

Analysis of Ecotourism Market in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari Province, IRAN

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Abstract

Due to people's searching for a unique new destination to pass their holidays and release for a while, the province of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari in Iran is one of the top touristic destinations in which a combination of huge natural beauty and rich history due to the nomadic lifestyle has made this province as a potential region for eco-tourism development, however this province has not a high volume of tourism flow at this time. To remove this shortcoming of tourism market in the area, in this study a baseline analysis of current situation of tourism industry has been done through in-depth interviews with the main stakeholders in eco-tourism market in the province. The potentials of tourism market in the area have been reviewed through SWOT analysis technique. The results will provide the tourism decision makers the main strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. The main strengths and opportunities of the province is related to environmental and cultural issues due to its unique vast natural environment and nomadic lifestyle, however the main weaknesses and threats of the tourism destination is related to political and technological issues due to global sanctions of Iran and lack of sufficient infrastructure for eco-tourism.

Keywords; Natural Potential, Cultural Potentials, SWOT analysis, Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari

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Introduction

In the present industrial world in Iran in which people are busy with stressful jobs, their need to relaxation and traveling to the natural environment has increased the attention to the phenomenon called 'Eco-tourism'. Due to their searching for a destination to meet their spiritual requirements Iran as most countries in the Middle East has a lot of natural competitive advantages in the global tourism industry. However, the potentials of this competitive advantage has not been reached. Few foreign and even not many domestic travelers are aware of such vast potentials in Iran. Iran's true natural appeals have never been introduced properly to the world's people. The publicity is insufficient and even almost absent. Specifically, in this regard there is a unique destination in Iran, the province of Chaharmahal & Bakhtiari (Ch.M.B.), for ecotourists with both natural and cultural attractions.

The province of Ch.M.B with 16533 km² extent and the population of 803687 persons (The General Housing and Population Census, 2001) is located in the south-west of Iran and in the centre of Zagros Mountains range.

The geographical situation of Ch.M.B, its appropriate climate, its mountains full of snow on the summits even in summers, the bushy forests as well as juicy Karun and Zayanderud rivers as long as the national and international wetlands has made this province a unique attraction for both domestic and foreign tourists. Mountaineering, hunting, skiing and different kinds of water sports in this province besides its pleasant weather has made it different from other provinces in Iran to be a market for the ecotourism activities. In addition, existence of vast pastures and plains with the variety of plant and zodiac covering has astonished the foreign researchers and botanists in this region.

On the other hand, as the main communities inhabited in this province are Bakhtiari tribe (98%), with an old rich history and mostly typical nomadic lifestyle, this region has become a very interesting cultural nomadic attraction for tourists and foreign anthropologists.

Moreover, by analysing incremental cost in different economic sectors in this province, it is represented that this value in agriculture has been 24.1%, in industry 23.6% and in service 52.3% of GNP (Statistical Year Book,2004). High amount in the service sector represent the

potential of services and equipment for the tourism segment in this region.

Despite all the attractions for different types of tourists there is a low volume of the tourism demand to this region. Unfortunately, this region has been kept deprived, isolated and unknown so far. This has been happened as a result of lack of enough attention and lack of a strategic policy toward the tourism industry. Therefore, considering the high potentials in this area, development the tourism industry in this region in order to its identity enhancement seems necessary.

It is obvious that without any knowledge of the existent economical, ecological and human potentials and pitfalls in each region, it will be impossible to make a development plan for the future of that region. In fact, being aware of the status quo in the region will provide this opportunity for the researchers to distinguish the development ways on the basis of the existent potentials in the region.

In this study the basic situation in the region of Ch.M.B. is identified via SWOT technique in order to provide scenarios for the future development of ecotourism with an appropriate return to both the local community benefits and long-term conservation of the resources. The study will be able to provide an opportunity for policy makers to initiate further large-scale strategies all over the other similar destinations in Iran.

Why ecotourism?

The primary subject of this research is to estimate potential for the development of ecotourism in Ch.M.B. This subject has to be approached with regard to a specific character of the studied place which is its natural attractions. According to the local literature and based on the interviews done in this research, it was found out that the presence of valuable natural habitats as long as the cultural attractions due to the nomadic lifestyle in this province determines a character of the ecotourism that can develop in this region. The research hypothesis is the first aim of the travellers to this area which could be experiencing destinations that are nature oriented. Therefore, they form nature-based tourists but being aware of the rich local traditions and nomads' population in the area will change them to eco-tourists.

- Ecotourism exploration

Recreational activities such as hiking, bird watching, climbing, canoeing, boating, fishing, etc. are all based on natural environment and have been popular for centuries. Therefore, many of the activities

that can now be included under the label 'ecotourism' have existed long before the term itself was invented. Recently, Oram (2001; in: Filipiak, 2003) noticed that 'the rise of the term 'ecotourism' has been relatively rapid. In 1980, the term did not even exist and now, 20 years later, there is a specialized Encyclopaedia¹ that represents thinking of many different authors from around the world on this topic. However, this worldwide perspective is characterised by a significant inconsistency not only with regard to the term 'ecotourism' but also in understanding what it is, what it should be and how it is supposed to work.'

Numerous authors have made an attempt to define the phenomenon of 'ecotourism' and tried to distinguish it from some other forms of the tourism. Reviewing all these would be rather complicated, laborious and repetitive. To do a general overview on a wide scope of perspectives, approaches and definitions of the ecotourism it is preferred to refer to the definition and elements of this concept by Wearing & Neil (1999). This is obviously a very complex notion of the ecotourism and numerous authors have already stated that.

According to Wearing & Neil (1999), the ecotourism includes four fundamental elements; Firstly, movement or travel from one location to another. This travel should be restricted to relatively undisturbed or protected natural areas since the ecotourism focus is basically on experiencing natural areas. As mentioned before the main aim of travelling to Ch.M.B. is sightseeing and enjoying natural attractions in this region.

The second component which must be included in a definition of the ecotourism is that ecotourism is a nature-based experience. Activities such as business travel, travel to cities, conventional beach holidays and sporting holidays cannot be considered as ecotourism as their focus is not primarily on an experience based on the natural environment. However, this does not mean that ecotourism is exclusively limited to undisturbed natural areas. Ecotourism can rejuvenate nature as well. Rehabilitating degraded areas as a result of human activity can be classified as the ecotourism. This industry can definitely contribute to the environment and be a direct benefit to the local community. Wearing & Neil (1999) believe the ethical impetus in volunteering services to the environment is one of the ecotourism

¹ CAB International, 2001. *The Encyclopaedia of Ecotourism* (ed. D.B. Weaver)

benefits. For the host community, the ecotourism may also stimulate renewed appreciation of the unique value of their own cultural traditions as a result of the interest shown by tourists (Kutay, 1989). In this study, the main focus is on the tourists who are concerned about the rich nature and culture existent in the area as well.

Considering these two categories, Swanson (1992) defined the ecotourism as; 'Travel, often to developing countries, to relatively undisturbed natural areas for study, enjoyment or volunteer assistance that concerns itself with the flora, fauna, geology and ecosystems of an area as well as the people who live nearby, their needs, their culture and the relationship to the land'

Thirdly, ecotourism is conservation-led. That is because ecotourism as a segment of the tourism industry has emerged as a result of 'increasing global concern for disappearing cultures and ecosystems' (Kutay, 1990). Therefore, the main goal of the ecotourism is taking small groups of people to natural areas with minimum impact on the physical, social and cultural environments. This can be fostered, as Swanson (1992) believes, by increasing the awareness of people in the importance of the natural and cultural resources. The reason that the notion of conservation must be included in a definition of the ecotourism is that ecotourists are more concerned with environmental impacts than mass tourists and /or nature-based tourists. The meaning of tourists in the study of Ch.M.B. is the visitors with awareness on the nature and culture conservation.

The fourth idea is that ecotourism has an educative role. As Eagles (1992) believes the ecotourists generally express a strong desire to learn about nature and culture on their trips. Ecotourism dependency on nature and culture has motivated the ecotourists to satisfy their educational needs through interactions with the natural and cultural environment. Also Eagle (1992) believes that this kind of tourists want to learn the maximum in the time available. So, they are expected to be looking for both financial and time efficiencies in their travel. The willingness of ecotourists to try new foods and to be receptive to new experiences can be good for the local economy. They would like to reinforce their learning feature with photographs that will be taken home. This is kind of tourists which Page & Dowling (2002) refers as 'hard core' and 'dedicated' tourists. In this study, the researcher provides scenarios in which the tourists in this region express a desire to learn about the natural and cultural features; to

know about the nomadic lifestyle more; to search the ways to be more efficient for local community financially during their trip.

By this definition, Wearing & Neil (1999) drew the certain lines in order to make a distinction with nature-based tourism. Such lines were also clearly laid by the World Tourism Organization (WTO). Therefore, ecotourists are assumed to have above specific preferences which are applied in conducting the tourism in Ch.M.B. through this study.

- Eco-tourism marketing and SWOT analysis

The best practice for identification of the natural environment and its ecology and understanding the social activities and economic impacts on the facilities and community values in one region will be achieved, as Wearing & Neil (1999) believe, through a marketing audit and an analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT). In other words, the SWOT is an effective way to analyse the current status of the tourism marketing and project the future threats and opportunities to impact the tourism suppliers and managers as well as the tourists. A marketing audit of relevant internal and external environments that potentially affect this business is the first step toward making marketing efforts sustainable for the tourism organizations.

Internal analysis has the objective to identify and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each functional component of tourist destination. The main objective of the external analysis, on the other hand, is to identify and evaluate the opportunities and threats that are present in the development of tourism. The analysis of both the internal and external issues consists of a detailed exam of the situation of the environmental, economic, social, political and technological aspects and their relations with the development of the tourism activity.

The SWOT analysis in this study will allow for an overview of the main strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in the province of Ch.M.B. The strengths which are the attractions and facilities of the destination that match up to the consumers' requirements; the weaknesses which may often be associated with the destination's facilities; the opportunities which may arise from the elements under the control of the destination's advantages and finally the threats which may arise from both internal and external factors will be reviewed in the study. This will lead to provide scenarios'

development for the future of the region. Since, according to Van der Heijden (1996) the SWOT analysis is a way of recording important features of the group/region situation and provides a database for the scenario exercise.

Materials and Methods

In addition to using secondary data and reviewing literature in both national and local documents, the primary technique for data collection was in-depth semi-structure interviews which were conducted through the snowball sampling in order to identify the most important stakeholders concerning the tourism industry in the area. This method was preceded by a reconnaissance trip to map out the area, a general assessment to determine the first organizations and persons who are already involved in the area. The involved sampled stakeholders in the tourism sector are including; the tourism business owners (tour operators and travel agencies, hotel owners), academicians, the tourism planners and professionals of the public sector, third sector representatives (associations, NGOs), tourists and local people in the province of Ch.M.B as well as the local ecotourism authorities. A total number of 22 open interviews selected from the mentioned stakeholders out of which 12 interviews were carried out in Ch.M.B. The main questions asked in the interviews were regarding the main strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the tourism and ecotourism industry in the area.

Results

- Swot Analysis

As far as it concerns the main **strengths** of Ch.M.B, it refers to its environmental elements. As 5 of local people and 2 NGOs have claimed in their interviews and the public sector has confirmed, the vast natural potential of the area with the pleasant climate has attracted a lot of people to visit different parts of the area. The beautiful rivers as long as the mountainous potentials can offer a kind of peace and tranquillity for the visitors who are tired of routine works and are going to get rid of stress. In short, reputation for this province as “the roof of Iran” and/or “beautiful asleep of Zagros” (Tourism Guide of Ch.M.B,2004) can attract interested visitors in order to experience the unspoiled environment that this place offers.

On the other hand, the main socio-cultural strength of this region is the rich tradition of the local community and their tribal lifestyle according to 7 locals’ interviews and 3 NGOs and public sector. This

area presents a unique nomadic lifestyle and it is characterized by the locals and nomads. It is regarded as a living museum where cultural elements and values that in other places disappeared during the time, in this province are a part of everyday life. In addition, the residents' hospitality contributes to the tourism attraction to the area. This will cause the visitors to come back again to this region or leave the area with a good memory of their journey. They will never forget Bakhtiyaris' kindness and social behavior, local food, dance, clothes and handicrafts.

The main **weakness**, on the other hand, refers to the policy situation in the tourism field generally and ecotourism industry specifically. As the private sector including 3 tour operators have been interviewed in this research, lack of professionalism in the tourism management is interpreted as lack of a good partnership between the stakeholders, lack of advertisement of the place in and out of the country and lack of knowledge and skills on ecotourism. It seems that the greatest weakness refers to lack of a good partnership among the stakeholders as the interviewees believe. That was the thing that all the 6 interviewed government authorities informed during their interviews. It was mentioned that the sectoral view but not an over- sectoral view among the stakeholders leads to an ongoing suspicious relationship that does not leave the chances for the relationships based on trust, and therefore it does not allow providing such a good cooperation. Lack of advertisement is also perceived as the other element of professionalism. The best advertisement of this province done so far inside Iran has been from national media, different articles in newspapers and magazines as well as a few dissertations presenting the uniqueness of Ch.M.B. There has never been an advertisement in a global scale and even no specific information in the national and local websites. The third aspect of the weakness of professionalism is lack of knowledge on ecotourism field. Rude behaviour of some hotel and restaurant personnel, no ability of any foreign language among the tour guides and tour authorities, different prices for the same product are the main elements that indicate this shortcoming.

Cultural change and imitation of urban culture among tribes is going to lead to the extinction of nomads' population in the near future and regards as socio-cultural weakness. 4 local people believed that. Moreover, 2 public sector stakeholders believed that there are also some other reasons for nomads' extinction in this region. Lack of clear

policy for nomads' affairs and high rate of illiteracy among them has led to lack of local authorities' attention to them. This will lead to the nomads' willingness to be settled permanently. Therefore, generally nomads' disappearing will lead to the eco-tourists' low interest to this region.

As important weakness in the tourism infrastructures, is the absence of the tourism facilities in such vast area. The results of 5 interviews with national tourists state that what makes it worse is lack of the least equipment for the eco-tourists in far touristic destinations (e.g. the village of Sare Agha Seyyed). In addition, the only international flight of province's airport to Kuwait has caused the low attention of especially western motivated eco-tourists to this unique area. Due to the interests of the domestic visitors, lack of railroad is also another infrastructure weakness for the region. ICT deficiency and lack of advertising websites to introduce the existent potentials in the province is added to these weaknesses.

Based on the interviews with all the 22 stakeholders in eco-tourism market, all the internal issues are summarised in table 1:

Table 1: Analysis of the internal issues

Analysis Factor	Strengths	Weaknesses
Political		Lack of professionalism (partnership/advertisement/ knowledge)
Socio-cultural	-Nomads' immigration, folklore, values - Well known hospitable region in Iran	Nomads' extinction
Technological/ Infrastructure		Undevelopment of the vast potential of the area for tourists; infrastructure and tourist facilities, accessibility, I.C.T....
Environmental	Vast natural potential of the region	

Referring to socio-cultural **opportunities**, different potentials for alternative forms of the tourism in this region should be mentioned. The results of interviews with tourism professionals including 3 academicians, 3 researchers and 2 tourism authorities have shown that geology potentials due to its abundant faults and hills could attract many 'geo-tourists' to visit these sites and/or do research in a form of 'scientific tourists'. The areas with high potentials for agriculture and rural life as a result of the climate variation and rich biodiversity could be an opportunity for 'agro-tourism' and/or 'rural tourism' growth. This kind of tourism can be seen in the surrounding of Karun River and Bazoft nature. There are also many areas with the potentials for

‘adventure tourists’ who would like to do sport activities or have new exciting natural experiences. This kind of tourism can be developed in Zayanderood River and Kuhrang tunnel. Moreover, ‘nomads’ tourism’ is another potential tourism market in this nomadic province. This kind of tourism has been attracted a large motivation of the tourism decision makers in Iran at present. In addition, a special attention to ‘nature- based tourism’ is growing among the people facing a lot of living problems and having stress in their daily life.

2 interviews with tour operators have stated that the geographical situation of this province between two highly demand tourist provinces like Esfahan and Khuzestan can be mentioned as an environmental and spatial opportunity in the province of Ch.M.B.

Finally, as far as it concerns the **threats** that occur for the tourism development in the area, the first and the main one is the political threat which hampers using the area’s opportunities to overcome the weaknesses. This was the main claim of all 5 interviewed governmental authorities with the researcher. The recent political climate due to the issue of U.S.A sanctions is threatening the tourist arrivals even from the Muslim countries. Furthermore, the competition that exists between Iran and other destinations with the similar situations is another threat for the ecotourism development in this country and specifically in CH.M.B. This difference can be seen clearly in the countries like Turkey, Dubai, Armenia and Georgia which shows these countries’ more well-managed tourism than Iran. This is an important threat for this country as people come to these neighbour countries without passing from Iran.

However, the main point of view of 4 international tourists in the region was with respect to the socio-cultural threats, lack of enough religious security for foreign passengers in terms of their code of dress (hijab), eating and drinking, night life and fun style which is another important issue leading to lack of large volume of tourists and eco-tourists to this area.

The 2 interviewed university professors in tourism field said that in their interviews; “the environmental threat for the eco-tourism arrivals to this area is the existence of previous earthquakes, avalanche, mountain falling (landslip), seasonal flood water and other natural disasters”.

Table 2 is the summarized version of all the 22 interviews with tourism stakeholders in regard to external issues of eco-tourism market in Ch.M.B.

Table 2: Analysis of the external issues

Analysis Factor	Opportunities	Threats
Political		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The political climate due to sanctions - Competition between Iran and its neighbour countries
Socio-cultural	Potentials for different types of tourism; geo-tourism, agro tourism, scientific tourism, adventure tourism, nomads' tourism, ecotourism	Religious boundaries to attract international tourists
Environmental	Geographical position of the region between Esfahan and Khuzestan	Natural disasters

Discussion and Conclusion

This study provides analysis of the current situation of eco-tourism market in the region adopting a qualitative approach through interviewing with involved stakeholders.

The main findings in the current situation assessment were summarized in a SWOT analysis of the area. According to the stakeholders' views, the main **strength** of the region is its specific nature and culture. Combination of the natural beauty and unspoiled environment with the unique nomadic attractions in the province has attracted a lot of interested eco-tourists to the area. However, there are fundamental **weaknesses** in the region which can block the fast development process of this industry. 15 of 22 interviewed stakeholders have mentioned that the main weaknesses are related to the tourism policy, planning, decision making and management in the national and regional levels. Those are; lack of professionalism, infrastructure deficiency as well as nomads' extinction. On the other hand, it was recognized that external **opportunities** may contribute to the existent strengths in order to remove the weaknesses. As the 15 interviewers believe, the main opportunities are; the geographical position of the province between two high-demanded tourism destinations, a growing demand for different types of tourism. The main external **threats** were the political climate due to the issues of sanctions and also religious boundaries which are threatening the western tourism arrivals to the region. That was the results extracted from 5 interviews with governmental authorities.

Now, the main tourism authorities can plan for the future of this region based on the current situation of eco-tourism industry in CH.M.B. According to Tribe (1997), since the tourism as a multi-disciplinary phenomenon is the most appropriate approach in the future scenarios for the development of one area, therefore the tourism authorities have to consider a combination of all the four dimensions of SWOT in the area. Therefore, the planners can implement the most feasible action plans in future paying attention to the whole aspects of the eco-tourism market in this area.

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