

## Rural Tourism in Razavi Khorasan Province: Challenges, Opportunities, and Strategic Planning Solutions for Sustainable Development

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### Abstract

This study aims to develop a strategic planning model for rural tourism management in Razavi Khorasan Province based on sustainable development. Rural tourism, as a tool for sustainable development, plays an important role in improving the economic and social conditions of rural communities. For the sustainable development of rural tourism, comprehensive and systematic planning is required that considers all dimensions and aspects. This planning must be carried out with the participation of all stakeholders, including local communities, tourists, the private sector, and government entities. Environmental protection and preservation of the cultural and social authenticity of rural communities are fundamental principles of sustainable rural tourism development. This study, through a thorough review of strategic planning literature in rural tourism and the development of a suitable model for Razavi Khorasan Province, seeks to provide solutions for the sustainable development of rural tourism in this region. The statistical population included tourism experts and residents of 59 villages with tourism potential in Razavi Khorasan Province. Using Cochran's formula, 384 individuals were selected as the sample. Data were collected via a researcher-made questionnaire and analyzed using SPSS and PLS software. Findings showed that economic components have the greatest impact on sustainable rural tourism. There is also a significant positive relationship between tourist security and environmental protection, as well as between tourist motivations and locals' adherence to local customs. The results led to the presentation of a strategic management model for rural tourism emphasizing sustainable development.

**Key words:** *Strategic planning, rural tourism, sustainable development, environmental management, Razavi Khorasan.*

### Introduction

In recent years, the expansion of the tourism industry has attracted considerable attention from economic officials and experts. This industry, as a global system, accounts for a significant share of the world's local gross domestic product. For success in tourism, a region

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Autism is a neurological disorder that disrupts the brain's ability to process information effectively, leading to difficulties in social interaction and communication. According to Yule (2006), the identification of brain lesions in individuals with specific speech disorders has clarified the role of certain brain areas in normal speech abilities. Numerous studies have been conducted on various parts of the brain related to language functions. Damage to the Broca's area causes issues in speech production, while damage to Wernicke's area results in difficulties in speech comprehension. Since both areas are located in the brain's left hemisphere and damage to their counterparts in the right hemisphere does not cause similar issues, it is inferred that language processing is predominantly a left-hemisphere function.

#### **Problem Statement:**

This research seeks to answer how rural tourism in Razavi Khorasan Province can be sustainably developed through strategic planning. To achieve this, identifying attractions, potentials, facilities, and tourist expectations, along with planning compatible with the social, cultural, and climatic conditions of the region, is necessary.

#### **Significance and Necessity of the Study:**

By providing a strategic planning model, this study can assist tourism managers and planners in Razavi Khorasan Province to make more informed decisions toward the sustainable development of this industry. Also, it can help identify strengths,

weaknesses, opportunities, and threats facing rural tourism in the region and offer solutions to improve the current situation.

#### **Research Objectives:**

This study aims to:

- Explain a strategic planning model for sustainable tourism development in the study area based on sustainable development components
- Develop and promote the tourism market in the study area
- Identify indicators of rural sustainable development
- Support international tourism
- Ensure the security and rights of tourists

#### **Hypotheses:**

1. Rural tourism in Razavi Khorasan Province is sustainable.
2. Economic components have a greater role in sustainable rural tourism in the study area compared to other criteria.
3. There is a significant positive relationship between the security and support of international tourists and event-based tourism with environmental protection in the region.
4. There is a significant positive relationship between tourist motivations and rural residents' adherence to local, national, and religious customs.

### **Research Questions:**

This study aims to answer the following:

1. What are the various indicators of rural tourism in the study area?
2. What are the factors affecting rural tourists' motivations in the study area?
3. What are the SWOT analysis results and rural tourism capabilities in Razavi Khorasan Province?
4. What are the challenges and opportunities of rural tourism, and what are the most important strategies for empowering sustainable tourism management in the study area?

### **Study Innovation:**

1. Providing a native model specific to Razavi Khorasan Province
2. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods in data analysis

### **Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations:**

#### **Importance of Rural Tourism:**

Rural tourism is considered a potential for social, and economic development, and revival of rural areas, especially low-production areas. This type of tourism can diversify the rural economy and support environmental protection and rural culture (Yasouri, 2015).

#### **Necessity of Strategic Planning:**

Tourism development requires strategic planning to prevent negative social and environmental effects and to be implemented cohesively and harmoniously. Strategic planning can improve the competitive position and sustainable growth of

rural tourism destinations (Moulani Heshjin et al., 2017).

#### **Strategic Tourism Planning:**

Strategic tourism planning includes setting goals, identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, and formulating strategies to achieve sustainable development. Various models exist, each with specific features and applications (Karimzadeh et al., 2016).

#### **Sustainable Rural Tourism Development:**

Sustainable rural tourism development requires attention to economic, social, and environmental dimensions. This development should meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Foujan Mokhtari, 2020).

#### **Opportunities:**

##### **Historical, religious, and natural background:**

Khorasan Razavi has diverse attractions that can attract both domestic and international tourists.

**Climate diversity and environmental variety:** The province features various climates and natural landscapes, providing diverse opportunities for rural tourism.

**Rural tourism as a tool for sustainable development:** This type of tourism can contribute to improving the economic and social conditions of rural communities.

**Development of eco-tourism:** With pristine natural areas, diverse wildlife, and rich indigenous culture, Khorasan Razavi has a high capacity for eco-tourism development. This kind of tourism can generate

sustainable income for local communities while preserving the environment.

**Religious and cultural tourism:** The presence of the holy shrine of Imam Reza (PBUH) in Mashhad and other religious and historical sites across the province creates a high potential for attracting religious and cultural tourists. This capacity can be utilized to develop rural tourism in areas surrounding these attractions.

**Diversity of agricultural products and handicrafts:** Khorasan Razavi has diverse agricultural products and high-quality handicrafts that can be used as rural tourism attractions. Organizing agricultural product festivals and handicraft exhibitions can help attract tourists and introduce these products.

**Geographical location:** Proximity to Central Asian countries and relatively adequate transportation infrastructure create opportunities to attract international tourists (Rafiei Darani, 2024).

#### **Challenges:**

**Need for strategic planning:** Lack of proper planning can lead to economic, social, cultural, and environmental problems.

**Infrastructure shortage:** Many rural areas in Khorasan Razavi suffer from a lack of tourism infrastructure such as suitable accommodations, restaurants, adequate access roads, and health services. This can hinder tourism development in these areas.

**Preserving cultural and natural authenticity:** Tourism development must be managed in a way that does not cause environmental destruction or loss of the local communities' culture and

traditions.

**Insufficient local community awareness:** Many rural communities are unaware of their region's tourism capacities and do not know how to utilize them. Educating and empowering local communities for active participation in tourism development is essential.

**Inadequate marketing and advertising:** Rural tourism attractions in Khorasan Razavi have not been well introduced to tourists. Targeted marketing and advertising are needed to attract domestic and foreign tourists.

**Seasonality of tourism:** Tourism in some rural areas of Khorasan Razavi is seasonal due to climatic conditions, which can lead to unstable incomes for local communities. Considering these challenges and opportunities, appropriate planning can be carried out for sustainable rural tourism development in Khorasan Razavi.

#### **Types of Rural Tourism Indicators:**

##### **A) Economic Indicators:**

1. **Employment:** The amount of employment created in villages through tourism activities (direct and indirect).
2. **Income:** Increase in income of rural households and local businesses through providing services and products to tourists.
3. **Investment:** The amount of investment in tourism infrastructure, accommodations, and related facilities in rural areas.
4. **Economic diversification:** The role of tourism in creating diverse income sources in villages and reducing dependence on traditional

agriculture.

5. Added value: The amount of added value that tourism activities contribute to the rural economy.
6. Fair wealth distribution: Examining whether the economic benefits of tourism are fairly distributed among the local community.

#### **B) Socio-cultural Indicators:**

1. Preservation and revival of cultural and natural heritage: The role of tourism in protecting historical buildings, customs, handicrafts, and the natural environment of villages.
2. Empowerment of local community: The level of participation and role of the local community in tourism planning, management, and utilization.
3. Cultural awareness enhancement: Cultural exchange between tourists and local communities and increasing awareness about each other's cultural values.
4. Human development: Improving education levels, skills, and capacities of local communities related to the tourism industry.
5. Quality of life: The impact of tourism on villagers' quality of life, including access to services, welfare facilities, and social security.
6. Sense of belonging and identity: Strengthening pride and attachment to place among villagers through valuing their cultural and natural assets.

#### **C) Infrastructure and Service Indicators:**

1. Accessibility and transportation: Quality of roads, public transportation, and access to villages for tourists.
2. Accommodation: Diversity and quality of existing accommodations in villages (eco-lodges, local houses, small hotels, etc.).
3. Welfare facilities: Availability of restaurants, health centers, handicraft shops, and other services required by tourists.
4. Information and guidance: Availability of tourism information centers, signboards, and trained local guides.
5. Communication and information technology: Access to internet and communication networks in rural areas for tourists and tourism operators.
6. Waste management and hygiene: Waste management systems and environmental hygiene maintenance in rural tourism areas.

#### **D) Management and Planning Indicators:**

1. Strategic planning: Existence of rural tourism development plans at provincial and county levels.
2. Stakeholder participation: Level of cooperation and coordination among government organizations, the private sector, local communities, and other stakeholders in tourism development.
3. Laws and regulations: Presence of facilitating and regulating laws and regulations for rural tourism activities.
4. Monitoring and evaluation: Systems for

quality control and impact assessment of rural tourism.

5. Marketing and advertising: Strategies and activities for attracting tourists to rural areas of the province.
6. Training and capacity building: Educational programs for rural tourism actors and local communities.

#### **E) Environmental Indicators:**

1. Biodiversity conservation: Impact of tourism on preserving plant and animal species and natural habitats in villages.
2. Natural resource management: How water, soil, and energy resources are used in tourism activities and efforts for their sustainability.
3. Pollution: Levels of pollution (air, water, soil, noise) caused by tourism activities and ways to reduce it.
4. Sustainable transportation: Promoting the use of clean transportation means and reducing the negative effects of tourist transport.
5. Environmental awareness: Raising awareness among tourists and local communities about the importance of environmental protection.
6. Carrying capacity: Assessment and management of ecological and social carrying capacity of rural tourism areas (Rafiei Darani, Danayi, 2024).

SWOT Analysis of Rural Tourism Capabilities in Khorasan Razavi Province:

Several factors influence the motivation of rural tourists in Khorasan Razavi Province. These factors can be divided into the following general categories:

#### **A) Natural and ecotourism attractions:**

**Pristine and beautiful landscapes:** The presence of mountains, valleys, rivers, waterfalls, springs, and lush plains such as the Shamkhal Valley, the Akhlmad and Artakand waterfalls, the Panj Dareh Torqaba River, and the village of Zeshk with its pleasant climate are strong motivations for tourists who seek peace and enjoyment of nature.

**Biodiversity:** The presence of specific plant and animal species in the rural areas of the province can be a motivation for travel for those interested in nature and wildlife (although this is not emphasized in specific Khorasan Razavi sources, it is generally important in rural ecotourism).

**Recreational opportunities in nature:** The possibility of carrying out activities such as mountaineering, hiking, cycling, fishing, and camping in the countryside of villages is a motivation for active tourists.

#### **B) Cultural and historical attractions:**

**Traditional texture of villages and special architecture:** Villages with stepped architecture such as Kang village, adobe, and mud houses with old texture, have a special attraction for tourists interested in culture and history.

**Customs and rural lifestyle:** Experiencing the simple and intimate life of villagers, participating in local ceremonies and rituals, getting to know traditional crafts and arts, and tasting local cuisine

are important motivations for cultural tourists.

**Historical and religious monuments:** The presence of imamzades, old mosques, castles, caravanserais, and other historical monuments in villages can be a motivation for religious tourists and history enthusiasts (although the main focus of religious tourism in Khorasan Razavi is on Mashhad, villages can also have religious attractions).

**C) Factors related to the tourism experience:**

**Peace and distance from the hustle and bustle of the city:** Many rural tourists are looking for a quiet atmosphere away from the hustle and bustle of city life, and villages provide this opportunity.

**Affordable:** Compared to urban destinations, rural tourism can be a more affordable option for some tourists.

**Authentic and different experience:** Staying in eco-lodges, interacting with locals, and experiencing rural-style living create a sense of authenticity and difference for tourists.

**Security and intimacy:** The safe and intimate atmosphere of villages can be attractive to some tourists, especially families.

**Accessibility and appropriate infrastructure (developing):** As access to villages becomes easier and accommodation and service facilities improve, the motivation to travel to these areas increases.

**D) Psychological and social factors:**

**Need for rest and rejuvenation:** The relaxing nature of villages can help tourists restore energy and reduce stress.

**Need for learning and discovery:** Getting to know

new cultures and nature satisfies tourists' curiosity and learning.

**Need for social connection:** Interaction with the local community and other tourists in an intimate atmosphere can be a motivation for travel

**Spending leisure time with family and friends:** Villages can be a suitable destination for family and friendly trips. (Hajarian, 2023)

**Strategy for empowering tourism management based on sustainable development in Khorasan Razavi Province**

a) Creating an integrated and coordinated management structure

**Establishing a sustainable tourism management institution:** Establishing a cross-sectoral institution at the provincial level with the presence of representatives of relevant government organizations (cultural heritage, tourism and handicrafts, environment, agricultural jihad, roads, and urban development, etc.), the private sector (tourism organizations, investors), local communities (village representatives, Islamic councils), and universities and research centers. The task of this institution will be to formulate policies, and strategic planning, coordinate between stakeholders, and monitor the implementation of sustainable tourism programs.

**Developing a comprehensive document for sustainable tourism in the province:** Preparing and approving a long-term strategic document for sustainable tourism in Khorasan Razavi by determining specific goals, strategies, implementation plans, evaluation indicators, and



responsibilities of each stakeholder. This document should be developed taking into account the specific characteristics of the province (the presence of the Holy Shrine, the diversity of natural and cultural attractions, and a strong rural context).

**Establishing coordination mechanisms at different levels:** Establishing effective communication and coordination between the provincial governing body, county offices, and local tourism management in villages.

**B) Empowering local communities and their active participation:**

**Educational and skill building:** Holding training courses for local communities in various fields related to sustainable tourism, including ecotourism accommodation management, local tourism guides, handicrafts, marketing and sales of local products, environmental protection, and cultural heritage.

**Supporting the establishment of small and home-based businesses:** Providing financial and technical facilities and support to villagers to establish businesses related to sustainable tourism, such as ecotourism accommodation, handicraft workshops, production of local food products, and provision of tourism services.

**Strengthening the role of local organizations:** Supporting the establishment and strengthening of cooperatives and rural tourism organizations for the participatory management of tourism resources and benefits.

**Information and awareness:** Holding workshops

and awareness programs for local communities on the importance of sustainable tourism, its benefits, and responsibilities.

**Establishing participatory decision-making mechanisms:** Providing appropriate opportunities for the active participation of local communities in the planning, implementation, and monitoring of tourism projects in rural areas

**C) Sustainable resource conservation and management:**

**Ecological and social carrying capacity assessment:** Conducting detailed studies to determine the carrying capacity of rural areas in terms of environment and society before tourism development and managing activities based on this capacity.

**Sustainable infrastructure development:** Investing in the development of environmentally friendly infrastructure in rural areas, such as appropriate waste and sewage management systems, the use of renewable energy, and water consumption management.

**Protecting natural and cultural heritage:** Implementing programs for the protection and restoration of historical and natural monuments with the participation of local communities and allocating appropriate financial resources.

**Promoting responsible tourism:** Educating tourists about responsible behavior in rural areas, respecting local culture and customs, and protecting the environment.

**Continuous monitoring and evaluation:** Establishing monitoring and evaluation systems to



measure the economic, social, and environmental impacts of tourism in rural areas and amending programs if necessary.

#### **D) Marketing and promotion of sustainable tourism:**

##### **Sustainable tourism branding of Khorasan Razavi:**

Creating a strong brand for sustainable tourism in the province, emphasizing its unique natural and cultural attractions and commitment to the principles of sustainability.

**Using appropriate marketing channels:** Using digital media, specialized exhibitions, and collaborating with travel agencies to introduce the province's sustainable tourism attractions.

##### **Developing sustainable tourism products:**

Designing and offering diverse and attractive tourism packages focusing on authentic rural experiences, environmentally friendly activities, and interacting with local communities (Behboodi Issa Lou, 2017).

#### **Why is this strategy the most important?**

**Long-term sustainability:** Without the active participation of local communities and the protection of resources, tourism development will not be sustainable in the long term and can lead to environmental degradation, loss of indigenous culture, and dissatisfaction among local communities.

**Fair distribution of benefits:** Empowering local communities ensures that the economic benefits of tourism are distributed more equitably among rural residents and help improve their livelihoods.

**Maintaining the authenticity of attractions:** The

participation of local communities in tourism management helps to maintain the cultural and natural authenticity of attractions and prevents their excessive commercialization.

#### **Increasing the quality of the tourism experience:**

Tourists who interact with local communities and enjoy the pristine environment will have a richer and more satisfying experience.

#### **Method:**

This research is applied in terms of purpose and descriptive survey in terms of method.

The statistical population includes:

15 tourism experts (using purposive sampling) and 384 residents of villages with tourism potential (using cluster sampling)

Data collection tool:

A researcher-made questionnaire whose validity was confirmed by experts and its reliability was measured with Cronbach's alpha (above 0.7). The data were analyzed using structural equation modeling in PLS software.

#### **Findings**

The results of the data analysis showed that:

1. Economic components with a path coefficient of 0.406 have the greatest impact on sustainable rural tourism ( $p < 0.002$ )
2. There is a positive and significant relationship between tourist security and environmental protection ( $\beta = 0.760$ ,  $p < 0.001$ )
3. Tourist motivations are positively related to adherence to local customs ( $\beta = 0.746$ ,  $p < 0.001$ )
4. Tourism development did not have a significant impact on its sustainability ( $p > 0.05$ )

Paths	Path Coefficients	P-value	T-value	Interpretation
Tourist Security -> Sustainable tourism	0.011	0.869	0.165	Not significant
Tourist motivation -> Sustainable tourism	0.063	0.383	0.872	Not significant
Product sales -> Sustainable tourism	0.493	0.000	6.772	Significant
Tourism development -> Sustainable tourism	0.083	0.236	1.185	Not significant
Economic components -> Sustainable tourism	0.406	0.002	5.265	Significant

(Table1: Path analysis test results for hypothesis)

Paths	Path Coefficients	P-value	T-value	Interpretation
Tourist Security -> Environmental protection	0.760	0.000	23.613	Significant

(Table2: Path analysis test results for hypothesis2)

Paths	Path Coefficients	P-value	T-value	Interpretation
Tourist motivation -> Adherence to customs	0.746	0.000	22.649	Significant

(Table 3: Path analysis test results for hypothesis3)

### Discussion and Conclusion:

The findings indicate that strategic planning for rural tourism should emphasize three main axes:

1. **Economic development:** Creating sustainable jobs, developing local products, and improving infrastructure.
2. **Environmental protection:** Waste management, preservation of natural resources, and educating local communities.
3. **Preserving indigenous culture:**

Strengthening handicrafts, local customs, and native festivals.

Rural tourism has a high potential for the economic and social development of rural areas, but achieving sustainable development requires strategic planning and management. This planning must address all aspects of development and the preservation of natural and cultural resources. Considering conducted studies and research, strategic planning for rural tourism is essential and

inevitable. Ignoring this important issue leads to various economic, social, cultural, and environmental problems. Rural tourism, as a tool for sustainable development, plays a significant role in improving the economic and social status of rural communities. By creating employment and increasing income, it helps reduce poverty and deprivation in these areas. For sustainable rural tourism development, a comprehensive and documented plan is necessary, considering all dimensions and aspects. This planning must be done with the participation of all stakeholders, including local communities, tourists, the private sector, and the government. Furthermore, environmental protection and preserving the cultural and social authenticity of rural communities are fundamental principles of sustainable rural tourism development.

#### **Practical Suggestions:**

1. **Policy:** Developing a strategic document for rural tourism in the province.
2. **Implementation:** Training local communities, developing ecotourism, establishing tourism service offices in villages, and creating communication networks between tourist-friendly villages.
3. **Research:** Conducting comparative studies with other provinces.

#### **Limitations:**

The limitations of this research include its focus on one province and not examining regional differences. It is suggested that future studies compare different provinces.

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