

Local People Perceptions toward Social, Economic and Environmental Impacts of Tourism in Kermanshah (Iran)

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Abstract

This study examines the locals' people perceptions about social, economic and environmental impacts of tourism in the cultural heritage destination of Kermanshah in Iran. The study focused on residents in the vicinity of popular heritage attractions in the region. According to the survey, a high percentage of the respondents recognizes and appreciates the positive impacts of tourism towards the local people. Among the impacts, the positive social impacts of tourism were most favorably perceived by the local community. The findings of semi structured interviews with residents supported the survey results.

Keywords: Local community, Tourism impacts, Perceptions, Iran

1. Introduction

Local communities are known as the key stakeholders in leisure and tourism management. Tourism has to be managed with the help and interest of all stakeholders in a given territory with a focus on local inhabitants (Guyer and Pollard, 1997). Considering the importance of residents who have a key role in tourism, many studies have been carried out by researchers in developed countries about local community perceptions toward tourism. Among them are Lankford and Howard (1994), Hernandez et al., (1996), Schroeder (1996), Ryan and Montgomery (1994), Nicholas (2007), Williams and Lawson (2001). But unfortunately, hardly any work has been devoted to examine residents' attitudes on tourism development in developing countries (Lepp, 2007). This study will focus on Kermanshah province of Iran, recognized as one of the main tourism destinations in the region. The purpose of this study is to identify the perceptions of residents on the tourism impacts in the vicinity of two main tourism destinations of Kermanshah.

2. Setting

Iran is the eighteenth largest country in the world. It is located in southwestern Asia and covers a land area of more than 1,648,000 sq. km. It has a population of over seventy million (SCI, 2006). Throughout history, Iran due to its geostrategic position and being located in central Eurasia has always been important. It also occupies an important place in the world economy due to its large reserves of petroleum and natural gases. The country possesses one of the world's oldest major civilizations, with historical and urban settlements dating back to 5000 BC. It is rich with the history of humanity and has numerous archaeological sites (Zendehtdel, 2001). Iran has ten historical sites listed under the World Heritage list, with more than 60 other sites in the process of being awarded

the prestigious status (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2006). Heritage attractions are the catalyst for tourism development as it would increase the appeal and give a significant competitive advantage on the destination. Realizing the huge potentials of tourism, the Iranian government intends to develop tourism as the key sector for boosting the economy as emphasized in the country's national economic and social development plan.

Kermanshah province is in the western of Iran, covers an area of 24,434.25 sq km which is approximately 1.5 percent of Iran's total land area. Kermanshah has a moderate mountainous climate and has been the home of man since the Paleolithic and Neolithic age. Based on the historical monuments found in Kermanshah, evidence suggests that it was very glorious in the Achaemenid and Sassanian eras (more than 1400 years ago), and was closely associated with the kings of those times. In the Islamic period, especially in the Safavid period (about 400 years ago), it continued to grow and made great progress.

From the Paleolithic time to the present, this district has been the home of many people (Ahmadi, 1989). Presently, the Kurds, Lurs, Arabs, and Turks are people living in this province. In addition to the inhabitants of the town and villages, there are nomadic societies throughout the province. The predominant language is Farsi, but other languages are also spoken. Today, the popular heritage sites of the province are TaqueBostan and Bisotun.

TaqueBostan is a series of large rock relief from the era of Sassanid Empire of Persia, the Iranian dynasty which ruled western Asia from 226 to 650 AD. The site is located in the capital city of Kermanshah and is only 5 km from the city of Kermanshah. The population of the city is about 900 000 (SCI, 2009). The other site, Bisotun is located in the small city of Bistoon, 30 kilometers from the city of Kermanshah. There are many historical monuments in the Bisotun complex. Its primary monument is the Bisotun Inscription carved in 521 BC during the era of Darius the Great when he conquered the Persian throne. The inscription is written in 3 languages: Elamite, Babylonian and Old Persian (UNESCO, 2006). Both TaqueBostan and Bisotun are protected under the National Cultural and Natural Heritage Department of Iran while Bisotun was registered in UNESCO List of World Heritage Sites on 13 July 2006 (UNESCO, 2006). Bisotun is inhabited by only 2500 people during fall and winter (SCI, 2006); however, the number escalates in spring and summer because of the more desirable weather and more job opportunities especially in the tourism sector. In the past, Bisotun was a village with only 100 houses, being a crossroad for traders from other regions. It had about 25 shops comprising butchery, bakery and grocery stores. After the Islamic revolution of Iran (1978), the population increased gradually with the emergence of more shops and houses in the region. In 1996 a decision was made by the government to change its status, from a village to that of a city. Today, they are more than 500 families living in the city of Bisotun. The economic livelihood of the population is dependent on agriculture, tourism and manufacturing.

Taking into consideration the current global tourism trends and the unique heritage attraction which the province possesses, the tourism sector has been identified by government as the major economic driver. The first government body responsible for tourism in Iran was set up in 1935 and if literally translated is known as 'attracting tourists and advertisement'. Since then, the responsible body has gone through many changes, ranging from its name, structure, objectives and policies (Farzin, 2007). However, the tourism industry of Iran was badly affected by political crises and war, such as the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1978 and the imposed Iran-Iraq war. After the Islamic revolution, tourism was again taken into account in the first development plan of the country (Safaei, 2007).

Presently, the Iran Cultural Heritage, Handicraft and Tourism organization is the government body responsible to establish, protect, preserve and restore the country's historical-cultural legacy as well as promote and develop tourism. The main objectives of tourism development in the five year (2004-2009) socio cultural and economic development plan of Iran are to introduce the culture and civilization of Islamic Iran, stimulating local commerce and industries and project a favorable worldwide image of the country (Farzin, 2007).

The TaqueBostan and Bisotun sites are visited by many domestic and international tourists every year. It takes only about half an hour by car to reach Bisotun from Kermanshah. Tourists will visit both the destinations during their stay in Kermanshah. Their main motivation is to enjoy the unique heritage and natural beauty of the areas. The typical visit is short and seasonal. Peak seasons for domestic tourists are usually during the NowRuz (Iranian New Year) period, spring, summer, and other public holidays. International tourists visit the area throughout the year and their visits are mainly organized by tour operators. During the peak tourist season, these destinations may host more than 25 000 visitors per day.

3. Literature review

Heritage is regarded as one of the more significant and fastest growing components of tourism in many developed economies (Alzue, O'Leary, & Morrison, 1998; Herbert, 2001). It is becoming increasingly popular in the world, and deemed important for tourism development. Defined as a form of special interest tourism, it caters to the desire of tourists interested to learn about the history and lifestyle of a destination (Craik, 1997; Williams, 1998). It has long been recognized that the ideological and institutional context of heritage tourism is fundamentally different from that of general tourism (Garrod&Fyall, 2000). The relationship between heritage and tourism is frequently characterized by contradictions and conflicts (Nuryanti 1996). Heritage has its special values and concerns. Although, heritage tourism provides opportunities for many destinations, it may also represent different kinds of threats for residents. In order to minimize these threats, there is a need for dialogue, cooperation, and collaboration among the various stakeholders involved (Aas et al., 2005). The stakeholders' involvement must be included in any sustainable tourism plan in order to reduce conflict (Byrd 2007).

The concept of stakeholders is becoming increasingly important in heritage management and planning, especially the community as owner and custodian of the heritage (Nuryanti, 1996; Peters, 1999; Serageldin, 1986). The local community is often recognized as the main stakeholder in heritage tourism. Local community residing in the vicinity of heritage areas is increasingly being afforded the opportunity to make decisions over their own resources and livelihood infrastructure (Cochrane and Tapper, 2006). But the level of resident participation in tourism management varies in different countries. Compared with many developed countries, local residents in many third world countries do not have the opportunities to share in the decision making process of tourism development. Mowforth and Munt (2003) have discussed and provided vast evidence on how local communities in third world countries have been exploited. Little control is given to them to steer the direction of tourism development in their region. Their views are rarely heard and opportunities to nurture their low budget entrepreneurial tourism businesses are frequently exploited by the bigger external investors.

A larger proportion of the local population should benefit from tourism, rather than merely bearing the burden of its costs. Moreover, the industry ought not to forget that these destinations are essentially these communities (Blank, 1989). In many third world countries, a more appropriately planned tourism development process is needed which would spread both costs and benefits more equitably as well as be more sensitive to the social and cultural impacts. This would not only reduce the need for local residents to trade off their quality of life and social costs for economic growth, but would also contribute to having a more broadly based positive attitude towards tourism (Mansfield 1992). Many analysts call for greater local participation in the third world tourism sector to permit a more equitable distribution of costs and benefits (Blank 1989).

4. Methodology

In this research the perceptions of Kermanshah local communities toward social, economic and environmental impacts of tourism, are presented. A questionnaire was designed for this research and various related literature (Lankford & Howard, 1994; Williams and Lawson, 2001; Milman&Pizam, 1988; Choi and Sirakaya 2005; Andriottis, 2002) were used to develop the items of the questionnaire. Most of the questions were based on a 5 point Likert scale, ranging from 1: 'strongly disagree' to 5: 'strongly agree' and the questionnaire was pilot tested to have its content validated by several tourism scholars in Iran. Using the Cronbach's alpha method, the validity of statements about tourism impacts was tested. Descriptive analysis and t-test were employed as statistical techniques in this study.

Means and standard deviations are the descriptive statistics used in discussing the distribution of responses gathered in the research. To assess the normality of the distribution of the data, the skewness and kurtosis of each variable were also examined. In this study, the skewness and kurtosis were 0.239 and -0.201 respectively, indicating that the distribution is relatively symmetric. T-test was used to determine whether there were significant differences between respondents' group mean totals and item mean scores. The questionnaires were distributed among the local people, living or working in the vicinity of these two heritage destinations of Taqebostan and Bisotun. A total of 300 usable and completed questionnaires were collected and analyzed. Besides the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews with residents were also conducted. Interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed while informal conversations and observations were compiled as field notes by the researcher. A total of 90 persons were interviewed: 41 from Bisotun and 49 respondents were from Taqebostan. The data from the interviews were interpreted qualitatively.

5. Results

From 300 respondents, 53% was from Taqebostan and 47% from Bisotun. Female respondents constituted 27% of the sample while 73% were male participants, with an average age of 43 years (68% are less than 35 years

old). 44% of them are married, while 51% are still single. With reference to their educational level, 38% has secondary school qualification as the highest level of education attained, while 26% of the respondents have diplomas and 8% have a degree or a higher degree. The average length of residency was 31 years and 61% have been living in the area for 25 years and more. With regard to employment, 41% of the respondents stated that they have jobs related to tourism. 56% of the respondents reported a monthly household income for the year 2009 as Iranian Rials (RIS) 2000000-4000000 (about US\$216- US\$432) while 29% of respondents indicated a monthly income of under (RIS) 2000000 (about US \$216).

Concerning the community attitudes toward tourism in the area, items about social, economic and environmental impacts of tourism were studied. Descriptive statistics revealed that respondents mostly agreed the positive statements of related impacts. Table 1 shows community perceptions toward the perceived social, economic and environmental impacts of tourism. Some of the social impacts, which are most favored by residents, are as follows: "increase in the recreational facilities" (4.12), and "meeting tourists is a valuable experience" (4.08). Findings about environmental impacts show that the most favored item by residents is "tourism provides an incentive for restoration of heritage" (4.18). The negative aspects of environmental impacts are "crowded public places" (4.34) and "traffic congestion, noise and air pollution" (3.22). Based on the mean measures of economic impact items, the most favored items are "tourism leads to more investment and spending" (4.02) and "tourism creates job opportunities" (3.62). The negative economic impact item is "prices are increasing because of tourism" (3.64). However the lowest mean score of the economic impact is "tourism gives economic benefit to local people" (2.36). T-test statistical analysis was used to establish whether there is a significant difference between the respondents in Bisotun and Taqebostan. The result of the test shows that there are no significant differences of social, economic and environmental impacts of tourism between the two districts.

Interviews with local communities revealed that they value and appreciate the positive economic impacts of tourism. However, most of the respondents said they expected more economic benefits of tourism especially in terms of employment. Many of them believed that tourism have created more jobs for outsiders, benefiting only a small group of people in the province, rather than local people from Kermanshah. However, the majority of these respondents are in favor of tourism development in the area. On the environmental impacts of tourism, several respondents from Bisotun also believe that there will be negative impacts on the community's environment. For example, tourists would add to the traffic congestion in Bisotun during the tourist season but the streets around Taqebostan are wider and also several residents who work in the shops are accustomed to traffic and noise in the area.

With regards to social impact of tourism most of the respondents have positive perceptions and said that they are happy to meet tourists especially from other countries in Kermanshah. However, some respondents in Bisotun are concerned about the changes that tourism would cause such as affecting their traditional culture and the influence on the younger generations. Findings from the interviews support the results from the questionnaire survey whereby respondents from both Bisotun and Taqebostan perceived that tourism does have positive impact on their communities and they agree in principle that tourism can lead to the development of their economy in the region.

6. Conclusion

The residents' attitudes about social, economic and environmental impacts of tourism in Kermanshah have been studied in this research. Results showed that respondents perceived social impacts of tourism favorably, followed by environmental impacts and economic impacts. Residents believed that tourism has not yet created enough economic benefits for local people, but they agreed that tourism has provided job opportunities and can help to trigger the economy in the region. They have high hopes and positive outlook of developing tourism in Kermanshah.

The social impacts of tourism were evaluated positively by the residents. They are eager to meet tourists and show their ancient heritage, but some residents have concerns about undesirable effects or changes which tourism may cause on their culture. With regards to the environmental impacts, they believe that tourism would provide an incentive for the restoration of their heritage. However, crowded public places, traffic congestion and noise were found to be the negative aspects of these tourism impacts. From the semi-structured interviews, many similarities have been found in the two destinations with regards to their perceptions toward tourism in the two destinations and findings from t-test analysis indicated that differences were not significant.

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Table 1. Community perceptions toward tourism impacts

Tourism Impacts	Mean	Std.D
Economic impacts	3.08	2.76
Tourism leads to more investment and spending	4.02	0.93
Our standard of living is increasing considerably by tourism	3.04	1.12
Prices are increasing because of tourism	3.64	1.20
Tourism creates job opportunities	3.62	1.10
Tourism gives economic benefit to local people	2.36	1.22
Social impacts	3.44	2.22
Meeting tourists is a valuable experience	4.08	0.68
Tourism had led to increase in the recreational facilities	4.12	0.72
Tourism has an undesirable effect on our way of life	2.90	1.11
Tourism causes changes in our traditional culture	2.66	0.83
Tourism causes a lower quality of life for local residents	3.42	1.22
Environmental impacts	2.72	2.62
Tourism provides an incentive for restoration of heritage	4.18	0.90
Public facilities are kept at a better standard	3.02	1.18
Tourism causes Crowded public places	4.34	0.67
Traffic congestion, air pollution and noise increase by tourism	3.22	1.24
Tourism destroys the natural environment	2.02	0.86