

A Study of the Status Quo of Sports Tourism Industry in Western Provinces of Iran and Strategies for its Development

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Abstract: The purpose of the present research was to describe the current condition of sports tourism in the western provinces of Iran and to compare it with the desired condition from the perspective of the members of the academic staffs of Islamic Azad Universities in the fields of physical education, management and economics. A researcher-made questionnaire was used in the present research whose validity and reliability were verified by some professors of physical education, management and economics and using Cronbach's alpha, the internal consistency coefficients of the two sections of the questionnaire were $\alpha = 0.92$ for the section on current condition and $\alpha \leq 0.05$ for the section on desired condition, indicating the high validity of the questionnaire in both sections. These questionnaires were distributed among 50 persons of the academic staff in the fields of management, economics and physical education in Zanjan, Sanandaj, Kermanshah and Hamadan and were collected by the researcher once they were filled out. For statistical analysis, t-test for independent samples was applied in order to examine the difference between the current condition and the desired condition of sports tourism industry of Western Iran ($\alpha \leq 0.05$). Results revealed that in the view of the members of academic staffs in Western Iran, there is a significant difference between the current condition and the desired condition of tourism subscales. Considering the fact that the vast country of Iran, especially in its western provinces, enjoys various sports tourism capacities and potentials, both natural and human-made, managers and planners in the tourism and sports sectors of the country as well as researchers must make necessary effort to shape and develop this industry with proper planning and strategies, so that in near future we will witness the development of this industry and the exploitation of its various advantages by the country and especially in the western part of Iran.

Key words: Sports Tourism • Industry • Western Provinces of Iran • Development

INTRODUCTION

In the modern age tourism has turned into the greatest industry in the world. This industry constitutes 11% of the world's gross domestic product (GDP) and has 200 million practitioners which is equivalent to one person from each 12 jobs. Further, each year this growing industry transports more than 800 million people at the international level (WTO 2005) and it is expected that this number will be doubled until 2020 [1].

Countries in the world value tourism as an income-producing and development-generating industry and have made great effort to promote and expand it [2]. Factors such as increase of income, reduction in working time, increase in the number of holidays, inactivity,

enhancement of life standards, growth and development of communications, development of technology, development of roads and transportation and the change in people's needs are some of the common reasons that has led the modern human being toward tourism and sports, resulting in an increasing and unexpected growth for these two industries in the contemporary age [3].

From about two decades ago, we witnessed a shift of attention from the two industries of tourism and sports as well as their academic sectors to the combination of these two industries, which led to a multi-billion-dollar industry which has experienced the fastest and most phenomenal growth over the past few years. This industry is called sports tourism and has numerous enthusiasts and aficionados throughout the world [4].

According to the statistics published in different countries, about 20 to 30 percent of tourists have mentioned sports as their primary reason for travelling and more than half of the trips during holidays are for the sake of sports [5]. Sports tourism is thus a developing branch of tourism which according to statistics owns 32% of the worldwide success and achievements of tourism; this issue gains importance when we take into consideration the change in people's life styles and their interests in this phenomenon [5]. Nowadays, one of the several types of tourism which has been very much favored and used is sports tourism [6]. World Tourism Organization named 2004 as the year of sports tourism and in a joint message, the secretary general of WTO and the head of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) underlined that tourism and sports are the two driving forces for stability in economic growth, employment and increase in income [7]. It is currently felt that sports and tourism organizations must operate in close association with one another in order to exploit sports tourism opportunities which will materialize the objectives of both industries [8]. Meanwhile, many countries in the world are now trying to further their sports tourism industries, for this industry can play a prominent role in developing the economy and leaving significant political, sociocultural and environmental impact on different societies [9]. Hosting important regional and international events, holding national sports festivals, establishing recreation and sports centers dedicated to sport tourists and equipping and preparing natural sports attractions are some of the measures that are taken in different countries in order to attract domestic and foreign sports tourists.

However, in Iran - in spite of its numerous capacities in attracting various tourists and considering the importance and necessity of developing tourism of the country - there has not yet been any systematic, efficient policymaking and planning for this industry and unfortunately, the tourism industry and as a result the sports tourism of the country has not found its true place [10]. In any country, whether developed or developing, tourism involves many economic and social advantages. It is therefore of utmost importance to plan for the development and promotion of this industry [11]. As confirmed by UNESCO and World Tourism Organization (WTO), Iran is one of the ten top countries in terms of tourist attractions and has the greatest natural variety and diversity [12]; while now Iran's share of this market is insignificant and only about 0.1% of its gross domestic product.

Management guides the transition from "current condition" toward "desired condition" and constantly struggles for a better tomorrow [13]. Moreover, in tourism and sports with their various potentials and advantages, management can bring about improvement in international relations, increase the freshness and vitality of the society, promote the idea of engaging in sports and healthy recreations, improve the health of the society (physical and mental) and create many other economic, social and political advantages [14]; thus, it is essential for managers and experts in the country to develop and promote this industry. Considering the lack of a systematic plan and strategy as well as the lack of an exhaustive and efficient paradigm for developing this industry, the purpose of the present research was to describe the current condition of sports tourism in the western provinces of Iran and to compare it with the desired condition from the perspective of the members of the academic staffs of Islamic Azad Universities in the fields of physical education, management and economics.

Methodology: A researcher-made questionnaire was used in the present research whose validity and reliability were verified by some professors of physical education, management and economics and using Cronbach's alpha, the internal consistency coefficients of the two sections of the questionnaire were $\alpha = 0.92$ for the section on current condition and $\alpha = 0.88$ for the section on desired condition, indicating the high validity of the questionnaire in both sections. These questionnaires were distributed among 50 persons of the academic staff in the fields of management, economics and physical education in Zanjan, Sanandaj, Kermanshah and Hamadan and were collected by the researcher once they were filled out. The questionnaire contained the following 8 subscales:

- Management and Coordination: Questions 1 to 19
- Political and Legal Supports: Questions 20 to 32
- Marketing: Questions 33 to 42
- Infrastructures, Facilities and Establishments: Questions 43 to 47
- Recognizing Potentials and Capacities: Questions 48 to 53
- Research: Questions 54 to 60
- Culture-Building and Motivation: Questions 61 to 70
- Education and Training of Human Resources: Questions 71 to 77

Table 1: Comparison of the current condition and the desired condition of the eight components of sports tourism in the view of respondents N= ?

Component	Levels	Mean	Standard Deviation	T-Value	P-Value
Management and Coordination	Current Condition	1.72	0.33	24.14	0.003
	DesiredCondition	4.28	0.33		
Political and Legal Supports	CurrentCondition	2.16	0.45	22.66	0.002
	DesiredCondition	4.23	0.33		
Marketing	Current Condition	1.84	0.53	20.33	0.004
	Desired Condition	4.24	0.45		
Infrastructures, Facilities, and Establishments	Current Condition	1.83	0.59	21.04	0.005
	Desired Condition	4.28	0.52		
Recognizing Potentials and Capacities	Current Condition	1.86	0.53	26.35	0.005
	Desired Condition	4.25	0.38		
Research	Current Condition	1.77	0.57	24.98	0.004
	Desired Condition	4.17	0.48		
Culture-Building and Motivation	Current Condition	1.89	0.46	27.78	0.000
	Desired Condition	4.14	0.41		
Education and Training of Human Resources	Current Condition	1.77	0.47	25.53	0.004
	Desired Condition	4.18	0.42		

Further, confirmatory factor analysis was applied to determine the construct validity of the questions and eightfold components of the questionnaire and the construct validity was verified (KMO = 0.87 for the section on current condition and KMO = 0.83 for the section on desired condition), signifying the correct categorization of the relative factors.

The following procedures were used for data analysis: first, in order to test the normal distribution of variables, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test and Levene's test were applied to determine the homogeneity of variances between variables. Further, t-test for independent samples was applied in order to examine the difference between the current condition and the desired condition of sports tourism industry of Western Iran ($\alpha = 0.05$).

RESULTS

Using t-test for independent samples revealed that in the view of the members of academic staffs in Western Iran, there is a significant difference between the current condition and the desired condition of tourism subscales (Table 1).

Education and training of human resources is one of the most important components that contribute to the development of sports tourism industry of the country. This component is of little importance in the current condition considering the obtained average; yet in the desired condition, the obtained average proved that this component is of great importance in the development of this industry and thus it was revealed that the greatest gap between the current condition and the desired condition belongs to this component. It must be noted that

the only component that has been evaluated by the respondents to be of average importance is political and legal supports which currently has a better condition in comparison with other factors contributing to the development of sports tourism of the country (other components were of "little" importance) and this component has the smallest gap with the desired condition which indicates that officials and lawmakers of the country are not that much unaware of the significance of the issue of tourism and development.

On the whole, the results of the present research showed that in the view of the members of the academic staffs of universities, "infrastructures, facilities and establishments" is of little importance in the current condition with a mean equal to 1.934, but this component is "of utmost" importance in the desired condition with a mean of 4.38 and is regarded as the most important factor for the development of sports tourism industry of the country and has the highest significance in the present research.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of the present research was to describe the *current condition* of sports tourism industry in Western Iran and to compare this condition with the *desired condition* from the perspective of the members of academic staffs of Islamic Azad Universities in the fields of physical education, management and economics. The results revealed that there is a significant difference between the current condition and the desired condition of all the eight subscales of the questionnaire. All in all, the results of the present research showed that in the

view of sports tourism managers and experts of the country, the component of “*infrastructures, facilities and establishments*” is of little importance in the current condition, but of utmost importance in the desired condition and is thus considered to be the most important factor in the development of sports tourism of the country. Westerbeek *et al.* [15] mentioned sport infrastructures and facilities as important factors in the development of sports tourism and eligibility for hosting important sporting events. Hinch [16] considered the growth and development of infrastructure, facilities and establishments of a country to be essential and effective for developing sports tourism. Thus, considering the huge gap between the current condition and the desired condition of this component in Iran and considering its significance, we can conclude that building infrastructures, facilities and establishments is a key factor in development of sports tourism. Thus, country officials must take measures for developing the infrastructures (e.g. air, land and sea transportation) and facilities (such as hotels and restaurants) and build multi-purpose sport facilities and establishments in order to hold sporting events and non-competitive and recreational activities for domestic and foreign tourists. Moreover, the findings revealed that the component of “*recognizing potentials and capacities*” is of little importance in the current condition and must gain special importance in the desired condition. In their planning paradigm and operational scheme, Weed [17] as the planners of the Canadian Sport Tourism Alliance underlined the significance of recognizing, estimating and developing sports tourism potentials and capacities as one of the four stages of sports tourism development in Canada. Potentials and capacities are also an important factor when it comes to eligibility for hosting international events.

In the view of the respondents, “*marketing*” was of little significance in the current condition and of great importance in the desired condition. One of the chief strategies for developing sports tourism of the country is marketing and earning the related revenues [18]. This issue is consistent with the results of Weed [17]. Therefore, considering the findings of the present research it appears that marketing is a principal basis for attracting sports tourists and developing this industry; the huge gap between the current condition and the desired condition of this component suggests that marketers must take into consideration the interactions between tourism and sports, develop various marketing mixes (product, price, distribution and promotion) and

make an effort in this regard by identifying target markets, separate marketing mixes and developing long-term strategies [19].

The results also revealed that the component of “*political and legal supports*” that can be administered through state organizations and lawmaking institutions is of average importance in the current condition and must gain great importance in the desired condition. This indicates that it is necessary for state officials and policymakers to approve and execute supportive rules in this regard; fortunately, this component enjoys a better condition in comparison with other components. Moreover, in the planning paradigm for sports tourism development of Canada, Weed [17] have taken into consideration the increase of political supports and state supports as important factors. It must be noted that the only component that was evaluated by the respondents to be of average importance in the current condition was *political and legal supports* which enjoys a relatively better condition among the factors contributing to the development of sports tourism of the country (other components were of little importance), suggesting that country officials and lawmakers are not that much unaware of the importance of sports tourism development and we can be hopeful of their future supports and the prospering of this industry in Iran.

“*Education and training of human resources*” is another important component that contributes to the development of sports tourism of the country. Considering the mean obtained for this component, it is of little importance in the current condition and it was proved that due to its significance, this component is of great importance in the desired condition and this relatively huge gap must be filled by including the education of an expert and informed workforce in country’s strategies for sports tourism development. The results of the research of Swart and Bob [20] also confirm the findings of our study and underline the significance of educating and training human resources and developing their skills in order to develop this industry. Usually, planners, lawmakers and national and regional (provincial) managers have a parochial attitude toward the link between tourism and sports and it has been verified that these officials do not have necessary understanding of the roles and duties of the involved organizations and their mutual effect on one another. Thus, educating the managers and officials in the two areas of tourism and sports regarding the significance and the issues of sports tourism must be taken into consideration for the development of this industry.

In the view of respondents, the “research” component was evaluated to be of little importance and it was also proven that this component must of great importance in the desired condition. The considerable gap between the current condition and the desired condition of this component indicates that there is an utter need for carrying out research in order to become more familiar with this industry and its advantages. The results of the studies of Swart and Bob [20] and Gibson [10] as well as the Australian Strategic Document for Sports Tourism (2000) confirm our findings regarding the significance of research in the development of sports tourism industry. It thus appears that lack of information and research regarding sports tourism and its various advantages has led to a misunderstanding among tourism and recreation planners in different regions and will consequently deprive us of the benefits of this industry.

The findings of the present research underline the importance of “*culture-building and motivation*” in sports tourism development and simultaneously point out to the significant gap between the current condition and the desired condition of this component. This issue is consistent with the results Costa and Chalip [21] and Funk and Brian [14]. These studies underscore the significant role of culture-building and cultural institutions as well as change and adaptation in sports tourism development and the significant role of psychosocial and cultural-educational motivations in marketing for international sports tourists [14]. Considering the results of the present research, the current condition of this component is not appropriate; thus, proper arrangements must be implemented to raise international awareness and at the same time provide necessary conditions for receiving foreign tourists in terms of satisfying their needs, paying attention to their motivations and respecting their cultures and beliefs as a human responsibility.

Finally, in the view of respondents of this research, the component of “*management and coordination*” was assessed to be of little importance in the current condition and it was revealed that this component must be of great importance in the desired condition. Thus, the findings of the present research emphasize the significance of management and coordination in the development of sports tourism industry and meanwhile show the significant gap between the current condition and the desired condition of this component. There are numerous studies that confirm our findings. For instance, Jago [22] highlighted the significance of management and strategic planning in industries and universities and

considered the separate management of tourism and sports as the chief problem of sports tourism management.

Considering the importance of sports tourism and the necessity to exploit its various individual, economic, social, cultural and political advantages, it seems that now is the time for managers and planning and lawmaking officials of sports tourism of the country to pay a more specific attention to this industry and take measures for identifying and developing recreational and sport attractions and improve the necessary infrastructures in different provinces and cities and develop this industry with sectorial and regional management in cooperation with governorships, municipalities, tourism agencies, physical education bureaus and natural resources organization. The prerequisite for this development is that state, province and city officials must become more familiar with sports tourism and must recognize the significant role of attracting sports tourists and hosting various sporting events in the all-embracing development of the country or the regions. Considering the fact that the vast country of Iran, especially in its western provinces, enjoys various sports tourism capacities and potentials, both natural and human-made, managers and planners in the tourism and sports sectors of the country as well as researchers must make necessary effort to shape and develop this industry with proper planning and strategies, so that in near future we will witness the development of this industry and the exploitation of its various advantages by the country and especially in the western part of Iran.

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