An Investigation of the Effective Factors on Sport Tourism Development in IRAN with the Emphasis on Natural - Sport Attractions

Hashem Koozehchian, Mohammad Ehsani and Javad Adabi Firouzjah

Abstract: Tourism is one of the most important industries in the world. Sport tourism is considered as a part of tourism that has arisen from the integration of tourism and sport. Recently, it has rapidly changed into a big and independent industry in the world. One of the influential factors in sport tourism development is the natural resources of the country. The aim of this study was to explore the effect of natural-sport attractions on the sport tourism development in Iran and also the problems in this area. The data were collected from three groups of participants as a sample of the study: tourism experts of Iran Cultural Inheritance and Tourism Organization (N=37), experts of active travel agencies in the field of tourism (N=60) and the sport experts of ten sport federations in Iran such as swimming, horse riding, hunting, track and field, skiing, golf, general sports, mountaineering, bicycling and boating (N=30). A researcher-made questionnaire was distributed among subjects and 112 questionnaires were completed. The data were analyzed by factor analysis using SPSS software. From the viewpoint of three groups of experts, hiking, water and summer sports, desert tourism and hunting and fishing were most important in sport tourism development in Iran. Also, regarding the problems of sport tourism in Iran, findings showed that cultural problems were the most significant issues in the area of sport tourism in Iran. Managerial problems were the second important barrier in this area. The third most important problem in Iran sport tourism was infrastructural problems. Moreover, the results showed that seasonality in Iran less affected sport tourism development.

Key words: Tourism %Sport tourism %Natural-sport attractions %Iran

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the great industries in the world. According to the World Tourism Organization (WTO), the number of tourists has a 4.3 percent growth annually and will reached 1.6 billion in 2020. At the same time, the expenditure of tourists with a growth rate of 6.7 percent annually has reached 2 trillion dollars 1.

Sport tourism is a combination of tourism and sport, in which many people are working all around the world. The subject of participation or watching sport events have existed since the ancient Olympic; where people gathered in the Olympic mountain from various places to watch their champions’ competition [1].

Baron Pierre de Coubertine, the father of the modern Olympic Games, gives inspiration for the development of sports tourism. It was his belief that “…sport brings people together and in doing so contributes to a better understanding between peoples and nations. It was de Coubertine’s concept that gave sports tourism its vitality and foundation [2].

The issue of sport tourism has become one of the new research approaches in recent years [3]. The concept of sport tourism is a complex one. The complexity emanates from the difficulties in defining the concept. Gibson (1998) defined sport tourism as “leisure-based travel that takes individuals temporarily outside of their home communities to play, watch physical activities or venerate attractions associated with these activities” [3]. Sport tourism makes an important contribution to local and national economies and appears to have substantial potentials to further build on this contribution [4]. Sport tourism in industrial countries includes 1-2 percent of GDP and it has a 10-percent increased rate annually [5].
Business or none-business travel aiming at watching sport events is called sport tourism [6]. In general, sport tourists are either non-active or active participants in sports voyages [7]. Many researchers have classified sport tourism into various aspects and fields [6, 7, 8]. Gibson (1998) suggested that sport tourism incorporated three main behaviors: participating, watching and visiting/venerating. The first category includes tourists who visit places in order to attend sport events, such as world and European championships, the Olympic Games, etc. The second category includes visitors of famous sport related attractions, such as famous sport facilities, stadiums and museums. Finally, the last category includes active tourists who travel with the objective to do active holidays and participate in sport and recreation related activities, such as outdoors, water related activities, golf, tennis, etc [3].

The classification introduced by Kurtzman and Zauhar (1997) includes: attractions, resorts, cruise, events and tours [9]. Attractions are divided into natural and handmade attractions. Some countries possess identical and diverse climates, so they enjoy a variety of natural attractions to develop sport tourism [10-14]. They can exploit these opportunities to develop sport tourism in their countries. Studies have proven that Iran is among the top 10 countries from the viewpoint of tourism attractions [15]. The present natural sport attractions in Iran are widespread and generally related to hiking, nature tourism, hunting, fishing, winter sports (such as skiing, skating, snowboarding), beach and water sports (such as swimming, boating, surfing, diving), desert, camel riding, nature therapy, mud therapy, spa therapy, mountaineering and caving and adventurous sports [1, 16]. Unfortunately, in spite of such potentials, Iran’s position is not good in the world’s tourism industry. The country’s tourism share in GDP was about 0.1 percent in 1990s [15]. Iran as a country with plenty of tourism attractions should also have a developed tourism industry, but economic, social, religious and political factors affect this industry and are considered as opponents of its development. Although Iran is in the list of 10 superior countries of the world from the viewpoint of tourist attractions, the share of Iran in world tourism industry is just 0.08% [17]. Since sport tourism is a new phenomenon in Iran, it faces a lot of problems and challenges. Therefore, the aim of this research was to explore and determine the most important natural sport attractions which affect sport tourism development in Iran and also the related problems and difficulties.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this study, the research method was descriptive-survey. The sample included 127 subjects: 1) The experts of tourism section of Iran Tourism Organization (N=37), 2) The experts of top 30 traveling agencies (N=60) and 3) The experts of sport federations including mountaineering, canoeing, rowing and sailing, swimming, horse riding, biking, shooting, track and field, public sports, skiing and golf (N=30). They were selected because of their knowledge and experience about tourism and sport tourism. Since the number of experts was limited, the sample equaled the population. A researcher-made questionnaire was designed after a literature review (55 questions). Five university professors experienced in tourism and sport tourism (two sport management, two tourism and one management professors) studied and reviewed the questionnaire for the validity. Unsuitable and extra questions were corrected and reduced by these five professors. The new questionnaire contained 45 questions which included two overall categories (25 questions about natural sport attractions and 20 questions about the problems related to sport tourism). Each category had its own subcategories (7 subcategories for natural sport attractions and three subcategories for sport tourism problems). The reliability of the questionnaire was surveyed by a pilot study. The Cronbach’s Alpha for the questionnaire was 0.93. Then, the questionnaire was distributed and finally 112 questionnaires were completed. The confirmatory factor analysis and SPSS software were used to analyze the findings, to determine the most crucial natural sport attractions affecting tourism development and to find the most important difficulties in Iran sport tourism.

RESULTS

According to the experts, the order of the attractions affecting sport tourism development in Iran and their corresponding factor loadings are as follows (Table 1).

Regarding the country’s sport and tourism problems, the following order appeared: cultural problems (0.75), management problems (0.72) and infrastructural problems (0.50) (Table2).

Tables 3, 4 and 5 show the factor loading order of the internal components of the micro-scales related to the problems and obstacles of the sport tourism development in Iran from the viewpoint of the experts (Tables 3, 4 and 5).
Table 1: The order of natural sport attractions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sport Natural Attractions in IRAN</th>
<th>Factor Loading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1- Hiking and Nature tourism</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2- Beach, Water and summer sports</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3- Desert tourism</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4- Hunting and Fishing</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5- Mountaineering and caving</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6- Spa and Nature therapy</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7- Winter sports</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: The most important sport tourism problems in Iran

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sport Tourism Problems</th>
<th>Factor Loading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1- Cultural problems</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2- Management problems</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3- Infrastructural problems</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: The most important cultural problems of Iran Sport tourism

A) Cultural Problems in Iran Sport Tourism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A) Cultural Problems in Iran Sport Tourism</th>
<th>Factor Loading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1- Negative approach and false presumption of the foreign tourists in Iran</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2- Inappropriate contact with tourists in some areas</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3- Ideological bottlenecks or their non-conformity with the tourists’ culture</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4- Negative images and propaganda against Iran</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5- Unawareness of Iran tourism attractions</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6- Lack of information about tourists’ demands</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7- Lack of ICT and public relations towards tourists</td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: The most important problems of Iran sport tourism management

B) Managerial Problems in Iran Sport Tourism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B) Managerial Problems in Iran Sport Tourism</th>
<th>Factor Loading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Lack of coordination among sport tourism organizations</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Presence of overlapping organizations and lack of job description</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) The problems of investment in sport tourism section</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Lack of control and supervision over the activities of sport tourism units</td>
<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) No vision in strategy plans for sport tourism development</td>
<td>0.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Differences in policy making and lack of strategies for sport tourism</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: The most important problems of Iran Sport tourism infrastructures

C) Sport Tourism Infrastructural Problems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>C) Sport Tourism Infrastructural Problems</th>
<th>Factor Loading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1- Lack of standard facilities for sport and recreation activities</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2- Poor welfare services and facilities</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3- Shortage of dwelling places and standard hotels</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4- Various impeding laws in issuing visa and customs</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5- Mismanagement in land, air and railroad transportation systems</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6- Lack of theoretical and scientific knowledge in sport tourism in Iran</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It seems that the reasons for the higher importance or attraction of hiking and nature tourism, beach, water and summer sports and desert tourism compared with the other attractions are as follows:

These activities are popular in Iran. North and South of Iran include 2000 km beach borders. The Caspian Sea is the largest lake in the world and the summer place for most people who are interested in visiting Iran. An ideal combination of beach, mountain and forest has developed this area into the main tourism attraction of the country. The southern beach is another tourism attraction as well. Further, in recent years, the two famous islands in the Persian Gulf (i.e. Kish and Qeshm) have experienced the largest tourism investments especially in sport tourism.

Considerable variety of sport activities which may be pursued in these points has made Iran a proper place for sport tourism. Swimming, diving, boating, water skiing, surfing, beach sports, etc. in beaches, lakes and rivers and activities such as walking, jogging, biking, horse riding,
golf in the hills and mountain feet; and also camel riding
and desert tourism are just a few sport activities that are
practicable in Iran tourism attractions [16].

These attractions are less affected by the Iran’s
seasonality. Seasonal changes are indicative of the world
challenges in the management of the tourism attractions.
Seasonality is one of the most prominent features of
tourism; yet, paradoxically, it is also one of the least
understood features. It is generally accepted that tourism
seasonality can be attributed to two basic groups of
factors, natural and institutional. Natural seasonality
refers to regular temporal variations in natural phenomena,
particularly those associated with cyclical climatic
changes throughout the year, such as temperature,
precipitation, wind and daylight. Institutional factors
reflect the social norms and practices of society. These
factors are typically based on religious, cultural, ethnic
social and economic considerations, epitomized by
religious, school and industrial holidays [18, 19]. In the
case of natural seasonality, Iran is a four-season country
throughout the year and less affected by seasonality and
can attract more sport tourists [1, 17].

It is important to pay due attention to the problems,
challenges and opportunities related to seasonality and
their effects on sport tourism. Sport and tourism depend
on seasons and may interact with each other in different
ways [19]. If a country possesses varying climates, it will
most probably receive more sport tourists in all seasons
throughout the year [20, 21]. With regard to Iran four
seasonal climates, the possibility of exploiting natural
sport attractions in longer periods of the year would be
high as compared to other countries [1, 17]. This is an
important point in sport tourism development and thus it
must be duly considered. Winter sport attraction had the
lowest rank because of the following four reasons: climate
changes and reduction of snow in some years that reduce
skiing period and winter sports season. However, in
Europe and the countries in the North orbit, it snows more
and longer than Iran; as a result, there are more winter
sports attractions in those countries as compared to Iran
[22].

Another reason is the lack of data about the winter
sports tourism facilities and resources in Iran, also lack of
standard skiing areas and proper welfare facilities and lack
of transportation to access the existing skiing areas in
winter. The results showed that the main barrier in Iran
sport tourism is cultural problems; the false presumption
towards foreign tourists and inappropriate contact with
tourists in some areas are the most important cultural
problems. This negative view about tourists, in fact,
provides other problems and barriers in many cases. Such
inference has led the authorities to refrain from moving
towards developing this industry; because they fear that
they may encounter society’s public opinions. Indeed,
cultural differences have been suggested as a possible
reason why consumers and managers in different
countries make different decisions [23, 24]. Also, there is
an urgent need to establish a department to coordinate
the activities of tourism organizations and those of sport
organizations and thus to avoid wasting of capital and
resources. The main problems in the infrastructural
section included lack of sport and entertainment facilities
and structures and lack of welfare services and facilities
for tourists. There are no sufficient standard sport
facilities and equipment in the prone areas. This problem
is related directly to financial investment. Integrated
planning and master plans can help overcome many
constraints. Infrastructure requirements for the tourism
and sport tourism sector should be properly considered
in the country’s infrastructure development plans.
Soleymanzad (2010) suggested that the problems related
to the infrastructure may be solved through attracting
the private section investment. In order to attract private
sector participation, government should address issues
such as creating a competitive business environment,
providing investment incentives, developing an adequate
legislative framework and strengthening governmental
capacity to negotiate [17]. The problems in the area of
sport tourism, such as cultural, managerial and
infrastructural, should be prioritized by tourism
administrators and authorities and sustainable solutions
should be sought. In order to achieve the favorite level
predicted in next 20 years of Perspective Plan for tourism
of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in which the country
should attract 20 million tourists and earn 25 billion dollars
income, we all are obliged to pay due attention to all
capabilities of the country in this regard.

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