

Original Research Article

## Landscape Approach in Mountain Tourism; a Case Study of Alborz Mountains

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Received: 9/6/2020

Accepted: 7/9/2020

Available online: 22 / 10 /2020

**Abstract** | In past times, mountains had numerous functions and meanings for humans and used to be considered as a holy natural element. This issue was also true in Iran. Because of the particular geography of Iran and locating in the Tropic of cancer, if mountains did not exist in Iran, the country was just a big plain. Hence, mountains in Iran have been a resource for water and life for the people and have always been important elements. Besides, the mountain has had many other functions for Iranian people and has made numerous subjective meanings for this natural element. However, over time and with the advent of technology caused by modernity, the need of Iranian people for mountains was decreased and caused a decline of its meanings in public opinions. Now, it can be just considered as a natural environment. On the other hand, tourism is the presence and experience in the environment, and knowing the environment can leave a significant effect on the perception and experience of presence. The more the information about the environment are, the better and more perfect experience can be obtained. Hence, regarding mountain tourism with such important functions and meanings for Iranian people, a comprehensive understanding is required. Mountain is a cultural element for Iranian people and recognition of cultural dimensions of the mountains can be very effective in the perception and experience of tourists. Moreover, knowing the cultural dimensions of the mountain can help the sense of belonging of place, so that tourists can act carefully to protect the natural environment. Over the decades, a new discipline has been created to counter the environment called Landscape Approach, based on which natural environment is something beyond just a view or environment and it has also semantic aspects. The approach is the same relationship of Iranians with nature, due to which they respect nature and consider various meanings for that. Hence, with the conceptual framework of the landscape approach and with using the descriptive-analytical method, the research results have been analyzed with emphasis on Alborz Mountain studies.

**Keywords** | *tourism, landscape approach, mountain landscape, Alborz.*

**Introduction** | The mountains have been always important because of the spring and rivers, the place of sunrise and the place for gods, and the place of the relationship of prophets with the God. On the other hand, the mountain is a symbol of ascension and spirituality and has been always the secret of resistance, excellence, and the place for power and holiness in man's belief. Mountains have been a source of light for human beings and have played the role of God for people. Mountains are mostly the contact point of the sky and the earth and can be regarded as a center, a point through which the axis of the world passes, and a place full of holiness. Mountain is next to the sky and hence, it has dual holiness: on one hand, it is a symbol of

excellence and rising and on the other hand; it is the territory of the holiness of atmospheric effects and could be regarded as a place for gods. The architecture of mountain-shaped buildings used to be affected by this belief that that the mountaintop is the nearest place to the sky and they used to try to build their houses on the highest points of mountains to have access to the sky.

Moreover, mountains are barriers against the airflow of the earth, and the air and the moisture in them are rose as a result of countering the mountain and becoming cold. Meanwhile, rain and snow become possible. Rain penetrates the earth through the holes in the mountains and can be saved from evaporation, and is saved in form of snow and provides the water for the rivers and water streams. Hence, mountains are

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called freshwater towers in the world. Biodiversity: according to an ecologic principle, the more the heights of a place are, the more biodiversity would be. Mountains are the source for rivers and are the source of civilization and the origin of culture and cultural variety and all big rivers of the world have origin in the mountains.

From the perspective of Iranians, the mountain has special importance and position and it could be mentioned that the majority of religious ceremonies used to be held in the mountains and Iranian people have always considered a ritual and holy value for that. Alborz Mountain as the most important mountain in Iran has been the place for gods and has been a contact point between people and god because of its height.

Over history, complicated relations have existed between man and mountain, and mountain has been an important element for the people. According to the beliefs of Iranians, Alborz Holy Mountain is located in the middle of the earth and is connected to the sky. Alborz Mountain is the column of the sky, and the sun, moon, and stars rotate around that (Razi, 1967). The description presented by writers about the Alborz Mountain shows that Alborz is not a geographical mountain, but also is a heavenly mountain and is a symbol of heaven. The Soroush house on top of Alborz has natural light and moon and the stars rotate around it (Mohassel, Behnamfar & Zamanipoor, 2012). In a section of the Global Mountain Charter, it has been mentioned due to naming the year 2003 as the Mountain's Year: mountainous regions of the world have been the bed and origin of valuable and original civilizations. The special environment, at which the people of this region have been living over history, has led to the creation of special behaviors, situations, and relations between man and the natural environment that can be the infrastructure for all civilizations. The legends created by the civilizations and the values relevant to them and socio-economic structures have been significantly affected by geographical position. Mountains form one-fifth of the earth landscape and can be the habitat of at least one-tenth of the world's people and one-third of people of the world are dependent on the mountains from different aspects (food, electricity, wood, and minerals). Half of the people around the world are depended on mountains to meet their water needs. Mountains are the most beautiful and effective dominant views on the earth. They provide a life for plains and form the biologic foundations of a huge population of the people around the world and are the source for rivers as life arteries for human societies (Guide to Prepare Mountain Protected Areas, 2009; IUCN, 2004). For the eastern people, the natural elements have subjective meanings and the meanings of natural elements are concerning their functions. It means that the deeper the functional relationship of people and a natural element is, the stronger their subjective relationship with that element would be. Hence, as the mountain for Iranian

people is a multidimensional element and includes different dimensions, it is necessary to have overall and true cognition of this natural element to have a good perception of presence at this place. Concerning mountain tourism, comprehensive and multidimensional information about mountains can cause a better relationship between tourists and the environment. Besides, to have a better feel and more understanding of tourists about the environment, it can make them have more sense of belonging to the environment and avoid damaging the mountains. Hence, the main purpose of this study is to provide a holistic attitude towards to the issue of the mountain through taking different functions and different meanings of the mountain over the time for the Iranian people and Iranian culture. The issue of the study is that more comprehensive cognition is needed to have a perfect understanding of the environment and to make at least a better relationship with that and the more the cognition about the environment is, the more understanding of the environment would be. For example, if people of Tehran go to the mountains north of Tehran for tourism, they should know that the mountains are the cause of deployment of their city. In addition to this, the history and the story of the mountains can cause a different relationship with these mountains. As Alborz Mountains and especially Damavand Mountain are meaningful for Iranian people, other people of other cities are in a different relationship with these mountains. Even this issue can be useful for non-Iranian tourists to understand this environment.

## Theoretical framework

### Various approaches in mountain tourism in Iran

The studies and review of relevant news of mountain tourism show that the mountains and folds of Iran have been important to an extent that can enter the tourism industry of the country. There are various approaches in this field:

#### Planning system approach to mountain tourism

This approach has the highest frequency in this field and lack of appropriate planning can be regarded as a reason for failure and unused specific capacity of mountains in the tourism industry (Tabrizi & Mehrmand, 2011; Rezaei, 2016; Motahari, Arjmandi & Riazi, 2018; Jozi & Behzadi, 2015; Salehi, 2017).

#### The economic approach to mountain tourism

On this basis, economic importance affects other aspects of that and considers mountain tourism an important way for the economic development of mountainous regions (Mountain Tourism, 2016; Karami, 2019; Ghadiri Masoum, Rezvani, Jomepour & Baghiani, 2015).

#### The sustainable development approach to mountain tourism

This is an approach, in which some attitudes and studies have been presented based on the concept of sustainable development (development based on environment) and expressed the economic development of mountain tourism, besides, to pay attention to protection and optimal use of

resources and the natural environment (Behraves, 2010; Babakhani, 2013; Zahedi, 2009).

#### **Sport approach to mountain tourism**

This approach is another aspect of mountain tourism, which pays specific attention to sport in this field. This approach emphasizes mountaineering sport and believes that the development of mountaineering is a highlighted part of the development of mountain tourism (Ouhadi, 2017; Akhundi, Danekar, Arjomandi & Shabanali fami, 2015).

#### **The approach of considering the development of participation and public interest**

This approach believes that economic prosperity caused by mountain tourism is a field to achieve social justice and highlights the role of people of mountainous regions in the development of tourism (Mousavi, 2019; Nabhani, 2018).

#### **Mountain as the natural landscape- the conceptual framework of the landscape approach**

Today, a holistic approach called landscape approach is considered in the relationship between humans and the environment, in which nature can't be considered just as a landscape or an ecologic element and physics. Although the concept comes from the west, the studies show that the attitude of Iranian people at past times to nature has been polysemous. Hence, this concept can be effective in the analysis of the relationship between humans and nature. For example, the meaning of Damavand or Alborz Mountain for Iranian people is different from the meaning in the mind of people of other countries while encountering the mountains. Iranian people living in these mountains have common subjectivity and the mental image of these mountains based on the slogans, stories, myths, idioms, and paintings and this is polysemous subjectivity specified to these people.

European Landscape Convention has provided a comprehensive definition and has described the landscape as the concept of an area, which is understood by people; a region with features arose from the interaction of human components and natural elements, which can encompass nature, urban areas, rural areas and countryside (CEO, 2000).

Based on the definitions, the landscape is another type of place and is the product of the interaction of humans and the environment in outside spaces (Berque, 2008). Simon Bell has analyzed the natural patterns and has found that landscape is a part of the environment, in which people live and understand it by the perceptions (Bell, 2012).

Agustin Berque defines landscape as a type of place with biologic, ontological, and logical assumptions. In other words, he says that the existence of place is not being of that place, but it can be created in connection with the subject and specifically as living things (Berque, 2013). Moreover, the landscape approach to natural elements based on sustainability concepts can lead to the sustainability of the environment. The combination and integration of cognitive and subjective

aspects of aesthetics valuation of the natural environment show considerable advancement in the spiritual and ethical aspects of the human mind. This can lead to environmental sustainability (Habibi, 2013). The landscape is the macro space of human life in the environment and can't be created by itself. With all subjective complications, the human can affect the environment in a reciprocating process (Mansouri, 2010).

### **Functions of the mountain in Iran over time**

#### **• Objective functions**

##### **- Ecologic functions of mountain**

Mountain, the resource for the water supply of habitats: Iran is generally a mountainous and semi-arid country and the mean height of that is more than 1200m from sea level. If there were not mountains, in a country like Iran, rainfall would be mitigated and there would be no runoff in the summer (Research on the role and importance of mountains in the world, 2009). Meanwhile, Alborz Mountain as the tallest mountains of Iran can be considered as the water resource of the largest city of Iran. Two third of Iran's population lives in northern one-third of this country and are directly relevant to Alborz water resource.

##### **- Mountain, the factor for creating microclimate and making pleasant weather**

Alborz Mountains in the north direction as natural barriers to southern hot airflows, and western wet airflows ,can not only cause rainfall in the northern part of the city, but also can lead to natural air circulation in a natural semicircle of heights of the north to the southeast (Safamanesh, 2014). In the past, the mountains were very advantageous for Iranian people. In the heaven, the wise man asks about the cause of the creation of mountains and gets this reply: "these mountains sometimes make wind and sometimes avoid that; sometimes cause rainfall and sometimes protect people against enemies and sometimes save the life of gods" (Afifi, 1995).

##### **- Mountain, one of the main manifestations of nature**

Mountains have encompassed a series of the most beautiful natural effects in them. Heights, valley, waterfall, flowers, and plants, and the folds are the landscapes, which have changed the mountains into unique museums.

##### **Mountain, shelter against the invasion of enemies**

Mountains can be considered as a stable stronghold surrounding the countryside. Safety is one of the main reasons for making cities and villages in the foothill. Under the condition of low safety, the tall mountains were capable to provide safety, so that the enemies could not attack the city. Moreover, the shelters made by people in the middle of the mountains can be also referred to.

##### **Visual relation between mountain and foothill's residents**

Mountain, natural element for identity, symbol and focus point: Mountain as a natural edge and focus point is important for the city and the visual relationship between mountain

and foothill residents is an important objective connection of mountain and people. Edge remains in minds of citizens as a symbol and criterion of some part of the urban area and provides the conditions for designing it as an identity-making element (Yarahmadi, 2010). According to the mutual effect of nature and culture, an ecologic symbol (mountain) is a part of cultural semiotics and tends to study the behavior and relation of people with the natural environment based on the perception and interpretation of signs to make an identity for the public landscape of the city through potentials of ecologic elements (Soltani, 2009). Alborz Mountain can be considered as the northern edge of the city and is a natural focal point. The villages and palaces in its foothill can be considered as manmade focus points of the city (Alehashemi, 2014).

#### **Mountain's livelihood function: agriculture, livestock, and hunting**

Mountains in Iran have created various ecosystems. Besides, providing water, mountains can also provide food for the residents of the foothill. Bondaheshn (a book in Pahlavi language) says in this field: "the mountains have been created to provide the food for Aturban, Arteshtaran, and Esterioshan" (Pourdawoud, 1933). About the Alborz Mountains, the heights and alluvial plains created by these mountains have created agricultural and animal biodiversity. Over history, the mountains have been a resource to supply food and water for the residents.

#### **Mountain, a place for recreation**

Mountains have always been places for recreation in Iran and this function still exists. The connection with mountains is tangible in Tehran, especially in the weekends. Ferdowsi refers to the nature of the mountains in his poetry. In the following, the poem by Ferdowsi refers to the recreational aspect of the mountains (Dariush, 2016).

*Now, it is time to drink freshwater, the water of these mountains smells wonderful*

*The air is fresh and water is coming out of the earth, drink the cold water and think about nothing*

#### **• Subjective functions of mountain**

##### **Mythical functions of mountain**

The closeness of man to the sky on the mountain and the imagination of presence in the center of the earth while being on top of the mountain: From the perspective of Iranian people, the earth has been intact. There has been no movement among the earth, moon, and stars. However, with the sudden invasion of enemies, the earth has been deformed and mountains were created and rivers were also created and moon and stars began circulation (Hinnells, 2007). Moreover, Bondaheshn<sup>1</sup> says that Tirag Mountain as summit of Alborz Mountain is the center of the world (Razi, 1967).

**Mountain, place of mythical stories and presence of myths:** Based on Mehryasht (Iranian myth), Mehr (mythical god) comes every day on top of the Sepand and Alborz Mountains and looks at the Arian houses and people and cares that no

one breaks a promise. Hence, Mehr looks at promises and she has the feature of an awake and clever god and never sleeps and cares about everything at the world (Mousavi, 2009). In addition to the Mehr myth, Alborz is the place for the growth of Fereydoon, the place for phoenix to live, and the place for Arash to throw an arrow from the bow. In Shahnameh and the Kiumars tale, it has been mentioned that he was living on the mountain as the first king and governor of Pars<sup>2</sup>:

*Kiumars became the king of the earth and made his palace on the mountain*

#### **Mountain, a holy place**

From the perspective of Iranians, the most important myth relevant to the mountain was formed in the customs of Arian people. The human was created in mountains at the first and the spirits were also judged on Chinvat Bridge (mythical place) (Mousavi & Khosrawi, 2008).

In Zoroastrianism (religion of ancient Iranians), the mountain has been a holy place, and people used to worship that. Avesta (book of Zoroastrianism) says Oh Hom (a devout)! I admire clouds and rain, where you have been born. I admire the top of the mountain, on which you have grown. Herdowt writes about pray of Parsian in the Achaemenid period: worshipping and praying used to be done not in the big sanctuary, but also on the mountains and in open spaces. Parsian used to climb tall mountains and worship Mazda<sup>3</sup>. They believed that the whole sky was the place of Mazda. Also, they used to worship the sun, the moon, the earth, fire and water, and wind on the mountains (Ghorshi, 2010).

Respecting mountains and describing that as a place of holy things by Shahnameh has such reflection that a devout called "Hom" from the Fereydon race says:

*While worshipping on the mountains, he used to go away from the flock*

*Hom is a good man and worships God in open space and away from a special place*

Alborz Mountain has been the main place of Mehr (the god of the sun) and Anahita (the goddess of water) as two life-giving elements and has been the place for Iranian people for saying prayers. However, with the advent of religion, the mosques were built inside the city and the mountain lost its position from this perspective. However, the presence of shrines and mosques on mountains can show the same excellent position as a mountain in the looks of people.

#### **Mountain in literature folklore of Iran**

Literature is one of the main manifestations of culture. Literature is the mirror of events, customs, rites, behaviors, efforts, and thoughts of society. It is the language of the nation and is also the ID card of the nation. A society can be known with an analysis of its content and subject of literature. Through knowing literature, social behaviors can be understood and the evolution of social phenomena can be traced (Ruh Al-Amini, 2000). Hence, one way to know the subjectivity of people about a phenomenon is the analysis of that in the literature



and poetry. In a study under the title of “the position of the mountain in Iran literature over the time and the impact the modernity on that”, the approach of poets to the mountain can be analyzed over time: “The investigations conducted in the field of meanings of the mountain in the literature show 9 general approaches of poets to mountains: an approach to the mountain as an element with glory; a phenomenon with human values; a phenomenon with a mythical position, a symbol of stability and resistance; pure approach to mountain physics; an approach for mountain personification; approach to a high position of the mountain; pure approach to nature of mountain; and ayah-based approach that the existing world can be known through that” (Dariush & Motedayen, 2019).

## Conclusion

Nowadays, a critical part of the leisure time of people belongs to recreation in nature and sports in natural environments. Walking in the mountain and mountaineering are the most important entertainments and natural sports. The statistics provided by the Chairman of the Mountaineering Board of Tehran Province show that on average, more than 500 thousand climber and tourists come to the northern heights of Tehran at weekends (Ministry of Sports and Youth News, November 2012). However, this is limited to holidays, and congestion in these days can damage the mountains. All foothills and even tall hillsides of north, west, and east of Tehran have been damaged by urbanization. Any kind of additional loading in the highest point of the countryside can destroy the mountains in the countryside of the metropolis (the letter of Mountain Watch Group Mountaineers Association). The decisions made for mountains in Iran show that mountain is natural and physical environment. People go to the mountains, and not for something that is

not available in cities; they want to go away from the busy cities to the mountains. Such invasion of mountains is not a good event. What is the reason that mountaineering is specified to weekend and mountain tourism is not in the daily plan of people? (Despite the Japanese people, who take day service to go to Fuji Mountain as a national symbol, but much shorter than Alborz). People go to the mountains, but they never have information about that. Mountain is a combination of subjectivity and objectivity; although people now pay attention just to its objectivity. If people become familiar with mountains and get more meanings, tourism in mountains can be changed and go towards prosperity. To have proper information about mountains paves the way to get more feelings, find identity in mountains, and change the perceptions about self and the mountains. The current status of the mountain and tourism industry shows that existing approaches have been unable to provide a good definition of mountain. It seems that lack of considering the mountain as a whole has caused the creation of incomplete definitions and approaches for mountain tourism. The results obtained from the study show that mountain is a multidimensional element and with various meanings for Iranian people, and the meanings have been changed a lot over time. In other words, it should be mentioned that based on the landscape approach, the mountain has been a cultural element at past times and has had subjective and objective dimensions. However, it has lost its subjective aspects over time and is not a cultural element anymore. This may be an answer to the question that why the capacity of mountains has been neglected. On the other hand, the landscape approach to the mountain as a holistic approach considers mountains at the same time as the subjective and objective element to cause different definition and meaning for mountain tourism.

## Endnote

1. Name of a book in Pahlavi language, published in late Sassanid Era. Banheshan means fundamental creation.

2. The ancient name of Iran

3. Based on Avesta, Mazda is the God of all good things and the whole existence.

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#### HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Dariush, B. & Dastyar, F. (2020). Landscape approach in mountain tourism; a case study of Alborz Mountains. *Tourism of Culture*, 1(2), 33-38.

DOI: DOI: 10.22034/toc.2020.239247.1007

URL: [http://www.jct-sj.com/article\\_109999-en.html](http://www.jct-sj.com/article_109999-en.html)

