

Original Research Article

# The Impact of Spatial Factors on Rural Tourism Development

## (Case Study: Villages in Lorestan)\*

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Received: 25/01/2023

Accepted: 26/03/2024

Available online: 20/04/2024

**Abstract** | Rural tourism, as one of the fundamental elements of development, contributes to the economic, social, cultural, and environmental capabilities of rural areas, and by utilizing its countless potentials, it significantly aids in the sustainable development of rural regions. However, in rural development programs and plans, tourism is often either overlooked or, if considered, solely focused on increasing the number of tourists without taking into account the spatial, historical, social, and geographical characteristics of the villages. This has resulted in existing development initiatives not only failing to significantly increase the number of tourists in rural areas but also causing serious damage to the natural landscape and socio-historical fabric of the villages. This research aims to examine rural tourism from an epistemological perspective and explore its dimensions of development. How can a place-based approach be utilized to optimize the potential of rural tourism, capitalize on available opportunities, and achieve sustainable rural tourism development? The research methodology employed is primarily exploratory, with some library-based components. The findings indicate that adopting a holistic and integrated approach to tourism development, considering the local characteristics of each village, can reduce the negative impacts of fragmentation and compartmentalization. Additionally, an epistemological approach to tourism can contribute to strengthening rural tourism, not only through physical interventions but also by leveraging the cultural, social, and identity capacities of each village. Operational strategies, including the preservation of ecological and natural landmarks, revitalization of local qualities, updating livelihood practices, and establishing local cooperation networks, contribute to improving tourism development and enhancing the spatial capacities of rural areas.

**Keywords** | Rural development, Rural landscape, Place-based tourism, Culture.

**Introduction** | What elevates a space to a place is its fusion with deep meanings and concepts that evolve and deepen over time (Relph, 1976). The identity of villages

emerges from the rural locations, official representations, and the everyday lives of villagers (Hatefi Shojae et al., 2017). In the process of planning and developing rural areas, assessing and analyzing local differences in various dimensions of rural development has great importance and assists planners in preparing coordinated and integrated development plans. It is necessary to pay attention to regional and local differences in rural

\* This article is extracted from the Research Project entitled "Place-Based Development: Rural Landscape Reading in Kuhdasht County" which was conducted under supervision of Dr. "Seyed Amir Mansouri" by the research team of NAZAR Research

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development because without considering these differences, the achievements of economic growth and social investments will be at risk (Rezvani, 2004). Place is the result of meanings that emerge over time and through the perception of the environment. Therefore, the term place refers to a deep-seated and rooted experience and encompasses various socio-cultural layers. In this regard, understanding the concept of place can lead to the revitalization and preservation of existing places. In other words, recent research shows that without a comprehensive understanding of place, we cannot explain the specific reasons for the uniqueness of some of our living environments (Bandarabad, 2017). Therefore, it is evident that rural areas, which have been the backdrop for various social, cultural, and natural events and changes over the years, are not exempt from this discussion. Only by recognizing their local capacities can we take steps towards their sustainable development.

Travel, as a cultural and social behavior within the framework of the tourism industry, is considered a service activity that is regarded as one of the factors contributing to the development of countries, particularly in the economic sphere. Generating high revenues from tourism empowers the development of this industry. Consequently, most studies in the field of tourism focus on the economic dimensions and the effects of industry development. Although this approach is beneficial, it fails to consider the fundamental aspects of tourism and overlooks its true nature (Shahrabi Farahani, 2022). Tourism, which arises from geographical movement, is a generator of meaning and knowledge within the cultural context and is a part of it. Culture, as a key concept in tourism, not only gives it vitality and significance but also allows for its understanding (Mansouri, 2020). True tourism should seek to engage with cultures and comprehend them. Engaging with culture means gaining a genuine understanding of a place's origins and its inhabitants. The intention of tourism leads to a form of cultural self-discovery. Such acquaintance is only possible when the exploration of historical and cultural artifacts in tourism is not merely to acquire knowledge and satisfy historical curiosity (Beheshti, 2020).

However, currently in many rural areas, due to neglecting the essence and reality of rural life, disregarding local capabilities, and lacking appropriate strategies, various aspects such as architecture, culture, economy, identity, and environment have not only remained underdeveloped but also faced serious damages. This has led to the policies of seemingly development-oriented officials becoming obstacles in the path of rural tourism

development. This issue has resulted in weakening local identity, reducing tourism attractiveness, exerting pressure on natural resources, causing environmental destruction, and ultimately missing out on numerous opportunities for cognitive and knowledge development. To analyze and examine this issue more accurately, the landscape of Lorestan Province was explored through field visits to several villages in this province by the researchers, and the results are presented below.

### Research Question

How can we, relying on a place-based approach, enhance the tourism potential of rural areas, optimize the utilization of existing opportunities, and promote sustainable rural tourism development?

### Theoretical Foundations

#### • Rural areas as a place

Rural landscapes are recognized simultaneously as natural and cultural landscapes that demonstrate the socialization of nature through collective cultural and ethnic appropriation. The rural landscape is the result of organizing the environment and natural elements based on the beliefs, meanings, and shared values of the residents. In rural areas, natural elements and components are communication and informational tools that are transformed through cultural symbols and specific mechanisms to convey concepts, meanings, and the presentation of the rural landscape as a unified and symbolic entity (Abarghouei Fard & Saboonchi, 2020). The village, or as Schulz puts it, the "settlement," is the scene of natural human settlement in the pursuit of identity and a sense of belonging to a place. Through "choosing to settle," humans establish their position in the natural environment and, based on it, engage in the exchange of ideas, emotions, and human-made products with their peers. This phenomenological image considers settling as a gathering of the surrounding world into one center, inviting humans to inhabit it. Therefore, the feeling of arriving at a settlement and being located therein, not as a distinct place but as a place where the quality of a place or environment is locally explained, holds significance. In other words, a village is a place where the land and sky permeate each other through architecture to create an attractive totality. In this case, the village can appear as a destination and interact with its surroundings accordingly. This is the same quality that enables the village to be read as a place (Sameh, 2014).

#### • The role of place in rural development plans

Evaluating the experience of a purely objective approach to development reveals the failure of its programs to ensure human and societal satisfaction. The

most prominent example of this is urban and rural development programs, which, although successful in improving certain objective indicators, have not been particularly successful in satisfying residents. Extensive research emphasizes the importance of psychological aspects in creating a sense of attractiveness and human satisfaction. Changes in understanding key aspects of human life cannot disregard the transformation of development concepts. Place and landscape are among the most significant achievements of the new understanding of humanity. Therefore, in new approaches to development, it is necessary to incorporate fundamental changes in planning by taking into account the new definitions of development (Mansouri, 2023).

#### • The role of tourism in rural development enhancement

Today, rural tourism has become a continuous trend that can detach individuals from the hectic urban life and provide them with a brief period of intrinsic connection with nature. Rural tourism can connect individuals with their desired natural environment and plays a special role as a green industry in the sustainable development of rural areas. It also helps in transferring and expanding the perceptual experiences of rural residents to tourists through an understanding and deepening of the rural landscape processes (Hemmati, 2020). The subject of rural tourism is like a self-reflective experience in the occasionally spontaneous environment of the village, with its unique nature, signifying a fresh approach to encountering a rural environment. The emphasis and importance lie in the self-reflective questioning of the spontaneous environmental elements, which can provide appropriate responses to today's issues. As a result, the aforementioned experience greatly contributes to a worthy understanding of the essence of what happens in a rural setting and depends on comprehending the fundamental components that constitute it (Sameh & Sameh, 2014).

#### • The difference between epistemological and ontological perspectives in tourism

In the ontological approach, tourism serves as a guide that provides tourists with explanations about the fame and significance of historical sites within a collection of spaces. In this approach, historical artifacts are objects of admiration and awe, and they are not intended to be beacons for the future. Consequently, this type of tourism becomes more of a spectacle that disrupts daily routines and minimizes the expectation of profound knowledge. It leans more towards wandering and leisure rather than pilgrimage and enlightenment. The former signifies the temporary spiritual state of the individual,

while the latter represents their permanent knowledge and understanding. In epistemological knowledge-oriented tourism, derived pleasure from travel and change of the usual state is also present, but its purpose is the development of insight and the enhancement of the tourist's understanding when confronted with the experiences of predecessors or nature (Mansouri, 2014). In cultural tourism, the focus is primarily on understanding the historical and scientific aspects of cultural products and analyzing them around the fundamental question of "How did it happen?" The characteristics and influences that have shaped these cultural artifacts are explored, such as: What meaning does this product convey? What characteristics does it possess, and under the influence of which components has it taken this form? After grasping the "essence" of cultural products and the manifestations of human civilization, questions of "why" and the ontology of their existence are raised: Why did this phenomenon come into existence? What dimensions and levels does it have? When did it start, which direction does it follow, and where does it end? Cultural tourism asks questions about the existence of the subject of tourism and, in doing so, contributes to the ontological understanding of nations. This process enables tourists to comprehend the interrelation between the worldviews of different nations and their outcomes (Mansouri, 2020).

If we examine the theoretical foundations, it becomes clear that the village, due to its historical role as a host to a community of residents and a backdrop for various events resulting from the interaction between the inhabitants and the natural environment of the village, possesses distinct local qualities. It is like a valuable and meaningful book that tourists can read to the extent of their capacity and ability, enriching their experience, knowledge, and understanding, and gaining a worthy comprehension of the essence of what happens in the village. However, in the ontological approach to tourism, the sole objective is to create excitement for tourists by providing limited quantitative and fleeting information about historical sites. In the existentialist and epistemological approach, tourism is presented as a tool for understanding and developing comprehension of the human cultural environment and history.

Therefore, current development plans that adopt a purely quantitative and objective approach, devised without any understanding of modern concepts of development such as a sense of place and landscape, cannot effectively address this important aspect of rural tourism development and have resulted in the loss of a significant portion of rural development potentials.

### Research Background

Habibi Koshkoohi and colleagues, in an article, discuss the role of tourism in rural development with an emphasis on entrepreneurship. They conclude that there is a direct relationship between tourism and rural entrepreneurship. They emphasize the importance of tourism in increasing employment and fostering entrepreneurial growth, stating that enhancing rural tourism capacity leads to business prosperity, increased entrepreneurship opportunities, and employment growth in rural areas (Habibi Kavashkahi et al., 2019).

Babakhani and Sameh, in their research aimed at finding solutions for improving the quality of the rural environment, enhancing the rural landscape and tourism, have concluded that strengthening tourism-related businesses, improving environmental cleanliness, enhancing access within the village, and utilizing local, traditional materials and identity elements can improve the rural landscape and attract tourists (Babakhani & Sameh, 2023).

Considering the recent growth of rural tourism in China, Liu and colleagues have studied the role of Chinese central and local governments in rural tourism development. Their findings indicate that the central government plays a guiding role in directing rural tourism towards desirable paths, while local governments manage direct tourism activities and coordinate with businesses and residents to provide services and solve problems. The interaction and synergy between the central and local governments in China have stimulated the rapid development of rural tourism (Liu et al., 2020). Zielinski and colleagues, in their research, aimed at identifying the reasons for the differences in success and failure between developed and developing countries in rural tourism, have concluded that it is the institutional and socioeconomic context and the implementation of policies that have caused these differences, rather than the existing criteria, as these criteria are sometimes copied from one another (Zielinski et al., 2020).

Based on the review of previous studies, it is evident that a predominantly ontological approach has been used to identify the strengths, weaknesses, and improvement strategies of rural tourism. In this process, the position and role of the epistemological approach to rural tourism have been overlooked (Fig. 1). Therefore, this research aims to explore rural tourism from an epistemological perspective and with an exploratory method.

### Research Methodology

As mentioned, due to the nature of the present research, which was based on field observations and a trip to the Lorestan region by the authors, the research method

used in this study was mainly exploratory, with some library-based sections. Therefore, in the following section, to identify the problems of rural tourism in some villages of Lorestan province, the authors' observations are documented and analyzed. These observations are presented in two sections: capacities and damages inflicted on the natural landscape and social life of the villages in the Lorestan region, as two important pillars of the rural context (Fig. 2).

### Case Study

The case study in this research includes several villages located in the Kuhdasht County of Lorestan province (Fig. 3). Kuhdasht County is one of the counties in Lorestan province and is among the most beautiful areas in western Iran. Some of the surrounding villages of Kuhdasht include Sorkhdom, Payastan, Khusrowabad, and Darb-e Gonbad.

This county and its villages have numerous tourist attractions due to their natural features, such as mountainous fabric, abundant rivers, numerous waterfalls, lush forests, beautiful landscapes, and pleasant weather. Additionally, the area is enriched by multiple historical sites, tombs, ancient temples, distinct local culture, diverse traditions, hospitable people, and local cuisine, all of which add to the charm of this region and provide a unique and distinctive experience of traveling to these rural areas.

#### • Emergence of livelihood activities of rural residents

One of the attractions of rural life for tourists, which not only entertains them but also provides them with a deeper understanding of rural life, is observing the hustle and bustle and the lives of livestock and poultry in the village. Historically, due to the close dependence of rural inhabitants on livestock and animal husbandry, they usually kept them in a space next to their homes, which gradually made the presence of these animals an

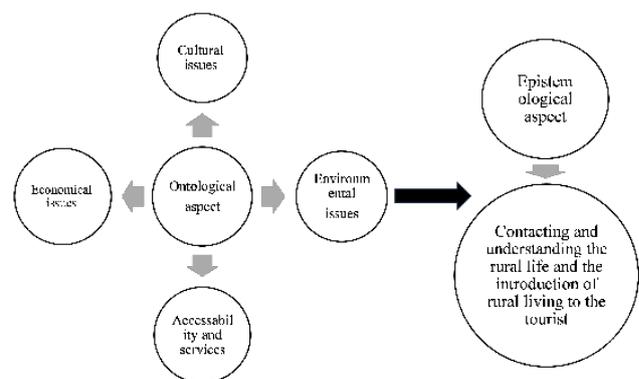


Fig. 1. The neglected role of existentialism in rural tourism development literature. Source: Authors.

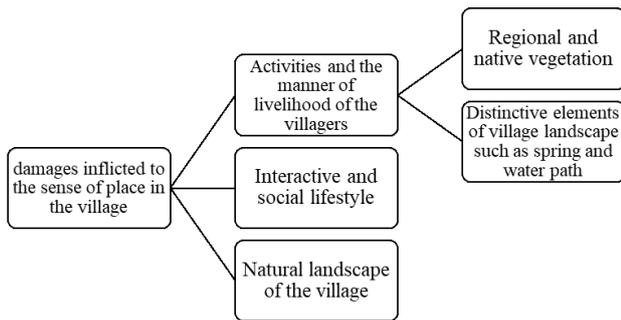


Fig. 2. Examined aspects in the vulnerability assessment of place-based rural tourism development in the region of Lorestan. Source: Authors.

integral part of the scenery and charm of these villages. However, due to the misguided perception of urban developers who lack an understanding of the distinct nature and characteristics of rural areas compared to cities, rural development policies have been formulated towards their assimilation with urban areas. This has led to the widening and standardization of rural roads for vehicle passage, forcing rural houses to retreat and undergo regular wall construction. Therefore, in such a context, there will no longer be a place for keeping livestock and poultry alongside residential areas, and their emergence and presence in the rural landscape will be avoided. In the field study of the villages in Kuhdasht, Lorestan province, it is clear that in the villages that have been exempt from centralized development plans so far, this important part of the rural landscape is still tangible and observable (Fig. 4). Whereas in the villages where development plans have been implemented, the lives and activities of local animals, as an essential part of the rural landscape that reflects the livelihood and subsistence methods of the residents, are no longer visible. This issue provides a unique opportunity to experience and touch



Fig. 3. The geographical location of Kuhdasht County in Lorestan Province. Source: Authors.

the essence of rural life and, as a result, enhances the understanding of the solid tourist experience (Fig. 5).

• **Social life and ongoing interactions in the context of a village**

To analyze the social life in the landscape of a village from an epistemological perspective, it is necessary to first understand its sense of place. The purpose of cultural tourism is to identify and introduce the hidden potentials within the simple rural life and encourage the audience to discover and appreciate everything that exists, rather than merely witnessing the most extraordinary beauties and attractions in a village. Common definitions of tourism, with a misguided approach, aim to discover and present the objective beauties and attractions in tourist destinations, solely to increase the number of tourists, rather than promoting their understanding and knowledge of the ongoing life in that place.

Among the factors that play a crucial role in the vibrancy of rural life and constantly attract tourists are the life, activities, and social interactions of rural residents on the village paths, squares, and streets. Tourists are not



Fig. 4. Keeping livestock alongside rural houses in villages where the organic fabric has been partially preserved from development projects. Village of Sorghdom. Photo: Zia Hoseynzadeh, 2023.



Fig. 5. The degradation of organic fabric in villages due to development interventions. Village of Payastan. Photo: Zia Hoseinzadeh, 2023.

only entertained and fascinated by observing the calm life and simple relationships of rural residents but also have a golden opportunity to become acquainted with the culture, customs, dialects, and many other unique cultural and behavioral characteristics of the village inhabitants. Therefore, as mentioned, there is no need to find extraordinary attractions in every village to encourage tourists to visit. Rather, it is sufficient to protect the simple and intimate social life of the residents from harm, in order to provide the grounds for tourists to engage, feel, and experience this rural life.

Social life, in the sense of the presence, interaction, and activities of rural residents, including men, women, the elderly, youth, and children, is fluid and ongoing in various local contexts of the village. Traditionally, in many villages, the rural fabric and structure were formed organically based on functional needs, behaviors, and types of social interactions of the people, which is evidence of their correct understanding of their geographical characteristics and their place-based development over

time. However, in many villages of the country, especially in the villages examined in this study in Lorestan Province, due to the incorrect understanding of officials and wrong policies implemented through development projects, social life has weakened and become less vibrant. That is why field research in some villages of Lorestan Province clearly shows that villages that have undergone fewer changes related to development projects and have remained unaffected by rural development plans have a significantly more dynamic and vibrant social life within their local context. For example, in parts of the Khosrowabad village that have not been heavily influenced by development interventions, one can observe children playing, conversations and interactions among adults, and the presence of elderly individuals (Fig. 6). However, on the other hand, in parts where the interventions of development projects have maximized the extent of development and the village fabric has undergone significant changes, the current social life in village paths, streets, and squares has almost disappeared entirely because these projects have not paid any attention to the local characteristics of these villages, community gathering places, and the social behavior of their residents (Fig. 7).

#### • Natural landscape of village

Native plants and springs play a fundamental role in shaping the sense of place in the village and have an important role in providing a deep understanding of local identity and characteristics as the main elements of the village's natural landscape. Native plants and springs have a historical background in each region and have a vivid role in the formation of collective memories of the residents. Native plants are one of the elements of the village's natural landscape that have been selected by the local inhabitants throughout history. These plants have always been cultivated in the courtyards of



Fig. 6. Signs of presence, interaction, and social life of the villagers in sections where development projects have caused less damage to the fabric and landscape of the village, and organic pathways have been preserved. Village of Khusrowabad. Photo: Zia Hoseinzadeh, 2023.



Fig. 7. Destruction of interactive spaces in rural areas and replacement of communal spaces with parking lots and construction materials due to uninformed interventions, neglecting the importance of interactive spaces, public squares, and simulating the village into a city. Village of Darb-e Gonbad. Photo: Meymanat Perseh, 2023.

houses, neighborhoods, and various locations within the village and have become an integral part of the mindset of the residents due to their long coexistence with the villagers. However, through field observations conducted by researchers in several villages of Kuhdasht County, Lorestan Province, it has become clear that in recent years, the highest concentration of development projects has been focused on infrastructure initiatives such as road construction, paving pedestrian walkways, and canal construction. Meanwhile, in the development of these villages, there has been a complete neglect of the vital and place-making role of native plants and springs. Recently, native plants in this region have been replaced by non-native and incompatible plants, causing serious damage to their natural infrastructure.

#### - Native and territorial vegetation cover

Native plant species have been present in the region since ancient times and are considered part of the village landscape identity. For example, the oak tree is one of the plants that can be seen throughout Lorestan Province and is a symbol of the Zagros landscape. The natural landscape of the foothills surrounding Darb-e Gonbad village includes native plants such as oak and chestnut trees, which offer a unique view. While the topographic structure of the village could provide a setting for the continuity and display of these oak trees as an identity-enhancing element within the village context, due to an incorrect understanding of the local capacities of this village, the dominant vegetation cover of the village now consists of trees that are unrelated to the village landscape identity, such as eucalyptus, creating an inappropriate contrast with the landscape of oak trees in the surrounding foothills (Fig. 8). Such interventions in the village's natural

landscape do not align or harmonize with the reading that its inhabitants have acquired over the years from their village. This issue prevents tourists who travel to the destination village from understanding its unique local characteristics and gaining different experiences by obtaining a deep and accurate knowledge of its existence and identity.

#### - Springs and aquatic routes

Springs, like native plants, are one of the natural elements that constitute the village landscape. In the collective memory and mindset of the villagers, water, especially through springs, is a vital element that has always been essential for their livelihoods, agriculture, and livestock. Therefore, these elements hold special importance in shaping the experience and understanding of tourists regarding the village landscape and providing them with a deep understanding of the lives of the residents and the village's nature. However, it can be observed in the village of Payastan that in implemented development plans, the importance of this natural element as one of the local capacities has been neglected. There have been no measures taken toward the revival, preservation, strengthening, and visibility of the spring landscape and its water movement path within the village context. Not only that but the water of these springs and their organic movement paths have been diverted from the main path in many areas, hidden and obscured from the view of the audience (Fig. 9).

#### Summary

Previous research and existing rural development projects indicate that the predominant focus has been on physical issues, and a significant portion of the damages inflicted on village landscapes are the result of interventions carried out due to development policies adopted by centralized authorities who lacked a proper understanding of the local capacities of each village. Consequently, development plans have increasingly aimed to simulate villages to resemble cities, disregarding their unique entities and identities. On the other hand, the theoretical literature in the field of development, particularly rural tourism development, emphasizes the lack of an epistemological approach to interpreting the village landscape. The conducted research and observations demonstrate that by adopting an epistemological perspective towards tourism, a significant portion of the rural local capacities can be recognized and preserved. To achieve this, various operational strategies can be implemented, including the following:

1. Interpretation, preservation, and enhancement of ecological and natural signs specific to each village's geography.



Fig. 8. Lack of attention to native and indigenous plants of Lorestan, such as oak, plane tree, and pomegranate, in development projects and the cultivation of unrelated species like eucalyptus in rural fabric and main routes. Village of Darb-e Gonbad. Photo: Babak Abdi, 1402.



Fig. 9. Misunderstanding the significance of springs and their flow in the village landscape, marginalizing, blinding, and separating the path of the spring from the main route. Village of Payastan. Photo: Zia Hossein-Zadeh, 1402.

2. Identification and revitalization of qualitative local qualities that promote social interactions, rather than implementing uniform versions to create culturally experiential tourism opportunities for all locations.

3. Strengthening and updating traditional rural livelihood practices to enhance the economic dimensions of rural life and create tourist attractions.

4. Establishing local collaboration networks between responsible institutions and village residents to share experiences and resources, strengthen communication, increase effectiveness in tourism development, and preserve local resources and local capacities.

In this way, numerous opportunities will be provided for rural tourists to experience the unique essence of life in each village. This not only provides an enjoyable experience for tourists but also effectively increases their understanding and knowledge of the distinctive local features of each village (Fig.10). It is evident that to achieve such a goal, the necessary criteria must be initially identified to assess the damages inflicted on village landscapes and evaluate their current status. In this regard, the authors have provided indicators for

assessing and evaluating the state of the rural landscape based on field observations and analyses conducted in this research (Fig. 11).

### Conclusion

In scientific studies, rural tourism development has always been a significant subject of attention. However, in the existing development programs and plans in the country, there has been little or no focus on this issue, or if there has been any attention, due to a misunderstanding of the matter, development efforts have predominantly revolved around infrastructure projects such as road construction and paving of main and secondary roads. As mentioned, this research emphasizes the epistemological aspects of defining rural tourism, specifically focusing on the local capacities, rather than a mere quantitative aspect aimed at increasing the number of tourists. In essence, the epistemological aspect refers to a dimension of tourism that aims to invite the audience to observe, feel, and experience the simple and intimate ongoing life in rural areas, to gain authentic experiences in encountering

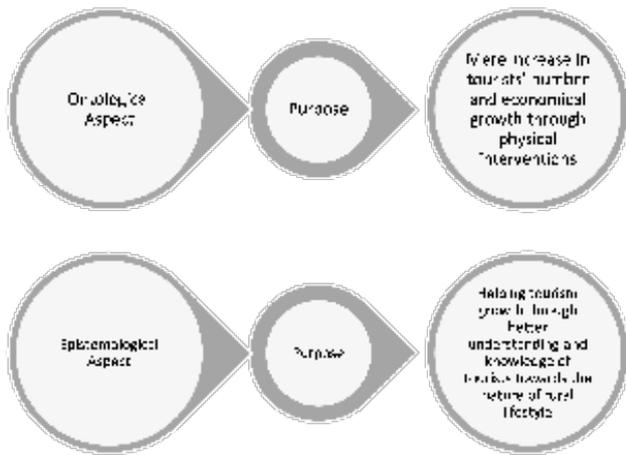


Fig. 10. The difference between ontological and epistemological approaches to the issue of tourism. Source: Authors.

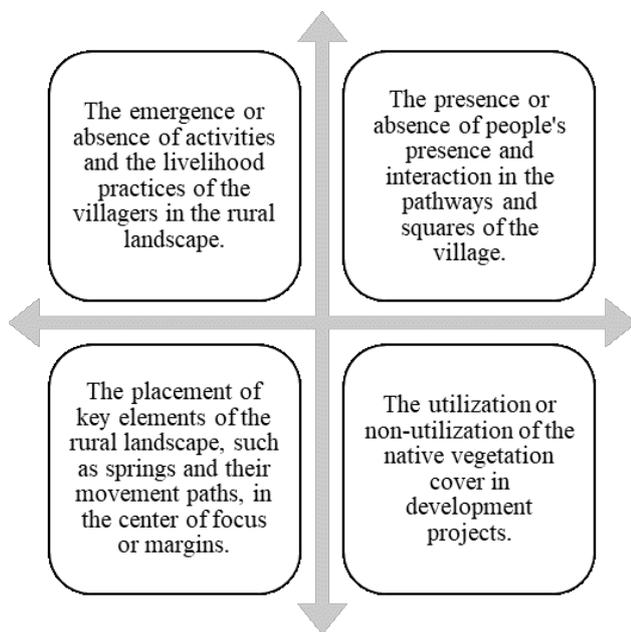


Fig. 11. Indicators of the extent of damages inflicted on the rural landscape. Source: Authors.

the essence of the village. Building upon this definition, the study of development plans and rural development, along with field observations of several

villages in the Kuhdasht County of Lorestan Province, led the authors to conclude that the negligence of officials regarding the importance of placemaking components in rural areas, which include social life, the emergence of activities and occupations of rural residents, and the rural landscape, has caused serious damage to the landscape of these villages and is a major obstacle to rural tourism development. This is because in the villages where these projects have been implemented, not only has social life been disrupted and the natural landscape suffered significant damage, but also the manifestations and symbols associated with rural occupations, such as livestock farming, have been undermined from the perspective of the village.

It is quite clear that providing a comprehensive solution to this dilemma is beyond the scope and patience of this article, as it is dependent on numerous economic, political, and social factors. Nevertheless, the results of this research demonstrate that a holistic and integrated approach to tourism development, incorporating the authenticity of each village's unique sense of place, minimizes the damages caused by fragmentary and reductionist perspectives. Attention to the epistemological dimension of tourism as one of the components of rural development leads to a greater focus on the placemaking characteristics of each village and consequently strengthens rural tourism. This is achieved not through physically damaging interventions to identity but by leveraging the cultural, social, and identity-related capacities of the village. Practical strategies that can be implemented in this regard include preserving the ecological and natural symbols of the village, revitalizing the physical and local qualities in line with social values, updating the livelihood methods of the village, and establishing local cooperation networks to enhance tourism development and strengthen the spatial capacities of the village.

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#### HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Hoseynzadeh, Z., Abdi, B., & Meymanat, P. (2024). The Impact of Spatial Factors on Rural Tourism Development (Case Study: Villages in Lorestan). *Tourism of Culture*, 5(16), 36-45.

DOI: 10.22034/TOC.2024.454041.1155

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