

Original Research Article

Formulating Creative Ecotourism Development Strategies

(Case Study: the Suleghan & Kan Valley)*

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Abstract In accordance with the philosophy of sustainable tourism development, ecotourism emphasizes intrinsic and inner values. The demand of tourists to gain new experiences is beyond a desire to simply spend their holidays in a tourist destination. By participating in creative activities in ecotourism destinations, tourists can gain new experiences in natural tourism, called creative ecotourism. The third wave of the tourism industry, called creative tourism, is influenced by factors such as diversity of customer demand, impact of technology, and demands of local communities; therefore, introducing effective strategies for creative ecotourism is an unavoidable necessity. The main objective of this study was to introduce creative ecotourism development strategies based on the sustainable development approach by considering the potential and actual capacities of the Suleghan & Kan Valley in Tehran, where the research was carried out. In this descriptive-analytical study, the data were collected using the desk study (documentary) and field (questionnaire) methods and expert opinions. The study population consisted of 30 experts. To develop creative ecotourism development strategies, the sustainability components were first integrated into the indicators of sustainable tourism, creative tourism, creativity, and ecotourism. The authors then outlined the current situation and identified effective internal and external factors. In the next step, the strategies were extracted using SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis. Finally, the Quantitative Strategic Planning Matrix (QSPM) was used to prioritize the identified strategies based on their degrees of attractiveness. The attractive strategies for developing creative ecotourism in the Suleghan & Kan Valley included “Emphasizing the design of tours that combined learning and nature tourism”, “Holding ecotourism and educational tours for the tourists to experience the lifestyle of local people”, “Revising executive policies and collaborating with the youth to start new tourism businesses”, and “Using effective advertising tools to encourage the young people to take courses in handicrafts and tourism.”

Keywords Sustainable Tourism, Ecotourism, Creative Ecotourism, Suleghan & Kan Valley.

Introduction Human societies have paid special attention to tourism for several centuries, and the phenomenon

of tourism has maintained its dynamicity due to various social and economic needs of human communities. As a great source of national income and employment, tourism can be used to boost economic development at national level. Tourism is especially a good alternative for other economic sectors when their profits are declining and a great strategy for development. Accordingly, the main reasons for the development of tourism include

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increasing income levels, providing new employment opportunities, and promoting social development in the local community. Therefore, the tourism industry brings fresh hope for the poor, especially in areas that are severely hit by economic recessions (Saqai & Papoli Yazdi, 2007). Numerous natural attractions and diverse geographical climates have provided human beings with invaluable resources. However, the exploitation of such resources can require preparation of various conditions that in general depend on stability of the tourism sector. Nature tourism or ecotourism is one of the various types of tourism. It is in fact based on the environment with its primary focus on people's experiences of natural environments, which promotes the culture of environmental protection. Today, ecotourism has a special place in the tourism industry and exhibits a rising trend in growth among the types of tourism. Nowadays, tourism authorities in different countries more than ever before acknowledge the need for expanding ecotourism and, more importantly, the necessity of preserving the environment. Consequently, ecotourism has gained great importance with the concept of responsibility toward the environmental and the local community. In the present century, ecotourism affects many geographical spaces and creates new spatial patterns in various geographical areas of cities and pristine nature with beautiful landscapes around cities; therefore, it is assumed that human beings actually preserve the environment. Therefore, the natural resorts in the outskirts of large cities have gained a high status mainly because it takes a short time to reach them and most middle class people can visit them during weekends (Jahangir & Fakur, 2020). In these settings, people often rest, relax, and enjoy their leisure time (Mafi & Saghaei, 2004). Moreover, increases in the number of tourists lead to expansion of tourism services and facilities and improve income and employment. The Suleghan & Kan Valley is a natural area in the proximity of Tehran, one the largest cities in the world. Many people in Tehran spend their leisure hours in this area; therefore, it can help researchers assess the indicators of creative ecotourism development. Due to its natural attractions including waterfalls, springs, refreshing climate, mountainous conditions, and beautiful landscapes, the study area has excellent environmental potentials for the development of ecotourism. Identification of these capabilities will lead to the expansion of ecotourism activities, which in turn will facilitate the development of various sectors. However, lack of a comprehensive strategic plan has prevented optimal use of ecotourism attractions and environmental capacities in these areas. In other words, due to the adoption of a centralized top-down approach and lack of a strategic planning model based on spatial-temporal realities, the authorities have failed to achieve sustainable

development through the expansion of tourism activities. Environmental problems and destruction of natural landscapes are among the detrimental consequences of this approach. In addition to the economic and social limitations in the study area, it seems necessary to study and identify its ecotourism capacities and constraints in order to propose effective development strategies and solutions with regard to the natural, sociocultural, economic, and institutional dimensions of sustainable development. By adopting a comprehensive approach, the authors examined the current capacities and limitations of the ecotourism industry in the Suleghan & Kan Valley and introduced the required strategies for the development of creative ecotourism activities in the study area so that the local community could reap the benefits. Based on this approach, the main and secondary research questions are as follows.

Main question

What strategies can be adopted for the development of creative ecotourism in the Suleghan & Kan Valley in Tehran Province?

Secondary questions

- What environmental strategies can be adopted for the development of creative ecotourism in the study area?
- What sociocultural strategies can be adopted for the development of creative ecotourism in the study area?
- What economic strategies can be adopted for the development of creative ecotourism in the study area?
- What institutional strategies can be adopted for the development of creative ecotourism in the study area?

Accordingly, creative ecotourism development strategies were assessed in the environmental, economic, sociocultural, and institutional dimensions.

Theoretical foundations

• Sustainable development

In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development offered a simple definition of sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". Sustainable development means incorporating economic, social, and environmental goals to ensure the welfare of the current generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs (Mehrara, Madanloo Joybari & Zare Zaidi, 2016). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2000). According to the UN definition, sustainable development is economically dynamic and productive, environmentally non-destructive, socially fair and acceptable, and technologically desirable

(Aminian, Sadeghi, Faraji & Naderi Goor-Ghale Neshin, 2012).

• Sustainable tourism development

Sustainable tourism development became popular in the 1970s following the introduction of the alternative development approach. Policies including sustainable tourism development, community-based tourism, pro-poor tourism, free trade, nature tourism (ecotourism), alternative tourism, women empowerment through tourism, and local investment reflected this approach (Parchekani, 2018). Sustainable tourism development is based on the relationship among the three components of the environment, namely tourists, tourist destination, and the host community (Taghvaei & Akbari, 2008). In sustainable tourism development, available resources are exploited to expand tourism activities in a way that meets the needs of tourists and creates a balance between the unity, cultural identity and welfare of both the hosts and the guests (Mansoori, 2002); therefore, the main goal of sustainable tourism is to maintain a balance between these three components of tourism in the long run while preserving natural resources (Eskandari & Saeedeh Zarabadi, 2016). Accordingly, sustainability and the needs of the host community must be taken into consideration when planning for tourism development.

• Ecotourism

Despite the growing use of the term ecotourism today, it is often used improperly in many scientific and non-scientific discussions. There are major differences between the term ecotourism and other relevant terms; therefore, we need to provide more precise definitions of ecotourism as an approach far beyond the concept of nature tourism. Ecotourism, as a subset of nature tourism, is a way of increasing the number of tourists who search for a pure experience in nature, reducing economic, sociocultural and environmental costs, and bringing benefits to the environment and the local community (Moghimehfar, 2011). Ecotourism is based on the four main principles of reducing adverse environmental impacts, respecting the culture of indigenous peoples, bringing benefits to the local people, and gaining the satisfaction of tourists (Moharram Nejad & Aghakhani, 2009). In addition, ecotourism is a nature-oriented, commitment-based, human-centered, knowledge-enhancing, and revenue-generating journey for local communities, which is considered the most productive form of tourism. Community-based ecotourism is a form of tourism that pays special attention to cultural, social, and environmental sustainability and emphasizes the key role of the general public in tourism management. Ecotourism aims to increase the knowledge and awareness of visitors about the lifestyle of the local community as well as the natural environment of the tourist destination (Heidarinia & Varamesh, 2017).

• Sustainable ecotourism

Sustainable ecotourism is a form of tourism that is ecologically sustainable; in other words, it meets the current needs of nature tourists, expands existing opportunities for the future, and preserves the ecosystem instead of damaging it.

The principles of sustainable ecotourism can be summarized as follows:

- Use of sustainable resources: Conservation and sustainable use of natural, social, and cultural resources leads to long-term business success.

- Reduction of consumption and waste: Reducing excessive consumption, preventing reconstruction costs of long-term environmental damage, and helping to improve the quality of tourism.

- Biodiversity management: Preserving and promoting natural, social, and cultural diversity is essential for the long-term success of sustainable tourism.

- Tourism planning: The development of tourism within the framework of comprehensive national and local strategic plans. Environmental impact assessment ensures the viability of the tourism industry in the long run.

- Support for the local economy: Tourism contributes to the development of a wide range of local economic activities, reduction of environmental costs and estimation of long-term benefits by avoiding environmental damage.

- Participation of local communities: Full participation of local communities in the tourism sector not only improves social and environmental insurance but also enhances the quality of tourism projects.

- Consultation and general stakeholders: Consultation can help tourism agencies and local organizations and institutions resolve potential conflicts of interest.

- Staff training: Training all staff in the tourism sector, integrating sustainable tourism into working practices, hiring competent staff at all levels, and improving the quality of tourism products.

- Responsible tourism marketing: Tourists are the most important markers in the tourism industry. Tourism authorities can also improve customer satisfaction by increasing their natural, social, and cultural information about the tourist destination.

• Relationship between sustainable tourism and sustainable ecotourism

Ecotourism is more compatible with sustainable development than other forms of tourism (Zahedi, 2009). Ecotourism protects nature and offers enormous benefits to tourist destinations and their inhabitants. Using natural resources as tourist attractions without degrading them is an ideal approach towards sustainable development. Literature review indicates that ecotourism is essentially based on sustainable development, which is management

and protection of natural resources for the present and the future.

• Creative tourism

According to experts, the first, second, and third generations of tourism include “coastal tourism”, “cultural tourism”, and “creative tourism”, respectively. With its slogan “Less museums, more squares”, creative tourism focuses on experimental activities and deeper engagement with the real culture of urban life (Rahimi & Pazand, 2017).

Creative tourism can be considered the tourism activities of customers who actively and creatively participate in the development of the local culture, or the economic activities of entrepreneurs who provide unique services by combining various services and using information technology (Hasani & Bastenegar, 2018).

• Strategic creativity for the development of creative ecotourism

Creativity is a crucial aspect of external outcomes of tourism. According to the various existing ideas concerning the definitions of creativity, creativity is more about developing new ways of thinking and doing and suggests there is a close link between creativity and innovation. Creativity can be used in the tourism industry through the development of new products or experiences, new forms of consumption, or new tourism spaces. Any form of tourism that is somehow related to imagination, whether the imaginative capabilities of tourism producers or consumers, can be placed in the realm of creative tourism. The present study focuses on active community-based ecotourism. Moreover, the development of community-based ecotourism depends on the creativity of the various individuals and groups in the host community, small business owners, local associations, and governments (Hatton, 1999); therefore, the theoretical research foundations suggest that ecotourism can be integrated into the discussion of creative tourism. In addition, sustainable ecotourism can contribute to the sustainable development and empowerment of the local community by focusing on small businesses and designing executive plans for visitors, hosts, and the environment (Conservation of Biodiversity in the Central Zagros Landscape Conservation Zone, 2015). Accordingly, a combination of sustainable ecotourism and creative tourism can probably suggest the abstract concept of creative ecotourism.

• Creative ecotourism

Offering visitors ecotourism services in combination with creative activities enables tourists to participate in local activities and enjoy natural attractions and local resources while contributing to the development and preservation of the natural sites. By participating in creative activities in ecotourism destinations, tourists can

gain new experiences of natural tourism, called creative ecotourism.

• Conceptual research model

The main aim of the study was to formulate a creative ecotourism development plan in the Suleghan & Kan Valley. The secondary aims of the research included identification and introduction of ecotourism capabilities of the study area, identification and assessment of weaknesses, strengths, threats, and opportunities of the area for ecotourism development (using SWOT analysis), and finally, identification and prioritization of ecotourism development strategies in the study area. Therefore, after identifying the principles of sustainable tourism development, sustainable ecotourism, and creative tourism in the research literature, common indicators were identified and explained, and then the components of creative ecotourism were determined based on these common factors and indicators (Table 1). Also, based on this, the conceptual model of the research was drawn as described in Fig. 1.

Research method

In this applied descriptive-analytical study, the variable of “creative ecotourism” was considered the dependent research variable. In addition, the variables of “creative ecotourism potentials” and “other tourist attractions of the study area” were considered the independent research variables. The purpose of the study was to identify the strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats, and the needs and problems of the study area, and to propose strategies to help tourism authorities develop creative ecotourism in the study area. The study population consisted of 30 tourism experts and professionals (including academic experts, municipal authorities, tourism activists, and tourism students). The sample was selected using the complete enumeration sampling method ($n = 30$). Due to the poor cooperation of some local organizations, only 30 questionnaires were provided to the experts. The questionnaire consisted of 189 items, of which 4 were general and demographic items and 184 were specific items. The number of specific items was reduced to 166 based on expert opinions. The specific items were scored on a five-point Likert scale. Table 2 presents the number of specific items associated with each research component. To assess the validity of the questionnaire, corrections were made in the items of the prepared questionnaire based on the opinions, comments, and suggestions of several university professors, authorities and experts. Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the reliability of the questionnaire (i.e. the consistency of the items used to measure the research constructs). The data were analyzed in SPSS. In addition, the statistical techniques used in the research included Cronbach's

Table 1. Indicators of creative ecotourism. Source: Authors.

Row No.	Indicator	Dimension
1	Desirability (water, soil and, air)	Ecological dimension
2	Natural landscapes (mountains and rivers)	Ecological dimension
3	Innovation in employment	Economic dimension
4	Income	Economic dimension
5	Innovation in partnership	Sociocultural dimension
6	Learning	Sociocultural dimension
7	Ethical principles	Institutional-structural dimension
8	Rules and Regulations	Institutional-structural dimension

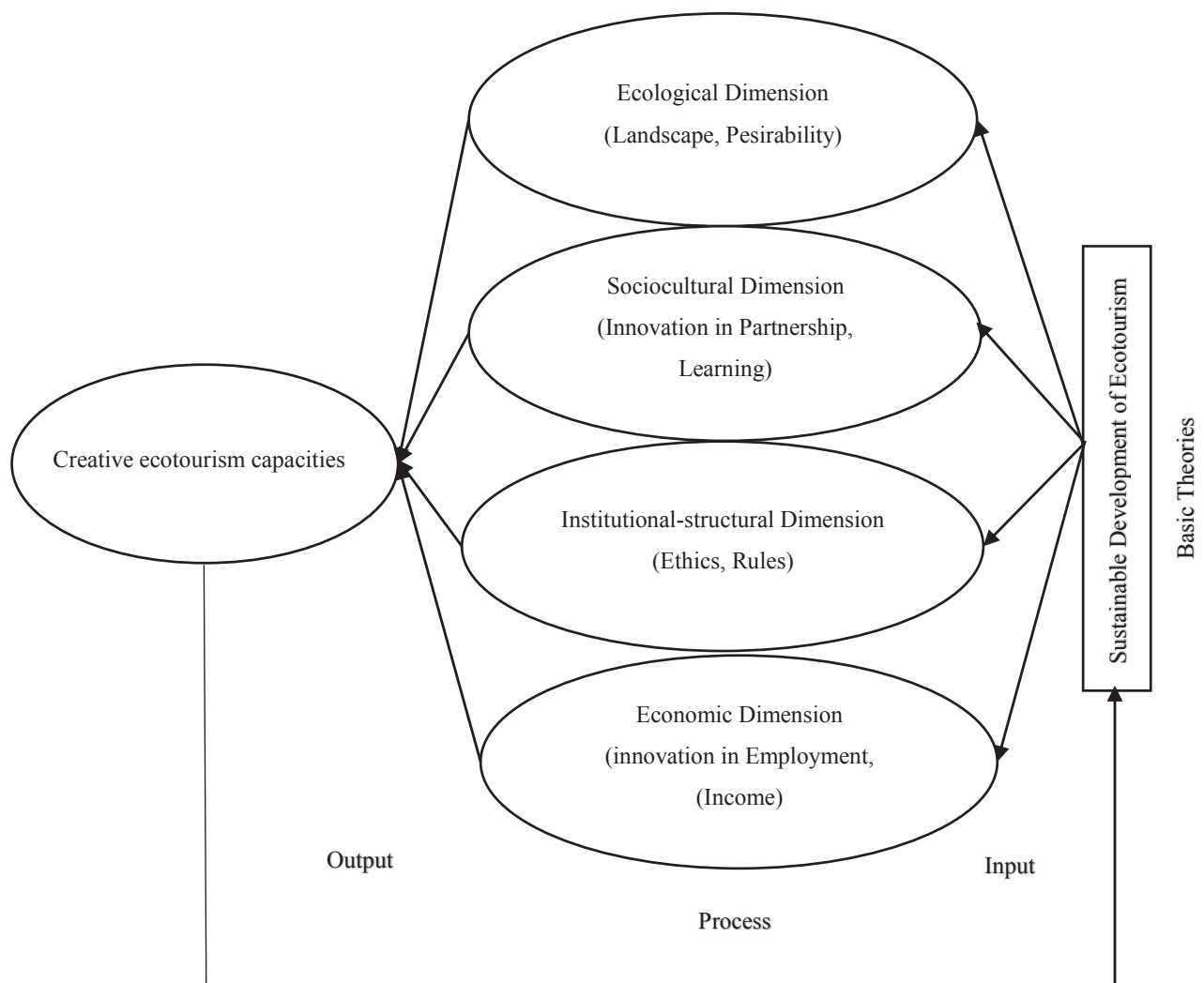


Fig. 1. Conceptual research model. Source: Authors.

alpha, SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis, and the Quantitative Strategic Planning Matrix (QSPM). Based on the findings, several creative ecotourism development strategies in the “ecological,” “sociocultural,” “economic,” and “institutional” dimensions were developed, explained, and prioritized with respect to their degrees of attractiveness. The

SWOT analysis results revealed that most of the proposed strategies were aggressive ones. The SO (Strengths-Opportunities) strategy, an aggressive strategy meaning synergism, can maximize use of opportunities by utilizing the abilities. Table 3 presents all the aggressive strategies developed in this research in the four dimensions of sustainability.

Table 2. Specific items. Source: Authors.

Research component	Item (s)	Type of scale
Strengths of the Suleghan & Kan Valley	31	Likert
Weaknesses of the Suleghan & Kan Valley	56	Likert
Opportunities existing in the Suleghan & Kan Valley	39	Likert
Major threats in the Suleghan & Kan Valley	40	Likert

Table 3. SO (Strengths-Opportunities) strategies proposed based on the dimensions of sustainability. Source: Authors.

Dimension	SO (Strengths-Opportunities) strategy
Ecological dimension	Emphasizing the design that combines nature tourism and educational tourism
	Creating new attractions and activities in the destination
	Holding seasonal festivals to familiarize tourists with the properties of local medicinal plants and herbal teas and hiring native inhabitants as tour guides
Sociocultural dimension	Holding ecotourism and educational tours to familiarize tourists with the lifestyle of local people
	Organizing local food festivals and competitions
	Organizing educational and art workshops to introduce and restore traditional handicrafts
Economic dimension	Revising executive policies in collaboration with young people in order to start new tourism businesses
	Creating competitive markets for local people to sell their products
	Focusing on the production of functional handicrafts
Institutional dimension	Using effective advertising tools in order to encourage young people to make and sell traditional handicrafts
	Using the creativity of young local people to make various types of handicrafts
	Offering educational syllabuses for ecotourism courses to improve the knowledge of tourism activists

Discussion and conclusion

Creative ecotourism is a sustainable form of ecotourism which attains ecotourism goals in a modern and creative way or finds new routes in line with sustainable ecotourism. The aforementioned explanations about ecotourism and creative tourism suggest that the demand of tourists to gain new experiences goes beyond a desire to simply spend their holidays in a destination. The strategies proposed for developing creative ecotourism can be summarized as: identification and assessment of “ecological”, “sociocultural”, “economic” and “institutional” capacities in order to utilize existing strengths and opportunities, overcome weaknesses and threats, and achieve the desired situation while bringing economic benefits to the local community, maintaining the cultural identity of the destination, reducing adverse environmental and sociocultural impacts, and promoting sustainable tourism. Authorities must strive to develop creative ecotourism using existing capacities and considering the dimensions of sustainability. The present study formulated strategies for the development of creative ecotourism by analyzing current and future capacities of the destination and determining the effect of each variable. The authors emphasized the importance of preservation of natural resources, development of local

communities, and innovation in employment. They also highlighted the crucial role of institutional factors (e.g. enacting suitable laws and regulations, taking into account ethical considerations when implementing relevant laws, and establishing close links between tourism and urban development organizations) in the development of creative ecotourism. The following strategies were devised and provided to executive managers based on the theoretical research foundations and with regard to the four dimensions of sustainability.

The attractive strategies for developing creative ecotourism in the study area included “Integrating nature tours into educational tours”, “Holding ecotourism and educational tours to familiarize tourists with the lifestyle of local people”, “Revising executive policies and cooperation with young people in order to start new tourism businesses”, and “Using effective advertising tools to encourage young people to make and sell traditional handicrafts”.

The following executive suggestions are offered to help executive managers develop creative ecotourism in the study area.

Executive suggestions

Based on the analyses performed in this research, the resources and capabilities of the Suleghan & Kan Valley

for developing creative ecotourism must be assessed based on the specific indicators in the study area. The status of creative ecotourism development in the Suleghan & Kan Valley was moderate. In addition, SO strategies were identified as the dominant strategies for the exploitation of existing capabilities and maximization of available opportunities. Therefore, the following suggestions are offered to facilitate the development of creative ecotourism in the study area:

- Providing local people with innovative employment opportunities in the area of creative ecotourism to strengthen the local economy;
- Creating jobs for young people and women in the area of creative ecotourism in order to strengthen the local economy;
- Establishing information centers for the tourists with an emphasis on new technologies;
- Designing efficient websites to introduce creative ecotourism capabilities of the study area;
- Designing and creating spaces to share ecotourism information and ideas
- Forming associations (e.g. mountaineering and photography associations) with guides from the local community;
- Proposing practical environmental and health measures (e.g. sewage disposal and surface water collection systems);
- Promoting cooperation from executive organizations to prevent or organize incompatible land uses;
- Carrying out research projects to restore the value of local vegetation;
- Establishing centers for the gathering of the local youth

and the elderly in order to strengthen intergenerational ties and cultural values;

- Collaborating with local owners and residents in development plans and offering incentives to encourage owners to stay in the study area;
 - Studying the cultural history of the study area and applying the obtained findings in tourism projects to ensure the survival of local traditions;
 - Employing local people in ecotourism training programs;
 - Scheduling special nature tours in the cold season (e.g. snow sculpture festivals, rain tours offering herbal teas, etc.) and broadcasting the tours on mass media to further introduce the capabilities of the study area;
 - Discussing the problems and capacities of the study area in meetings between invited tourism investors and tourism sector authorities;
 - Using the innovative ideas of academic elites to further develop the ecotourism sector;
 - Holding training workshops and group sessions to update the knowledge of government employees and managers working in the tourism sector;
 - Holding local handicraft exhibitions;
 - Holding various events to promote local customs and traditions;
 - Organizing local community-oriented events by combining natural attractions with cultural attractions
 - Recruiting educated people in the managerial and executive sectors of the ecotourism industry;
- Comprehensive research projects carried out before the intervention and prior to the implementation of tourism plans.

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