

Strategies for Iran Ecotourism

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Abstract: Tourism industry of any country consists of different forms of tourism and since provided policies and strategies for development of any form of tourism in any country are different and even opposite, matching and adaptation of strategies with the nature of destination is necessary. Ecotourism as the most important form of tourism is not an exception and preparing strategies for its development will not be possible without considering its specific and extraordinary environment. The object for preparing and writing this article is to formulate suitable strategies for Iran ecotourism in a three phase framework consisting of input, matching and decision levels. Provided instruments and techniques in this framework are suitable for different levels of strategic planning (e.g. local, urban, regional and so on). Also this research is applied in target and the statistical population is all technical managers of tourism agencies in the country and data is gathered by designing and distribution of questionnaire. The number of sample of this study amounts to 278 persons. Surveys show that Iran ecotourism is one of the most powerful forms of tourism in this country and can be the first choice for domestic and foreign tourists. Results show that hold and maintain strategies are the first priority; in addition, considering lots of strengths of the industry, market penetration and development of products is also suggested among other aggressive strategies. Determining and prioritization of Iran ecotourism strategies are some practical results of this article.

Key words: Ecotourism · Strategic Planning · TOPSIS · Forms of tourism · Hold and maintain strategies · Iran ecotourism

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays tourism or the act of traveling with the aim of recreation is one of the big industries and economic sectors in the world and one of the employment sectors in most of the countries and the most important source of foreign exchange. On the other hand, most of the governments consider tourism as a guideline for development of the country, because of the multiplier effect of tourism income, in which foreign exchange provided by tourists will commence expending for local products and services. Tourism industry as one of the important and global pillars of the economy becomes more important day by day. So, most of the governments consider it as a suitable way to alleviate today's economic crisis. Iran, as one of the developing countries, has a big share of tourism industry and has the potential to become a top destination. Development and enhancing tourism without guiding framework and pre-determined strategies for achieving development goals and in ad hoc

manner [1] is impossible. Around the world, ecotourism has been hailed as a panacea: a way to fund conservation and research, protect fragile and pristine ecosystems, benefit rural communities, promote development in poor countries, enhance ecological and cultural sensitivity, instill environmental awareness and a social consciousness in the travel industry and satisfy and educate the discriminating tourist [2].

Adopting strategic planning to tourism development is necessary, because most of the times after observation and emersion of tourism development and undesired social and environmental effects, it takes a long time to alleviate the effects or control the process of development. There are several examples of tourism destinations affected by negative and undesired effects of tourism development. Negative effects are usually because of the lack or inappropriateness of tourism development plans. So preparing tourism planning is necessary to compensate negative effects of tourism in destinations [3].

Strategic planning refers to the process of creating long-term conformity between managerial targets and changing market opportunities. All practices and operations related to tourism must be done on the basis of strategic plan. Strategic planning of tourism industry makes the governments able to recognize strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats and apply these findings for improving and enhancing the benefits of tourism industry. Strategic planning based on the business or environment of tourism, has an important role in developing tourism industry, which is one of the most important catalyzers of economic development of countries and results in the long-term conformity between business goals and opportunities and sustainable market opportunities. So governments can gain competitive advantage by preparing strategies which are applicable in market.

Ziffer says that ecotourism is a kind of tourism which is usually based on natural history and indigenous cultures of a region [4]. Ecotourists travel to almost undeveloped regions in order to observe and admire the nature and they take part in the conservation process of the destination. Ecotourism is an ecological sustainable development in natural areas. In this kind of tourism, cultures and local environments are explained and this leads to the improvement of tourists understanding and conservation of the environment and well-being of the local people [5]. Tickel defines ecotourism as a kind of travel to enjoy the diversity of cultures and natural life, without causing damage to either [6]. Ecotourism development approach is linked with the environment to generate economic profitability in terms ecotourism business activities [7].

Boyd and Butler emphasize on the motivations of the ecotourists when planning for the ecotourists and offer a set of eight criteria which should be taken into account when planning for tourism development [8]. These criteria include access, relationship between ecotourism and other uses of resources-base, other attractions of the region, presence of infrastructures, level of user's skills and their knowledge, level of social interaction, degree of acceptance of impacts and having control on the level of application and type of management required to ensure long-term validity.

Stuart Crispin and Mark Wickham in the article titled as "Ecotourism and Strategic Management" emphasize on the link between strategic management research and issues such as environmental impacts, government policy and destination planning and marketing [9] and the MA

European Tourism Management in an article titled as "Ecotourism in Laos: an alternative or a marketing tool for ecotourism operators?" states that host communities tend to prefer ecotourism to mass tourism for different reasons. Ecotourism is supposed to not overpower the community, most of the revenues stay in the area and economic diversity tries to avoid communities basing their economy on a single product like tourism [10].

In Jordan National Tourism strategy (2004-2010) proposed by Jordan Ministry of Travel and Tourism, key strategy directions include:

- Assessing economic impact on the basis of visitor expenditure.
- Using value chain approach to develop Jordan as a high value, boutique destination.
- Prioritizing concerns related to preservation and conservation of the environment antiquities, as they are tourism underlying resources.
- Improving disconnect between tourism marketing and product development.
- Auditing existing statistics system [11].

Frank Alaeddinođlu and Ali Selcuk Can in an article titled "Developing International Market Entry Strategies for Cultural Tourism of Turkey" state that in that paper they just aim to investigate foreign market entry or market penetration for cultural tourism and analyze possible market strategy for it [12]. Turkish destination marketers should expand market share of this country in global tourism industry. In this paper Canada and Korea are two possible international markets to penetrate. Agency is offered for Canadian outbound tourism market, based on market entry barriers, competitor analysis and perceptual mapping. For Korean market, opening overseas tourism promotion office is suggested.

Iran is a vast country and has a lot of cultural, natural and historical resources which has resulted in a high potential to attract tourists, since there are 131 protected areas, including 19 national parks, 91 natural reserve, 21 natural parks, 12 world heritage sites and lots of attractions with natural or historical importance, unsuitable and incorrect policies and strategies can result in deterioration of the attractions and places and even declining of tourism which has potential to create job opportunities for 2/5 million people and 3% of GDP. At last we can say that planning for tourism development in Iran has started from 1858 but because of prioritization of other plans and existence of oil and other resources

this industry has been neglected and the need for formulating strategies has been never felt. In today's complicated world, defining and determining the geographical area and the forms of tourists for whom the tourism policy will be performed is of considerable importance. There are different kinds of tourism destinations in Iran and different forms of tourists need different policies and strategies. That's why adaptation of the presented policies according to the nature of the destination is a crucial matter.

Research Methodology: The present study is of descriptive research type. It is considered as applied type in terms of objective. The present study is of survey research type in terms of collection of information. Therefore, collection of information and data has been made through studying books and documents. For obtaining necessary information at this study, required data have been collected through library-based studies, questionnaire and obtaining data from resources and documents (for provision of study theoretical fundamentals).

Research model: Basic methods of preparing ecotourism strategies can be included in a three phase framework including input, adaptation and decision making (Diagram 1). The first phase of preparing strategies includes recognizing effective internal and external factors on the forms of tourism by applying pair-wise comparison technique.

Before applying EFE and IFE matrix to find the final score of Iran ecotourism industry, we calculate the importance degree of each factor by applying TOPSIS technique and the degree of reaction (rank) of ecotourism to the factors by application of questionnaire. In the first phase (input), basic information for preparation of strategies is determined. In the second (matching) stage, different forms of possible strategies are considered and for doing this balance is made among external and internal factors. Techniques applied in the second phase include strengths- weaknesses-opportunities-threats (SWOT) matrix and internal and external matrix(IE).

Statistical Population, Sample Size and Sampling Method: All technical managers of tourism companies are statistical population of the preset study. In this study sample size was calculated by application of Morgan table and equals 1000 persons according to reports presented in Euromonitor 2009 report [13] about real number of active

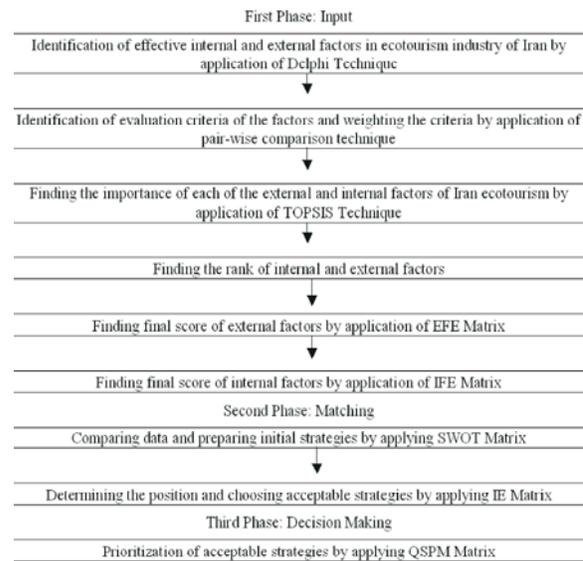


Diagram 1: Strategic Framework to Formulate Strategy

traveling agencies. The number of sample of this study amounts to 278 persons. The reason for choosing them is that they have enough experience in related matters and are well acquainted with different forms of tourism and internal environment (strengths and weaknesses) and external environment (opportunities and threats) of tourism industry of Iran. Random classified sampling method was used and one technical manager was selected from each company.

Validity and Reliability, Measuring Tools: At the present study, library based study was applied for preparation of theoretical basis and recording of previous studies and questionnaire were used for determining the affective factors and degree of reaction of tourism industry to these factors.

Provided initial questionnaire was given to university professors and experts in charge, with the aim of presenting their views on validity of questionnaire and whether questions posed at the questionnaire are appropriate or not.

Then, viewpoints of lecturers and officials in charge were considered at questionnaire and consequently, necessary changes were made at questions.

Cronbach's Alpha [14] Test was used for testing reliability of questionnaire of study. For this reason, 76 study questionnaires were distributed among statistical population (individuals set for this study). Then each answer was studied individually and response rate of each question was calculated. First, the rate of acquire

Table 1: Listwise deletion based on all variables in

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items		No of Items
0.7840	0.7840		40
		N	%
Cases	Valid	40	100.0
	Excluded ^a	0	.0
	Total	40	100.0

dresponses was over 90% of the sample. Second, there was no question to which most of the 16 person group didn't answer or gave an unexpected response. In the same direction, Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Test was made through the application of SPSS software package. Generally, test reliability rate was obtained 784% at large (Table 1).

Method of Analysis

Delphi: Delphi method starts with identification of the problem and selected experts (Delphi panel) based on their experiment related to the defined problem. A questionnaire is designed and distributed to the Delphi panel. Then data is collected and analyzed to reach consensus in responses. If the respondents have reached consensus a report is developed based on responses, if not, a new questionnaire is developed based on the results of the previous round and again distributed to the panel. This process is repeated until consensus is reached and based on which a final report is developed [15].

Weighting the Criteria: The basic procedure to carry out the pair-wise comparison consists of Prioritization of criteria by pair-wise comparison (weighing). Rating the relative priority of the criteria is done by assigning a weight between 1 (equal importance) and 9 (extreme importance) to the more important criterion, whereas the value reciprocal to that is assigned to the other criterion in the pair. The weightings are then assigned a number and averaged in order to obtain an average weight for each criterion [16].

TOPSIS: For ranking and selecting the most appropriate suppliers TOPSIS method is more appropriate due to the following reasons: In this technique, due to permission of desirability exchange between the attributes, it is possible to improve a supplier performance through its comparative advantage in some areas, despite its poor performance in other cases. In TOPSIS decision making technique, interaction effect of attributes is considered. This technique also considers Conflict and compatibility between attributes [17-20].TOPSIS decision making

technique is less sensitive compared to weighting technique. Considering the subjects covered in this study, compensating models and its constructive subgroup, TOPSIS technique, is used for evaluating and ranking the suppliers[21].

EFE and IFE Matrixes: External Factor Evaluation (EFE) Matrix summarizes economic, social, cultural, demographic, environmental, political, governmental, legal, technological and competitive information [22, 23, 24]. Internal Factor Evaluation Matrix (IFE) summarizes the major strengths and weaknesses in the functional areas of a business. Ratings and Weighted Scores are two important variables in IFE and EFE matrixes. Companies and industries rate each internal and external factor 1-to-4 in EFE and IFE Tables to indicate how effectively the firm's current strategies respond to the factor. Firms assign a weight from 0.0 to 1.0 to each internal and external factor in EFE and IFE Tables. Weights indicate the relative importance of that factor to being successful in the firm's industry.

SWOT: Surveying internal and external environment is an important part of the strategic planning. Internal factors can be classified as strengths (S) or weaknesses (W) and external factors can be classified as opportunities (O) or threats (T). Such analysis of the strategic environment is referred to as SWOT analysis. The SWOT analysis provides information that is helpful in matching the firm's resources and capabilities to the competitive environment. It is instrumental in strategy formulation and selection.

Strength: An internal competence, valuable resource or attribute that an organization can use to exploit opportunities in the external environment

Weakness: An internal lack of a competence, resource or attribute that an organization requires to perform in the external environment

Opportunity: An external possibility that an organization can pursue or exploit to gain benefit

Threat: An external factor that has the potential to reduce an organization's performance [25].

- SO strategies: pursue opportunities that are a good fit to the company's strengths.
- WO strategies: overcome weaknesses to pursue opportunities.

- ST strategies: identify the ways that the firm can use its strengths to reduce its vulnerability to external threats.
- WT strategies: establish a defensive plan to prevent the firm's weaknesses from making it highly susceptible to external threats [26].

Internal-External (IE) Matrix: Internal-External (IE) Matrix positions an organization's various divisions in a nine cell display through plotting them in a schematic diagram. The size of each circle represents the percentage sales contribution of each division and pie slices reveal the percentage profit contribution of each division in IE Matrix [16]. IE Matrix is based on two key dimensions: IFE total weighted scores on the x-axis and EFE total weighted scores on the y axis. On the x-axis of the IE Matrix, an IFE total weighted score of 1.0 to 1.99 represents a weak internal position; a score of 2.0 to 2.99 is considered average; and a score of 3.0 to 4.0 is strong. Similarly, on the y-axis, an EFE total weighted score of 1.0 to 1.99 is considered low; a score of 2.0 to 2.99 is medium; and a score of 3.0 to 4.0 is high. The IE Matrix can be divided into three major regions that have different strategy implications. First region gives the prescription of grow and build for divisions that fall into cells I, II, or IV. Intensive (market penetration, market development and product development) or integrative (backward integration, forward integration and horizontal integration) strategies can be most appropriate for these divisions. Second region gives the prescription of hold and maintain for divisions that fall into cells III, V, or VII. Market penetration and product development are two commonly employed strategies for these forms of divisions. Third region gives the prescription of harvest or divest for divisions that fall into cells VI, VIII, or IX. Liquidation, retrenchment and divestiture are appropriate strategies for these divisions. Successful organizations are able to achieve a portfolio of businesses positioned in or around cell I in the IE Matrix [27].

Reorganization of Internal and External Factors in Iran Ecotourism: In the first phase internal and external factors of Iran ecotourism were recognized by surveying literature review and research backgrounds. Then all the internal and external factors were analyzed carefully and most repeated and frequented factors in different researches were extracted. After administering 3 round of Delphi method, we acquired expert's attitudes and recognized strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats affecting Iran ecotourism industry (Table 2).

Table 2: Opportunities, threats, strengths and weaknesses in Iran ecotourism

Opportunities	Threats	Strengths	Weaknesses
9	6	9	13

Table 3: Weights of criteria Tables of Importance of Iran Ecotourism

Criteria	Weight
Number of Tourists	0.354
Length of Stay	0.303
Second Visit	0.116
Encouraging the Others	0.227

Reorganization and Weighting of Evaluative Criteria: Referring to literature review and research background, some criteria which are affecting Iran ecotourism are recognized and then by administration of questionnaire, aspects and ideas of tourism and geography experts are acquired. Then weight of each criterion is calculated on the basis of pair-wise comparison (Table 3).

Finding the Importance of Each Factor in Ecotourism: In this phase importance degree of each factor in ecotourism is calculated on the basis of number of ecotourists, length of stay, second visit and encouraging others. Weights are given by technical managers of tourism companies in Iran. Degrees are assigned a number between 0 (not important) and 1 (most important). Then by application of TOPSIS technique and considering the weight of each of the determined criteria, importance degree of each factor is calculated.

Finding Final Scores of External Factors (EFE): In order to calculate the final score of external factors, we put the opportunities and threat factors for ecotourism in EFE matrix. Then importance degree of each of the factors which was previously calculated via TOPSIS technique were added and each importance degree was divided to total degree and the result was entered in the column of coefficients of EFE. This helps us to gain the total coefficient equal to one. In the next step we found the ranks of each external factor. The importance degree (weight) of each factor was multiplied in its rank to find the total score of each factor. After that, the scores of all factors in the matrix were added to find the total final score of external factors.

Analysis of the Results of the Table of External Factors of Ecotourism matrix: Surveying the results of the matrix of the external factors of Iran ecotourism shows that this industry faces 9 opportunities and 6 threats among which

Table 4: Table of importance of external factors

	Number of tourists	Length of stay	Repetition of visit	Encouraging the others
Opportunities				
1. Ever developing demand for ecotourism across the world.	7.44	7.78	7.13	7.29
2. existence of a considerable number of potential touristslike Iranian settled in Western countries and neighbor and Islamic countries which have historical, religious and cultural relations with Iran.	9.38	9.55	9.63	9.37
3. Originality, distinction and authenticity of Iran's ecotourism attractions for some of ecotourists.	9.77	9.79	9.77	9.49
4.Existence of demand by domestic tourists (domestic potential tourists) and increase of free time.	9.76	9.88	9.93	9.59
5. Possibility of attracting tourists in all year round, because of geographical position of this country.	9.80	9.74	9.79	9.32
6. Geographical position of this country (Closeness to tourist generating countries).	8.67	7.83	9.07	7.56
7. Accessibility by ship, airplane, train and car.	7.69	7.90	7.66	7.24
8. High level of technological development in the world, which can support tourism industry.	7.97	6.77	4.79	4.66
9. Existence of the supplementary attractions, beside ecotourism attractions.	8.77	9.12	8.81	8.77
Threats				
1.Presentation of an unsuitable image of Iran in International societies (negative advertisement and political and economic prohibitions) to international tourists.	9.92	9.87	9.34	9.72
2.Tensions, restlessness and insecurity in Middle East and especially in neighbor countries like Afghanistan and Iraq, which causes the number of international tourists to decrease.	7.88	7.83	7.22	7.34
3. Increase and intensification of competing in international markets and existence of capable competitors with high capacity to attract tourists (especially turkey with high tourism attracting capacity in ecotourism) and the threat imposed by potential rivals.	9.77	9.80	9.39	9.51
4.World economic recession which causes the number of travelers to be decreased.	7.56	7.60	7.15	7.35
5. Climate change, consequent droughts and natural disasters like floods and earthquake.	9.69	9.77	9.21	9.54
6. Not choosing Iran by ecotourists from western and developed countries.	8.44	7.79	7.33	6.70

Table 5: Table of importance of internal factors

	Number of tourists	Length of stay	Repetition of visit	Encouraging the others
Strengths				
1. Continental and climate variety which makes it possible to travel in all seasons.	9.77	9.69	9.37	9.11
2. Undisturbed mountains, forests, pastures and ponds which are of high global importance.	6.49	6.14	6.07	6.17
3. Variety and exceptionality of Iran flora and fauna.	8.92	8.62	8.78	9.14
4.Position of the seas and coasts in the north and south of the country and coral beaches of Persian Gulf.	6.89	6.25	6.16	6.34
5.Internal lakes of the country and 26000 Km2 of beaches.	6.41	6.09	6.11	6.06
6. Geomorphologic position of the country in which rare geomorphologic landscapes such as volcanoes, islands, waterfalls and sand dunes are observable.	6.77	6.14	5.97	6.39
7. Iran salt deserts and rare attractions of them	8.90	8.49	8.33	8.89
8. Variety and ethnic richness in indigenous areas.	9.98	9.85	9.79	9.84
9. National parks, wildlife refuges, protected areas, national natural landmarks and biosphere reserves.	6.55	6.07	6.16	6.37
Weaknesses				
1.Lack of comprehensive plans and strategies to develop	9.92	9.87	9.75	9.77
2. Unsuitable transportation system for easy access to ecotourism	8.57	8.46	7.27	7.52
3. Lack of hospitality and accommodation centers to provide good	8.60	8.52	7.05	7.14
4.Inexpert, weak and inefficient human resource and lack of	8.55	8.40	7.59	7.61
5. Weak promotion and marketing efforts to introduce ecotourism	8.63	8.77	6.88	6.72
6. Providing unsuitable health services in the vicinity of ecotourism	6.33	7.56	6.37	6.12
7. Low access to modern technologies such as internet, express post, mobile phones and guiding software in the areas which have potential to develop ecotourism.	6.77	6.82	5.14	5.05
8. Not paying attention to ecotourism attractions, irresponsibility to conservation of the environment, increasing deforestation and deterioration of pastures and other natural resources.	8.76	8.48	7.18	6.79
9. Limited activity of travel agencies in the field of ecotourism.	8.81	8.46	7.09	7.16
10. Seasonality of ecotourism and unequal distribution of tourism	8.70	8.89	7.91	8.14
11. Weakness of social security, especially in remote areas.	9.57	9.92	9.66	9.72
12. High rate of inflation and unsuitable domestic economy which hardens the development of ecotourism and increases the expense of travel to Iran.	8.69	8.77	8.19	8.34
13. Cultural and communicative barriers, especially in the vicinity of ecotourism attractions and negative attitude of government authorities, policy makers and local communities to development of tourism.	9.42	9.67	9.49	9.70

Table 6: Matrix of external factors in ecotourism

	External Factors	Degree of importance	Rank	Final score
Opportunities	1. Ever developing demand for ecotourism across the	0.0377	2.77	0.1044
	2. existence of a considerable number of potential	0.0888	3.11	0.2762
	3. Originality, distinction and authenticity of Iran's ecotourism	0.0967	3.23	0.3123
	4. Existence of demand by domestic tourists (domestic	0.0998	3.56	0.3553
	5. Possibility of attracting tourists in all the year round,	0.0950	2.90	0.2755
	6. Geographical position of this country (Closeness to tourist	0.0530	2.41	0.1277
	7. Accessibility by ship, airplane, train and car.	0.0405	2.63	0.1065
	8. High level of technological development in the world, which	0.0095	3.69	0.0351
	9. Existence of the supplementary attractions, beside	0.0730	2.59	0.1891
Threats	1. Presentation of an unsuitable image of Iran in	0.0974	1.56	0.1519
	2. Tensions, restlessness and insecurity in Middle East	0.0411	1.74	0.0715
	3. Increase and intensification of competing in international	0.0958	1.13	0.1083
	4. World economic recession which causes the number of	0.0376	1.89	0.0711
	5. Climate change, consequent draughts and natural disasters	0.0942	1.66	0.1564
	6. Not choosing Iran by ecotourists from western and	0.0399	1.06	0.0423
Total		1		2.3834

Table 7: Matrix of internal factors in ecotourism

	Internal Factors	Degree of importance	Rank	Final score
Strengths	1. Continental and climate variety which makes it possible to	0.0754	3.49	0.2631
	2. Undisturbed mountains, forests, pastures and ponds which are	0.0111	2.94	0.0326
	3. Variety and exceptionality of Iran flora and fauna.	0.0614	2.41	0.1480
	4. Position of the seas and coasts in the north and south of the	0.0148	3.46	0.0512
	5. Internal lakes of the country and 26000 Km2 of beaches.	0.0101	2.39	0.0241
	6. Geomorphologic position of the country in which rare	0.0139	2.88	0.0400
	7. Iran salt deserts and rare attractions of them.	0.0588	3.22	0.1893
	8. Variety and ethnic richness in indigenous areas.	0.0826	3.04	0.2511
	9. National parks, wildlife refuges, protected areas, national	0.0129	2.65	0.0342
Weaknesses	1. Lack of comprehensive plans and strategies to	0.0822	1.38	0.1134
	2. Unsuitable transportation system for easy access to	0.0480	1.78	0.0854
	3. Lack of hospitality and accommodation centers to provide	0.0464	1.38	0.0640
	4. Inexpert, weak and inefficient human resource and lack of	0.0484	1.43	0.0692
	5. Weak promotion and marketing efforts to introduce ecotourism	0.0457	1.37	0.0626
	6. Providing unsuitable health services in the vicinity of	0.0196	1.35	0.0265
	7. Low access to modern technologies such as internet, express	0.0103	1.68	0.0173
	8. Not paying attention to ecotourism attractions, irresponsibility	0.0457	1.33	0.0608
	9. Limited activity of travel agencies in the field of ecotourism.	0.0477	1.49	0.0711
	10. Seasonality of ecotourism and unequal distribution of tourism	0.0557	1.77	0.0986
	11. Weakness of social security, especially in remote areas.	0.0779	1.83	0.1426
	12. High rate of inflation and unsuitable domestic economy which	0.0563	1.87	0.1053
	13. Cultural and communicative barriers, especially in the vicinity	0.0752	1.21	0.0910
Total		1		2.0414

factor number 4 (existence of demand by domestic tourists) with importance degree equal to 0.0998 is the most important opportunity of Iran ecotourism. Factor number 3 (originality, distinction and authenticity of Iran's ecotourism attractions for some of the ecotourists) with importance degree equal to 0.0967 and factor number 5 (possibility of attracting tourists in all year round) with importance degree equal to 0.0950 and factor number 2 (existence of a considerable number of potential tourists, with importance degree equal to 0.0888) are other two important opportunities in this industry. On the other hand, factor number 8 (high level of technological development) with importance degree equal to 0.0094 is the most important opportunity of Iran ecotourism.

Surveying and studying of the ranks shows suitable reaction of Iran ecotourism to factor number 8 (ranked 3.69). In addition, this industry has well exploited factor number 4 (ranked 3.56). The results of the table of threats of Iran ecotourism shows that factor number one (presenting an unsuitable image of Iran in international societies) with importance degree equal to 0.0975 is the most important threat which this industry is facing. Factor number 3 (increase and intensification of competing in international markets) with importance degree equal to 0.0958 and factor number five (climate change, consequent draughts and natural disasters) with importance degree equal to 0.0942 are other important threats which Iran ecotourism is facing. Surveys shows

that this industry is showing a suitable reaction, just in number 4 (global economic recession) ranked 1.89. Getting final score equal to 2.3834 for the matrix of external factors of Iran ecotourism, shows average status and condition of the industry in exploiting the opportunities and overcome the threats

Calculating Final Score of Internal Factors (IFE Matrix):

To calculate final score of internal factors, the factors which caused strength and weakness were put in internal factors matrix. Then the importance degree of each factor which was previously calculated by applying TOPSIS technique was added and then each of the degrees was divided to it and the result was entered in the column of coefficients of IFE matrix. This helps us to gain the total coefficient equal to one. In the next step the rank of each of the internal factors was calculated. Then the importance degree (weight) of each factor was multiplied in its rank to find the total score of each factor. After that, the scores of all factors in the matrix were added to find the total final score of external factors.

Analysis of the Results of the Table of the Internal Factors of Ecotourism Matrix:

Surveying the results of the internal factors of Iran ecotourism industry matrix shows that the most important strength of the industry is factor number 8 (variety and ethnic richness in indigenous area) with importance degree equal to 0.0826. Factor number one (continental and climate variety which makes it possible to travel in all seasons) with importance degree equal to 0.0754 is the second important strength of this industry. From the viewpoint of reaction to the factors (strengths), factor number one ranked 3.49 and factor number four ranked 3.46 are showing good reaction. The most important weaknesses of Iran ecotourism are factor number one (lack of comprehensive plans and strategies) with importance degree equal to 0.0822 and factor number eleven (weakness of social security) with importance degree equal to 0.0779 and factor number 13 (cultural and communicative barriers,... and negative attitude of government authorities and local communities to development of tourism) with importance degree equal to 0.0752. Surveying the reaction of this industry to the factors shows that factor number 12 (high rate of inflation and unsuitable domestic economy) ranked 1.83 and factor number two (unsuitable transportation system) ranked 1.78 have above average reactions to factors (weaknesses), but in other cases Iran ecotourism has not

been able to overcome the weaknesses. In general, total score equal to 2.0414 shows average status and position of Iran ecotourism industry in taking advantage of the strengths and eliminating the weaknesses is average, too.

Comparing Data and Preparing Initial Strategies by Applying Swot Matrix:

In the matrix of preparing strategies, evaluation stage includes all instruments which are dependent on all acquired data from previous stages (evaluation of internal and external factors) and it compares external opportunities and threats with internal strengths and weaknesses. For this, internal and external factors in SWOT matrix are compared to prepare possible strategies.

In the next step recognized opportunities, threats, strengths and weaknesses of ecotourism industry of Iran were put in columns of the matrix. Then internal strengths and external opportunities, internal weaknesses and external threats are compared and the results are entered in the places related to SO (strengths-opportunities), WO (weaknesses-opportunities), ST (strengths-threats) and WT (weaknesses-threats) strategies.

SO Strategies:

- Focusing on the domestic ecotourism, strengthening and developing it.
- Penetrating in Potential markets, such as Iranians settling in Western and Muslim countries, which have historical, religious and cultural relations with Iran, through development and marketing efforts.
- Developing new geographical markets and especially attracting ecotourists from tourist generating markets, such as America and Europe.
- Developing tourism products with emphasis on ecotourism attractions by promoting quality services and products.
- Focusing on target markets, which rivals have a small share of it.

ST Strategies:

- Sustainable development of ecotourism region
- Diversifying ecotourism products (providing varied ecotourism products in a package to ecotourists).
- Providing distinguished and special ecotourism products for ecotourists, so that this kind of products cannot be provided in rival countries especially Turkey.

- Providing other tourism products such as leisure tourism, Spa tourism, cultural tourism, urban tourism and so on for ecotourists.
- Renovating and developing ecotourism regions.
- Renovating and developing ecotourism corridors.

WO Strategies:

- Reinforcing domestic ecotourism by preparing legislatures and supporting plans and improving security.
- Balanced or sustainable development of Iran ecotourism, through conservation of environment, pursuing ecologically suitable principles, supporting a variety of cultures, ethnics, races, dialects and languages.
- Decreasing expenses and providing cheap ecotour packages for tourist generating regions.
- Attracting ecotourists all year round and holding ecotourism festivals in the areas which have different weather, climate and culture.
- Transferring the services related to travel by air, sea, road and rail to domestic and foreign companies in order to improve the quality and decrease the prices.
- Customization of global new technologies to provide support for Iran ecotourism.
- Transferring and Participating in the management of ecotourism service units, such as accommodation of ecotourism regions, local and road-side restaurants, special ecotourism tours and so on.
- Inclusion of other tourism products in ecotourism packages and establishing complementary attractions beside ecotourism attractions.
- Reforming plans and preparing comprehensive strategies to develop ecotourism in Iran.

WT Strategies:

- Improving the image of Iran in the world, through suitable diplomacy, advertisement, establishing ecotourism developing offices in Iran embassies located in different countries.
- Investing to improve the quality of infrastructures, such as road transport systems, hospitality and accommodation centers, medical and health services, increasing access to new technologies, such as Internet, telephone, post, guiding software and so on in ecotourism regions.
- Marketing and introducing ecotourism attractions of Iran.

- Reinforcing local societies, through education and management of ecotourism attractions and suitable relationship, so that besides providing maximum profit for local communities, it will result in the least negative effects on the environment, customs and indigenous culture.
- Cooperating with neighbor countries such as Turkey, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan and so on, in order to arrange joint package tours in the field of ecotourism.
- Investing in ecotourism areas through assigning public funds, encouraging the local community to participate and demanding loans from international financial institutions.
- Encouraging volunteer associations, domestic and foreign related organizations, local societies and so on to recognize, protect, conserve, reinforce, develop and exploit ecotourism attractions.
- Developing global cooperation and participation to provide technical support and receive support in the field of research and development with research centers and global experienced universities.
- Participating in leading country's ecotourism programs to perform grand projects through arranging short-term, midterm and long-term treaties and attract foreign investors to provide financial support for these projects.

Determining the Position and Selecting Acceptable Strategies by Applying Ie Matrix: After preparing initial strategies by comparing internal and external factors in the matrix of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) acceptable strategies were selected among them. The process of selecting acceptable strategies of Iran ecotourism industry is as follows:

Preparing internal and external matrix (IE) includes two main dimensions. Final scores of matrix of evaluation of internal factors are shown on X axis and sum of final scores of matrix of evaluation of external factors of Iran ecotourism industry is shown on Y axis. The incidence point of sum of scores of internal and external factors of Iran ecotourism on X and Y determines the status of Iran ecotourism industry in internal and external matrix.

Choosing Acceptable Strategies: Acceptable strategies of Iran ecotourism industry with attention to its place in cell 5 of internal and external matrix (IE) are known as hold and maintain (conservation) strategies. Considering a lot of strengths of this industry and its external opportunities, we can utilize ST, SO and also WO strategies, too.

Table 8: Final strategies for Iran ecotourism

No	Final Strategies in Ecotourism	Total attractiveness Score
1	Balanced or sustainable development of Iran ecotourism, through conservation of environment, pursuing ecologically suitable principles, supporting a variety of cultures, ethnics, races, dialects and language.	3.82
2	Focusing on the domestic ecotourism, strengthening and developing it.	3.66
3	Renovating and developing ecotourism regions.	3.40
4	Developing tourism products with emphasis on ecotourism attractions by promoting quality services and products.	3.31
5	Transferring and Participating in the management of ecotourism service units, such as accommodation of ecotourism regions, local and road-side restaurants, special ecotourism tours and so on.	3.16
6	Penetrating in Potential markets, such as Iranians inhabiting in Western and Muslim countries which have historical, religious and cultural relations with Iran, through development and marketing efforts.	2.79
7	Diversifying ecotourism products (providing varied ecotourism products in a package to ecotourists).	2.11

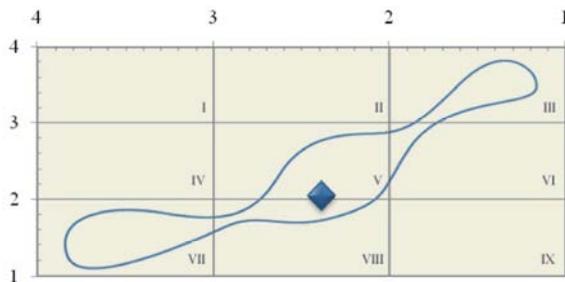


Diagram 2: Internal and External Matrix of Iran Ecotourism (IE)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Surveys show that ecotourism industry is one of the strongest forms of tourism in Iran and in other words it is the first choice of domestic and foreign tourists. Studies show that none of the forms of tourism has so much strengths and potential as ecotourism. This country has an extraordinary and specific position because of the variety of climate and weather, cultural richness, deserts, forests, geomorphological position, national parks, wildlife refuges and extraordinary seas and beaches, natural landmarks, mountains, pastures, lagoons, lakes and islands and ecotourism can be the most important competitive advantage of Iran ecotourism industry. Despite all these potentials and growing demand for ecotourism in the world, Iran ecotourism's share in global ecotourism market is low in spite of vast range of attractions which are special, different and authentic for most of tourists and this country is known as an ecotourism destination. Existence of demand by domestic tourists and increase of their free time can be the biggest opportunity and incentive of this industry. It seems that Iran should improve the status of ecotourism industry by taking advantage of this opportunity and focusing on it and make up the basis for attracting foreign ecotourists with high level of expectations. Also existence of a considerable number of potential ecotourists, closeness

to ecotourism generating markets, accessibility and geographical position are good opportunities which if are utilized, attract a considerable number of ecotourists from new markets such as Europe and America and markets to which rivals have not been able to penetrate. Surveys show that Iran ecotourism is suffering lots of weaknesses and threats although it is enjoying a lot of strengths and opportunities. At the beginning what needs more attention is preparation and enforcement of long-term planning and comprehensive strategies to develop and promote Iran ecotourism.

There is no doubt that all these plans should guarantee sustainable development of ecotourism and protection of local cultures and custom and decreasing travel expenses for ecotourists and improve their security in non-urban and remote areas. Improving transportation system for easy access to natural attractions located in remote areas and providing health and medical services and accommodation to ecotourists are the most important pre-requisites. Prevention from deterioration of environment and preparation of protective laws and removing cultural and communicative barriers which impede contact of ecotourists with local communities through changing negative attitudes of government authorities, policy makers and people are the other pre-requisites to overcome weaknesses of this sector of tourism. At last it is possible to overcome most of the threats of Iran ecotourism such as unfavorable image of Iran in the world and existence of powerful rivals (e.g. Turkey) by training expert and educated team of employees of travel agencies, ecotourism accommodation and competent offices and recognizing and introducing ecotourism attractions and promoting diplomacy.

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