Typology of the ecotourism development approach and an evaluation from the sustainability view: The case of Mazandaran Province, Iran

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ABSTRACT

This paper identifies the ecotourism development approach in the Mazandaran Province of northern Iran. It also evaluates the sustainability of this approach from local people's perspectives. Thirty indicators were developed for the typology of the approach and the respondents were key figures in the province's tourism sector. To evaluate the sustainability of this approach, 31 indicators were established, and based on cluster sampling and Cochran's method, 600 questionnaires were completed in 6 target cities in the Mazandaran Province. The study's findings show that ecotourism development in this region is based on a 'hybrid approach' (the combination of boosterism and economic factors), which have led to an unequal power interrelationships and interactions between the natural environment and human, and host and guest. Evaluating the sustainability of ecotourism, from local people's perspectives, has revealed that ecotourism in the Mazandaran province has failed to be sustainable.

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1. Introduction

The advent and increasing use of modern transportation, communication technologies and extensive socio-economic transformation (such as rapid growth of urbanization, dominance of capitalism ideology and increased income) has led to the growth of tourism since the 1960, and it is widely considered as a potential driving force for economic development and sustaining people's livelihood (Balkaran & Maharaj, 2014; WTTC, 2014). Thus, during the 1960s and 1970s, the relative success of the pioneer countries in the tourism industry, especially the economic aspect, fascinated the global south's politicians and planners. They mainly focused on the economic dimensions, regardless of the socio-environmental impact. This single-aspect and growth-based approach was nothing but unequal distribution of income; the return of economic benefits to multinational companies; deforestation; extinction of flora and fauna species; soil erosion; increased pollutions; and the socio-cultural decline of local people (Getz, 1987; Mowforth & Munt, 2008; Weaver, 1998). Since the 1980s, exacerbation of these problems and the emergence of environmental movements has led to alternative approaches such as "defensive tourism", "green tourism", "sustainable tourism", "nature-based tourism", "soft tourism", "scientific tourism" and "ecotourism" (Wearing & Neil, 2008) which calls for

social and environmental goals, alongside economic growth. In the last few decades, "eco/ecological tourism", as a new form of tourism, and the "mass tourism" antithesis, is recognized widely by politicians and planners as a potential efficient tool to improve the livelihood of local people and support the environment (Brooks, Franzen, Holmes, Grote, & Borgerhoff, 2006; Buckley, 2003; Honey, 2002; Kiper, 2013; Weaver, 2001a, 2001b). In other words, ecotourism is an alternative approach and aims to protect natural resources, especially biological diversity; promote the sustainable use of resources; the creation of ecological experience and environmental awareness for tourists and at the same time, protect and respect the natural and cultural heritage of destinations, benefit the local communities and put them at the center of development and planning processes (Bansal & Kumar, 2011; Fennell, 1999; Tewodros, 2010).

In developing countries the realization of this form of tourism, that has various roots, principles and stockholders, is faced with difficulties and complexities due to poor management; limited institutional capacity; insufficient funding; inefficient regulation system; limited knowledge; high rates of poverty and unemployment. In addition, true ecotourism requires the establishment of meaningful, sustainable and fair relationships between indigenous people and tourists. Planners and policy makers must take into account all fundamental principles of ecotourism in planning, development, operating and marketing. Failure to meet extensive requirements and the adoption of inappropriate approaches along with misunderstanding the ecotourism concept, particularly in developing countries, has not improved the wellbeing of local people but has turned into the primary source of economic

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inequality, social conflicts and ecological unsustainability (Ashley & Roe, 1998; Chamberlain, 2000; McLaren, 1998; Neth, 2008; Nyaupane & Thapa, 2004). In the last few decades the Mazandaran Province has aggressively pursued the promotion of ecotourism as the centerpiece of its development strategy. This province, characterized by climatic and environmental diversity, along with unique natural and cultural attractions, is one of the main tourist destinations in Iran. Undoubtedly, the success of such measures requires profound understanding of ecotourism and the adaptation of a sustainable and equitable planning and development approach. The first step towards this critical issue might be identifying the current dominant approach in plans and ecotourism development in this region. Based on this assumption, this paper aims to identify the dominant ecotourism approach in Mazandaran and then, by comprehensive and practical indicators, evaluate the impact of this approach from a sustainability perspective.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. The concept of ecotourism

Literature indicates that there is no clear-cut consensus on the appearance and definition of ecotourism. Some believe that this term was first used in 1987 by Ceballos-Lascuráin (Blamey, 2001: 5; Beeton, 1998). In contrast, Mader (2000) argued that it was used for the first time in 1965 by Claus-Dieter Hetzeand and that this term was coined in 1985 by Romeril (Weaver & Lawton, 2007). Despite these disagreements, the emergence and evolution of ecotourism is, without doubt, the result of two events of the 1970s and 1980s. First, ecotourism is linked to the environmental movements of the 1980s, and second, it has largely emerged as a response to the widespread worldwide discontent with mass tourism due to the growth of environmental pollution; cultural invasion; disruptions; economic inequalities (Diamantis, 1999; Fennell, 2002; Honey, 1999; Orams, 1995; Scheyvens, 2002; Ziffer, 1989). During the last few decades, ecotourism has attracted huge interest among researchers, planners and policy makers in every corner of the globe (Weaver & Lawton, 2007). Ecotourism has grown to the extent that 2002 was selected as the *International Year of Ecotourism* by the United Nations (Weaver & Lawton, 2007).

Like the terms "tourism", "sustainable development" and "ecology", "ecotourism" is also a complex and imprecise term, and researchers and organizations have presented various definitions. The International Ecotourism Society (1990) identifies ecotourism as 'responsible travel to a natural environment that preserves the environment and contributes to the well-being of local people' (TIES, 2013). Wood (1991) has added the cognitive dimension (understanding the natural and cultural history) to this concept and has emphasized ecosystem conservation and the advantages of preserving nature for the local people. Ceballos-Lascurain (1996), in his definition of ecotourism, refers to the respect of the cultural heritage and participation of the local people, and believes that ecotourism is 'travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas'. Honey (1999), in her definition of ecotourism, adds that it also includes learning and training, the political empowerment of communities, the respect of other cultures and the promotion of human rights. Fennell (1999) identifies ecotourism as 'a sustainable form of natural resources-based tourism that focuses primarily on experiencing and learning about nature which is ethically managed to be low-impact, non-consumptive, and locally oriented (control, benefits and scale). It typically occurs in natural areas, and should contribute to the conservation or preservation of such areas.'

"Ecotourism" is the combination of two words: "ecological" and "tourism." "Ecology" means the study of the interrelationships and interactions between organisms or their relationships and reactions with the natural environment (Brewer, 1994; Champ & Krebs, 1974).

The "ecologic" adjective that has been added to "tourism" not only refers to cautious and informative travel to pristine natural and cultural areas but also to the equitable interrelationships and interactions between the natural environment and human, and host and guest. Besides respect of local natural and cultural heritage and the integrity of the ecosystem, it leads to participation, capacity building, and the empowerment of local people. It also emphasizes balanced power relations and intra- and inter-generational equity.

In short, ecotourism refers to cautious and informative travel to relatively pristine and undisturbed natural and cultural areas that, through establishing the equitable interrelationships and interactions between nature and human and also host (local community) and guest (ecotourist), fosters ecological and cultural awareness, enhances the natural and cultural heritage and based on intra- and inter-generational equity leads to the long term well-being of the local people and destinations.

Therefore, the principles and characteristics of this type of tourism are nature-based and small scale travel; are informative (particularly environmentally and culturally); are supportive of the local economy; creates minimal negative environmental and socio-cultural impacts; respects local culture; supports human rights and democratic movements, with high sensitivity to the political environment and the socio-cultural environment; are empowering, participatory and satisfying (UNWTO, 2002; Hamele, 2004; Page, Dowling, & Page, 2001; Honey, 1999; Blamey, 2001:6).

2.2. The impacts of ecotourism

Theoretically, ecotourism has many socio-economic and environmental benefits, but global literature shows that, in practice, it has functioned like a double-edged sword and has had many positive and negative outcomes mainly stemming from its perception, development and planning approach (Courvisanos & Jain, 2006; Donohoe & Needham, 2006). Ecotourism has been beneficial in some countries and regions; however, in some others, it has caused economic inequality, social conflicts, and environmental problems. Based on global literature, Table 1 shows the positive and negative effects of ecotourism and is listed in three categories: socio-cultural, environmental, and economic.

Many authors stress that implementing the core principles of ecotourism in practice are necessary for successful ecotourism development. In other words, without the profound understanding of the basic principles, appropriate planning, and integrated and inclusive management, ecotourism can fail to become sustainable (Cater, 1993). Wall (1997a, 1997b) pointed out that achieving desired goals in ecotourism development requires three primary prerequisites: it must be culturally appropriate, economically viable and ecologically sensitive. Similarly, Chalker (1994) asserted that ecotourism must be addressed by three interconnecting issues. It must protect the environment and ought not to exploit local people; it must respect the socio-cultural traditions of the host community; and it must ensure benefits flow to local communities.

Mowforth and Munt (1998) and Croy and Hogh (2003) argued that when the development of ecotourism exceeds the carrying capacity of the destinations, it leads to a variety of negative consequences. Wall (1997a, 1997b) highlights that the visitation of wildlife habitats at sensitive times, such as during breeding seasons, must be limited. Gould (2004a, 2004b) and Pawliczek and Mehta's (2008) research revealed that ecotourism is beneficial for local people when they play an important role in delivered services and the management process. In this case, Weaver (2001a, 2001b) research in a village in the Solomon Islands showed that the control and operation of ecotourism plans and projects, largely by elite groups, leads to the unequal distribution of income and results in inequity in local communities. Weaver (1998) argued that the acquisition of land for the establishment of protected areas; restoration costs; the development of an appropriate management plan; suitable regulatory procedures; and the training of local people could reduce