and large waterfalls, which are considered outstanding natural and touristic elements. The Golestan fall with the height of 9.5 meters is located in the Golestan Park. Because of the rocks, woods, and interesting landscapes, the surroundings of the fall attract many visitors interested in nature. Another famous waterfall of the province is the Leveh fall, which consists of small and large cascade falls. The height of one of the falls is 15 meters. Around the fall is covered by broad-leafed Caspian trees and has an elegant weather in hot seasons. In the outskirts of broad-leafed forests, 5.5 km to Aliabad Katul town, the Kabud val fall is located and its water is supplied by the upstream springs. It has clear water and after passing this beautiful fall, water passes its way to the north in the peaceful environment of the forest. For tourists, this is one of the most attractive places in the province. Another important waterfall of the province is the Shirabad fall. Around the Shirabad cave, many small and large waterfalls have been formed by many springs in the submontane of Ghaleh Maran Mountain. The Shirabad fall is stair falls, consisting of 12 small and large falls, out of which one has the height of 20 meters and its water pours in the

downstream pools. It is an outstanding natural attraction and has the potential of attracting tourist, and Iranian and international researchers. Today, these waterfalls have received great attention and are visited in appropriate seasons.

2- Lagoons:

Lagoons and aquatic settlements are considered as important and also susceptible places around the world. The more the lagoons are damaged, the more man become aware of their absence and importance (Kiabi, 1378: 30). Fortunately, Golestan province has invaluable lagoons, which are visited publicly as entertainment centers, besides having settlement and scientific values.

The international Alagol lagoon

This lagoon is located among some mounds. At its largest, its surface area reaches 2500 hectares and the deepest point is 6 meters deep. Its water is supplied by Atrak River and also natural drainages of salty rivers of Saman and Shujeh. Some parts of the lagoon are covered by reeds, sedge, and *Tamarix hispida* shrubs. In most places, the bed is covered by green algae. Each year, in the migration season, thousands of birds come to the lagoons and other lagoons of the province. The birds include swans, flamingos, ducks, terns, Folica, geese, Kakaei, plovers, and Cormorant (Qaemi, 1376: 108).

The international Ajigol lagoon

The surface area of the lagoon is 320 hectares. It consists of two parts; the west part, which is somehow deep with the depth of 1-1.5 meters in most parts and the maximum depth of 4 meters. The canebrakes roughly separate the east and west parts, such that the separated part communicates with the main body through a narrow water passage. It is shallow and covered with reeds. The west coast is covered with dense reeds, surrounded by trees and گز shrubs.

The international Almagol lagoon

It has the surface area of 220 hectares, and is located near the border between Iran and Turkmenistan. Its depth varies between 1-1.5 meters, with the maximum of 3 meters. The surroundings of the lagoon is covered by reeds and in the northern part, the reeds approach the inner parts of the lagoon. Around the lagoon in the southern part and along the drainage canal is a forest. Because of proximity to the Atrak River, its water is sweet. The bird species are almost the same as those live in the Alagol lagoon.

Other lagoons of the province include the Gamishan lagoon with the surface area of 20,000 hectares, the Incheh lagoon with the surface area of 100 hectares, the Bibi Shirvan lagoon with the surface area of 600 hectares, the Daneshmand lagoon with the surface area of 400 hectares, the Gazba lagoon with the surface area of 50 hectares, and the Imer lagoon with the surface area of 480 hectares.

3- Springs

Regarding the natural positions, there are many springs in mountainous and submontane areas of the province, which are considered as natural attractions for tourists. Of the 676 springs in the province, some are mineral springs that besides having natural attractions, they are visited for treatment of diseases (Hamoon Adviser Engineers, 1381: 30).

One of the attractive springs of the province is Gol ramian spring, which is located at 5 km to the south of Ramian town, in the submontane areas covered by forest. Gol ramian is bounded on three sides by forest and on one side by farming lands and water flows out of the spring bed. This water resource has an elliptical shape with the length of 90 meters and the width of 80 meters, and the depth of 44 to 80 meters. When the water flows out the pool, it is transparent, but inside the pool has a nice dark green color, because of the depth of water. This natural pool was one of the famous leisure sites of the province from ancient times, and now it is considered as a major attractive site at the national level for tourists. Another unique spring is Lal spring, which is one of the leisure and sightseeing places of Galikesh town. It comes from inside the forest in an almost flat area and at the fountain; water is collected in a fairly deep hole and then after passing a short way, it flows into Duq River. The name of the river comes from the fact that because of the steep slope of the area and existence of large rocks, the water comes out with loud noise, but as it approaches the main spring because of the gentle slope of the river, water flows without any noise and thus the river is called Lal (which means mute in Persian). Other famous springs of the province are Aghsu, Zau, Ab garu, Seydkalateh, Ghelgheli, Touska cehshme, Zal, and Ziarat.

3- The Gorgan Gulf

The Gorgan Gulf is located in the western end of Golestan province, with the surface area of 400 km². The length of the gulf is 60 km and its width near Bandar-e Gaz is almost 12 km. the gulf is extended from east to west. It has a triangular shape, with Golestan province at its base and Mazandaran province at its apex. The gulf communicates with the Caspian Sea around the Ashuradeh peninsula up to Bandar-e Torkaman town and the long and narrow border of Miankaleh separates the gulf and the Caspian Sea. The major flora of the gulf are reeds, sedges, Saltwort/ glasswoer, Tamrix hispida, and different types of floating plants, which are found in massive forms in the eastern parts of the gulf. Until now, 32 species of fish have been identified in the gulf, including carp, white fish, rutilus, kfal, salmon, and different caviar fishes. The aquatic settlement of the gulf is a suitable place for wading, owing to the presence of enough food and safety.

The Ashuradeh islands

They are located in the east of Bandar-e Turkaman and north of the Gorgan province. Their surface area is 500 hectares and they are located 31 meters above the sea level. They are consisted of three small and large islands and their surface changes as the water level fluctuates. The Ashuradeh village is located in one of the islands. The village is considered an important fishing site. The islands have natural and environmental amazing attractions, and their unique wild life and their coastal landscapes have made the area as one of the most interesting tourism sites (Iran & World Traveling Organization, 1378: 29).

The Miankaleh Peninsula

Along the southern coast of the Caspian Sea, Miankaleh is the only peninsula in the southeast end of the sea. The surface area of the Miankaleh peninsula and the Gorgan gulf is approximately 68800 hectares. The Miankaleh peninsula is separated from the sea with 6.5 km coastal sand hills. It is covered with turf and in some parts with trees and the main trees are pomegranate and raspberry. The peninsula is one of the internationally registered ecosystems with outstanding environmental characteristics. Each years, thousands of wading birds including flamingos, swans, geese, ducks, merjus, kakaie, terns, plovers, and ringtails come to the peninsula. Moreover, other animals such as jackals, foxes, rabbits, pigs, and sables live in it. The peninsula and the Gorgan gulf are among the Iranian wild life settlements, and regarding their great importance, they have been registered as the biosphere reservoirs (Ghaemi, 1378: 137).

Flora

Forests and grasslands are regarded as the most important renewable resources. Besides having high economic value, this great resource has many tourism values at national and regional levels. The area of the forests of Golestan province, which is extended from Galugah in the west to Galidagh in the east of the province, is 426476 hectares. This is about 2.5% of all Iranian forests. The forest have a reasonable diversity of species and is one of the most important and invaluable industrial and commercial forests of the country. Some valuable species such as oak, beech, alder, maple, ulmus, and liden grow in the forest and have particular environmental, touristic, and economic importance. Some other species that grow in the forest are the rare species of yew, zarbyn, and cypress drink (Faghani, 1382: 61).

9- Forest parks

Golestan National Park

It is the first Iranian national park. In 1977, it was selected as a biosphere reservoir and specified as project No. 8 of Man and Biosphere (MaB) program, ran by UNESCO. It is considered as one of the 40

valuable national parks around the world. It is a living museum with a rich and diverse collection of plant and animal populations. Some researchers believe that the property of the park is unique with respect to having diverse biological environments of forest and steppe with all its related plants and wild animals in a rather small area and in a native form.

The area of the park is approximately 91,000 hectares and it locates at the end of Elburz Mountains in the east of Golestan province. It is a mountainous region and its view ranges from steppe and dry rocking mountains and mountainous forests to mounds and flats.

The flora of the Park is mainly of Hircani, Irano-Turani, and ecotone. The wild life of the park includes different species of mammalian, bird, reptile, amphibian, and aquatic species. The presence of 69 mammalian species, 149 bird species, 8 fish species, and different species of reptiles and amphibians has enriched the wild life of the park (Kiabi, 1372: 93). Moreover, waterfalls, rivers, mountains, and different valley have added beautiful landscapes to the park.

The Ghorogh forest Park

The surface area of the park is 650 hectares, and its height ranges from 40 to 600 meters above the sea level. Regarding its lower height above the sea level, it is considered as a flat vegetation place and its flora is mainly of the flat forests. One of the characteristics of the park is keeping living animals in small and large cages. This attracts visitors and those who are interested in the nature.

The Naharkhoran forest Park

Naharkhoran is one of the oldest parks of Golestan province that is located near Gorgan. It is known by many Iranian. It is 4 km to the south of Gorgan. The park is a combination of forest spaces near the road and also the coast of the river. Because of the specific geographical state and being located on two steep skirts, it has a nice weather. Many people of Gorgan and other parts of Iran are greatly interested in this natural site. Currently, it has the necessary infrastructures of accommodation and resting, such as hotels, restaurants, motels, villas, bowers, children parks, washing rooms, and water, electricity, and telephone networks.

Other forest parks of the province

Other forest parks of the province are the Deland Park with 450 hectares area, the Alang dareh Park with 174 hectares area, the Kordkuy Park with 54 hectares area, the Baghu Park, the Gharan abad Park, the Touskestan Park, the Barankuh Park, and the Shast kalateh forests.

10- Countryside

The mountainous regions of Golestan province have specific position compared with other areas, with respect to dense forests, green pastures, mountain

peaks, and attractive landscapes. Sightseeing in mountainous regions, whether it is staying in the countryside or climbing and hiking, can meet one's health requirements. The high moisture level and also flow of the nice air, provides a cool climate in summer, which is so interesting for staying. The countryside of Golestan province is now the place where lots of people visit in different seasons. One of such villages is Deraz nou village, located in the south of Kordkuy town. Because of having beautiful landscapes and overhanging all flat areas, beautiful nature, and having a nice weather, this village is one of the interesting and unique places, where establishment of tourism facilities would make it one of the most attractive sites for tourists in the province. Another interesting countryside is Jahan nama village, which is located in the protected area of Jahan nama. Each years, many interested families, individuals, climbing groups, and researchers visits the village. Its attractive nature, beautiful landscapes, needle-shaped leaf and broad-leafed trees, wild animals, and the Radkan tower are valuable resources of Golestan province. Because of these, each year in warm seasons (spring and summer) many tourists visit the village. Other countryside villages of the province are Afratakhteh, Siah marz kuh, Elestan, Khoulin dareh, Mayan, Cheh ja, Gildagh, Ghaleh ghaneh, Khosh yeylagh, Chahar bagh, Shiranou, Zarrin gol, and Chinu.

Caves of the province

Caves of the province have great tourism potentials. The caves are important from the biological, geological, and anthropological point of view. Moreover, they are visited by tourist, spelunkers, and sportsmen. The Shir abad cave is one the major natural caves, which was developed without man's interventions. Inside the cave, a spring flows and the cave is a very important settlement site for some animal species, such as mountain salamander that is Iranian native species. Most parts of the cave are completely dark and at the end of the cave, there is a spring, which was the cause of development of the cave through centuries. In the surrounding of the cave, there is mountainous and forest area, with different trees and shrubs such as beech, maple, alder, moss, flowering plants, and other broad-leafed Caspian species, and also different animals such as ibex, roebuck, bear, and panther. Some other famous caves of the province are Ghar dam, Farang, Seyed Rashid, Mobarak abad, Yakhchal, Kiaram, Gerav, Dareh joft, Jahan nama, Siah marz kuh, Azhdar khaneh, Ganj nameh, Khan mohammad cave in Dara abad, and Haft khan-e Sijan.

3. Conclusion

Geographical phenomenon and landscapes are the important elements of ecotourism development. Natural figures and phenomenon are appreciated by ecotourists from the aesthetical and environmental points of view. The presence of particular geographical conditions, climate diversities, high mountains covered with forests, springs, international lagoons, green forests, parks and unique forest reservoirs, diverse wild life, gulf, islands, natural caves, countryside, and native and migrant birds demonstrate the unique potential of Golestan province for ecotourism. The beauty of these natural elements around the province attracts thousands of Iranian and international visitors each year. This provides a basis for economic growth and employment in the province. Considering the great potentials and capabilities of the province with respect to ecotourism and attraction of Iranian and international visitors, it is desirable to consider the following suggestions to upgrade the economic state of local communities, employment, and the province's economic and social state:

- 1- Increasing the security of the province, especially in communication roads and tourism centers,
- 2- Prioritizing investment in infrastructures of the province to develop them,
- 3- Introduction of ecotourism potentials through internet, posters, CDs, brochures, tourism maps, photos...,
- 4- Teaching people and the authorities of tourism in the province the international behavioral codes to have an appropriate behavior toward tourists,
- 5- Warranty of capital and investment safety by the government to motivate the private sector, and also providing appropriate support and direction for the private sector in investment in tourism regions and centers,
- 6- Quantitative expansion of accommodation and resting units across the province and improvement of the quality standards of services of the units,
- 7- Preparing the cultural ground required for tourism acceptance across the province, and
- 8- Programming for increase of the Iranian and international tourists' stay as well as the non-staying travelers.

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