



Case study

Sustainable rural tourism in Iran: A perspective from Hawraman Village

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses issues of sustainability and rural tourism within the context of Iran. Using a qualitative research approach, it investigates the experiences of one particular village which is already popular with visitors and has featured in official tourism development plans. The focus is on the reactions of residents and their perceptions of tourism impacts and formal policies. Findings indicate that villagers are concerned about the use of local natural and cultural resources for tourism purposes, recognising negative consequences which seem to them to outweigh positive effects. Participation has been very limited in government rural tourism initiatives which are felt to yield few benefits for village inhabitants. Current policies thus appear ineffective and reforms are necessary if the potential for sustainable rural tourism, embracing community engagement, is to be realised.

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1. Introduction

Sustainable tourism in a rural setting is the subject of a growing literature, reflecting interest amongst academics and industry practitioners from both public and private sectors. There is some evidence of this trend in Iran where government is attaching increased importance to rural tourism and has launched several initiatives, but little research has been conducted there in general and within a local community context. The current study aims to help in filling this gap and has three main objectives of identifying the positive and negative impacts of tourism on a village and its resources as perceived by villagers; examining the concerns and priorities of villagers related to tourism; and investigating the concept of sustainable rural tourism from the perspectives of residents and their willingness to participate. Attention is also given to the role of rural tourism as an economic development tool and the effectiveness and appropriateness of current government policies. The paper opens with a review of the literature which is followed by introductions to tourism in Iran and the study area in order to set the scene. The qualitative research methodology of semi-structured interviews is then described and the findings are discussed before a final conclusion.

2. Rural tourism

Rural tourism can be broadly defined as tourism which takes place in rural areas, although the definition raises questions about what

constitutes the latter. Notions of rural may be socially constructed and differ by country and culture. However, certain common attributes can be discerned of low population densities and only a small proportion of land given over to the built environment, creating an impression of space. There is an implication that social structures will be more traditional, the natural landscape will be prominent and that access could be difficult (OECD, 1994). Agriculture is likely to be practiced, but not necessarily and rural tourism and farm tourism are not always synonymous. Definitional ambiguities about rural areas and rural tourism persist (Sharpley & Roberts, 2004) and both are multi-faceted concepts open to a degree of interpretation. A destination's geography and general circumstances will shape understanding in a manner suggested by comparison of the scenery and leisure opportunities found in the Scottish Highlands and Australian outback.

Oppermann (1996) claims that academic enquiry about rural tourism dates from the 1950s, making reference to an early publication by Ager (1958) which describes tourism in Alpine regions and the advantages it can bring to farmers. Benefits include additional income, job creation and a reduction in rural depopulation. Subsequent studies in the 1960s and 1970s focused on positive economic impacts, although attention was given to socio-cultural and environmental outcomes. The mounting significance of rural tourism is reflected in the dedication of a special issue of the Journal of Sustainable Tourism to the topic in 1994 which was recalled by Sharpley and Roberts (2004) a decade later. More recently, it has been observed that rural tourism can be a catalyst for socio-economic development and regeneration (Sharpley, 2000), especially valuable in places where traditional agricultural activities are in decline (Cavaco, 1995; Hoggart, Butler, & Black, 1995). In addition, rural tourism is promoted as a preferred alternative to mass tourism in some instances (Getz,

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1998; Ghaderi, 2004; Sharpley, 2000). Its rewards are pursued in destinations at very different stages of development, not least the world's poorest countries (Holland, Burian, & Dixey, 2003). At the same time, there are reservations about the disappointing financial returns accruing from certain types of rural tourism and damage to the physical and cultural landscapes (Fleischer & Felsenstein, 2000; Frederick, 1993).

Theories of sustainability (Butler, 1999; Hardy, Beeton, & Pearson, 2002) have increasingly informed the debate about rural tourism (Leeuwis, 2000), encouraged by the Rio Earth Summit's 12 key principles for sustainable development and the Agenda 21 goals. Proponents conclude that a sustainable approach is essential and Lane (1994) maintains that the four main reasons for adopting sustainable management systems are to conserve sensitive areas; balance the demands of conservation and development; stimulate community-based economic growth; and preserve the intrinsic features of rural areas. Stakeholder identification and involvement is agreed to be critical (Byrd, 2007; Hunter, 1997; Richards & Hall, 2000) and a number of studies explore sustainability imperatives from the point of view of rural communities (Aronsson, 1994; Bachleitner & Zins, 1999; Bramwell, 1994; Walpole & Goodwin, 2001). Authors have discovered that locals will generally accept and back tourism if it yields socio-cultural and socio-economic benefits and the environment is protected.

There is evidence of both good practice and success (Aronsson, 1994; Mitchell & Hall, 2005; Sharpley, 2001) and bad practice and failure (Singh, 2003; Tosun, 1998) pertaining to sustainable development. Nevertheless, sustainable rural tourism has been hailed as a possible solution to some of the many challenges confronting countryside and peripheral areas (Gannon, 1994; Kiesebach & Long, 1990; Thibal, 1988). Much research, however, deals with conditions in economically advanced regions of the world such as Europe, North America and Australia and New Zealand (Fleischer & Felsenstein, 2000; Hill, 1993; MacDonald & Jolliffe, 2003; Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997). Developing countries of Asia and Africa are less prominent and the Middle East also tends to be overlooked, although there are accounts of rural tourism in Israel (Fleischer & Pizam, 1997). Neglect extends to Iran where an additional problem to broader understanding is that most tourism research is published in Persian. Nevertheless, matters of sustainable rural tourism there merit analysis in view of Iran's distinctive characteristics and recent initiatives which are outlined in the next section.

3. Iran and its tourism

Iran is one of the largest nations in the Middle East with a land area of around 1.65 million square kilometres and a population in excess of 70 million. Known as Persia until 1935, the country has a history dating back over 7000 years. A rich heritage is revealed by the inclusion of 13 cultural sites in UNESCO's World Heritage list (UNESCO, 2012a) and nine examples in a World Intangible Heritage compendium (UNESCO, 2012b). The ancient Zoroastrian religion originated in Iran and there are also places of religious significance to Shia Muslims which have become centres of pilgrimage (Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2011). The physical geography encompasses two mountain ranges, a high plateau with large salt flats and vast sand deserts, fertile plains and Caspian Sea and Persian Gulf coastlines. There is a correspondingly wide variety in climate, from arid to subtropical, and in flora and fauna (ICHTO, 2012). Politically and socially, the 1979 revolution was a turning point and led to the establishment of the Islamic Republic which is a theocratic state governed by Islamic principles and Shariah law. Religion is thus all-pervasive and determines how life is lived in a patriarchal society where women are expected to be submissive.

There is evidence of tourism in Iran since ancient times, but modern efforts at development began 75 years ago with the founding of the Jalbe-Sayahan Bureau in the Ministry of the Interior. Iran's

history and geography give rise to a wealth of actual and potential visitor attractions and activities encompassing skiing, mountaineering, trekking and beach holidays. The appeal of the environment is recognised and there is a National Committee of Ecotourism which seeks to both promote and preserve nature. However, just over three million international arrivals were recorded in 2010 (Bureau of Statistics, 2011) and the low figure indicates unfulfilled promise. Impediments to tourism and its growth are the rigid social code, visa restrictions, deficiencies in accommodation and transport and insufficient marketing (EIU, 2008; Euromonitor, 2011). Iran suffers from an unfavourable destination image (Alavi & Yasin, 2000), at least amongst major generators, linked to the revolution and 1980–1989 war with Iraq. Negative associations are reinforced by sanctions imposed against Iran because of its nuclear programme, ongoing tensions with western powers and regional instability (EIU, 2012). Primary inbound markets are neighbouring countries such as Iraq, Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Afghanistan. Most other tourists are from the rest of the Middle East and Central and South Asia (Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Vacationers engage in culture and nature-based tours as well as study trips (Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010) and many Iranians living abroad return to visit friends and relatives or for pilgrimage. There is substantial domestic demand and an estimated seven million trips were made in 2010, but total spending by nationals is much lower than that of travellers from overseas (Euromonitor, 2011).

The economic significance of tourism is appreciated within the government and seen as a means of diversification, reducing the heavy dependence on the oil industry. Tourism is the responsibility of Iran's Cultural Heritage, Handicraft and Tourism Organisation (ICHTO) formed in 2004. A target has been set of 20 million tourists by 2025 (Faghri, 2007) after completion of the 20 Year Outlook of the Country general development plan, launched in 2005. A budget of US\$85 million was allocated to developing tourism and provincial governments were required to invest 5% of their civil funds in tourism infrastructure. Promotion is being extended beyond the Middle East region and to enhanced products, but cultural sensitivities exist and the preference is for foreign visitors with knowledge and understanding about Islam. Citizens may perhaps be more tolerant of outsiders (Zamani-Farahani & Musa, 2008), although strength of religious feeling appears to influence attitudes (Zamani-Farahani & Musa, 2012). Rural tourism and its prospects have inspired official interest, partly in response to the problems of rural areas and their urgent need for economic revival. Iran has a sizeable rural population which represents approximately 29% of the total and lives in 64,000 villages (Iran's Statistics Centre, 2011) where principal sources of income are agriculture, fishing and animal husbandry. Standards of living are generally low and conditions encourage outward migration and rural depopulation; these have adverse economic and social consequences which it is believed tourism can help to reverse.

Optimism is not unfounded as Iran's rural areas have much to offer visitors. They are home to aboriginal ethnic groups, lending an individual character to many villages. Making use of these resources, the government has attempted to develop rural tourism which is regarded as a tool in poverty reduction and employment generation. Rural tourism has become a priority in national tourism policies and was highlighted in Iran's Tourism Development and Management Master Plan (1998–2000) as well as other short, medium and longer term strategies which profess a commitment to sustainable development (Ghaderi, 2008). A Rural Tourism Steering Committee (RTSC) under the auspices of ICHTO was established in 2004, comprising representatives from various government agencies. The RTSC subsequently chose over 400 villages as rural tourism destinations of high potential and ICHTO started to prepare three stage 'rural tourism strategic-structural plans' for 300 of the 400 villages, the remainder to be assessed in the future. The plans cost around US\$5.2 million and were essentially feasibility studies which included SWOT

(strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analyses of village attractions and facilities (Ghaderi, 2009).

However, endeavours to employ tourism as a catalyst for rural economic development have not always been welcomed or proved as beneficial as anticipated. Following the identification of villages, authorities and private sector tour operators and travel agents commenced advertising without ensuring that a satisfactory infrastructure was in place. Communities were rarely consulted and concerns were raised amongst residents and non-governmental organisations about the implications of increased tourism. The consultancy firms which drew up the plans were more accustomed to dealing with urban planning and conclusions and recommendations were sometimes derived from desk research alone. Valuable and finite natural and cultural resources have been damaged and villagers gained little financially in return. Inadequate planning has thus threatened the sustainability of rural tourism, challenging arguments that tourism has the capacity to make a significant positive contribution to local societies and economies (Ghaderi, 2009). These issues are illustrated by the case of a particular village which is discussed below.

4. The study area of Hawraman

Hawraman is the name of a mountainous region in Kurdistan Province in the west of Iran which contains several traditional Kurdish villages. Inhabitants and their language are known as Hawrami, the dialect being one of the famous branches of the Kurdish language and similar to Avestan which was spoken in ancient Zoroasteria. The region is recognised as the heart of pre-Islamic Zoroastrian custom and many local words relate to the Sassanid era (226–651 AD). Remnants of ancient fire temples also indicate that the population were Zoroastrians before converting to Islam. The weather is pleasant in spring and summer, but very cold in winter. Agriculture is constrained by the climate and rocky and stony terrain, but orchards thrive and the land is covered with walnut, pomegranate, fig and mulberry trees. The province is divided into Rural Districts, overseen by a Rural Council, which look after village affairs. The most important village in terms of size and tourist attractiveness is Hawraman Takht, located in a valley

surrounded by snow-capped mountains 63 km south of Marivan. It is well known in Iran as one of the '10 wonderful villages' and was nominated as a World Heritage Site in 2007 (UNESCO, 2012c). Villagers commonly live in houses made of stone with beamed ceilings and constructed in a stair-like fashion so that the roof of one house is the courtyard of another as seen in Fig. 1 which shows the village in winter. The people of the village dress in Kurdish costumes and engage in sheep and goat herding together with fruit and vegetable cultivation on the sides and floor of the valley. Agricultural chores are customarily the domain of women and children, but modest mechanisation has given them more time for other work and some of this is connected to tourism.

Tourism on a commercially significant scale has a short history in Hawraman and its villages. Adventurous travellers exploring the region once visited the villages and have been followed in the last two decades by more conventional domestic tourists looking for new experiences and escape from modernised urban environments. Hawraman Takht is regarded as an excellent example of Kurdish traditions and heritage, demonstrated by the wedding ceremony of Pire-Shaliar which entices hundreds of observers every year in February and April and can be seen in Fig. 2.

Most are on day tours organised by travel agents, but a large number are independent travellers. On other occasions, Hawraman Takht is usually a stopover on a longer tour and visitors spend a few hours there sometimes shopping at roadside stalls such as those in Fig. 3. Key attractions are the architecture, heritage buildings, folklore, customs, carvings and other craftwork and natural beauty. There are various small scale tourist ventures such as souvenir shops and accommodation in private homes which have increased as agriculture and animal husbandry have declined. Although there are no official figures, the village council estimates that there are now around 150,000 visitors every year mainly in the period from early spring to mid-autumn (March through to early November); about 500 are tourists from overseas who usually come at the time of the celebrations.

The Rural Council deals with tourism matters alongside the Kurdistan Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organisation



Fig. 1. Hawraman Takht village in winter season.



Fig. 2. Traditional wedding ceremony of Pir-e-Shaliar, Hawraman.

which reports to ICHTO. The budgets of both organisations are, however, restricted and often insufficient for day-to-day administration. They tend to operate in an ad hoc manner and play a secondary and supporting role in tourism development, facilitating the process where possible. The village was chosen for the RTSC scheme and an official plan costing US\$35,000 was completed by external consultants in 2008 (Royan Fara Negar Systems, 2008). Aims were to explore the tourism prospects of Hawraman Takht, identify development challenges and recommend future action. Deficiencies of a sort previously mentioned were, however, evident as expressed by villagers taking part in the survey which is now outlined.

5. Methodology

Primary and secondary data were needed to satisfy the study objectives and thus assembled. Secondary data were collected from published sources within and outside Iran, including official reports and plans. Semi-structured face to face interviews with household heads was chosen as the most appropriate method of gathering primary information. Such a technique encourages open discussion of a topic, yet allows comparisons to be made of responses. A sample of 64 households, or 10% of the total in Hawraman Takht, was selected by systematic random sampling of a household list provided by the



Fig. 3. Local art and craft market in Hawraman.

Village Council. In conformity with this technique, the population was listed in random order with an interval size of 10. Interviews in the local dialect, lasting from 30 to 65 minutes, were completed over one month in the middle of 2009. Of the 64 households contacted, 55 interviews were carried out and the response rate was therefore 86%; 43 participants were male and 12 were female. Those refusing proffered a variety of reasons such as lack of interest, absence from home and insufficient time.

Four research assistants with a tourism background undertook the fieldwork and an additional three translated the recorded material into English. The interviews were based on 10 questions about rural tourism related principally to the economic, socio-cultural and environmental impacts of tourism in the village. Opinions were also solicited about the role of women in tourism, government support in developing tourism in the village and understanding of and perceived barriers to sustainable tourism development. Respondents were prompted to elaborate on their views after answering the initial question. Data were then analysed thematically in alignment with the key themes. Qualitative thematic analysis is widely used in social science research, not least tourism, and appropriate for the current exercise which is concerned with the personal reflections and thoughts of respondents. Limitations are, however, acknowledged and include the possibility that respondents did not speak freely about certain matters deemed sensitive. The sample was also dominated by males and women were not always permitted to respond, even though they sometimes headed the household.

6. Findings and discussion

1. Social and cultural impacts

The social and cultural impacts of tourism are distinguishable, but are often considered together as the 'people' impacts (Glasson, Godfrey, Goodey, Absalom, & van der Borg, 1995) which arise from interactions between residents and visitors (Smith, 1995). Such contact may precipitate changes in the everyday life, traditions, values, norms and identities of destination residents. Survey respondents cited favourable socio-cultural impacts of tourism in the village, although stances tended to be more positive when the locals felt that they were profiting financially from tourists. The rapid growth of an art and crafts market brought about by tourist demand was welcomed as was the awakening amongst residents to the importance of preserving rural heritage which had been in danger of vanishing a decade ago. Villagers enjoyed meeting new people and practising their language skills and appreciated some of the village amenities which owed their origin to tourists.

An advantage for several was the chances offered to women due to the fact that most tourism enterprises were family-based and small scale. Women had once been confined to agricultural labour and the making of handicrafts, but tourism development afforded other opportunities; this could enhance their status in society and lead to a degree of emancipation. Male household heads were asked if they did or would allow females from their family to be employed in tourism and 35% replied in the affirmative; 40% said they would refuse and 25% maintained it would depend on the job. Almost one third of households already had females working directly or indirectly in tourism. Men opposed to the idea adhered to the traditional belief that a woman's place was at home, looking after the house and family. Nevertheless, the extent of female involvement and its acceptance supports the findings of Devedzic (2002) that rural tourism can modify gender roles and relationships within communities, giving women greater independence and a stronger sense of identity.

However, a range of negative socio-cultural impacts were also identified in interviews. There were instances of resentment, antagonism, dishonesty and alienation in the relationship between the community and tourists and tour operators. Villagers described unprecedented

alterations to society and ways of life which were partly, but not totally, attributed to the presence of tourists. It was felt that young people paid little or no heed to their ancestral culture and aspired to an urban lifestyle whereas older members of the community were keen to protect traditions. One household head commented how the

Younger generation in the village has changed their lifestyles. They are interested to consume non- local foods and drinks, wear non-traditional fashions, and they desire to indulge in the same form of entertainment as tourists. We are a strictly traditional and religious society so that tourism had adverse impact upon the social fabric.

The authenticity of the culture and cultural representations marketed to tourists is a topic of debate worldwide and MacCannell (1973) writes of the phenomenon of staged authenticity. Tourists are thereby denied access to the original and consequently become victims of exploitation by the tourism industry, alongside residents who may or may not collude in the process (Chhabra, Healy, & Sills, 2003). In Hawraman, a majority (75%) of respondents were of the view that the commercialisation of tangible and intangible culture and cultural heritage was widespread. Ceremonies, events, activities, art and handicrafts had been adapted to satisfy visitor expectations. Some respondents (30%) deplored handicraft fakery and one pointed out

Nowadays the quality of local handicrafts has been decreased due to high demand for such products. Locals who are involved in this business reduced the quality and increased the price to suit the needs of customers.

Several (27%) asserted that food items such as honey, dried fruits and dairy goods were deteriorating in standard while price charged to both villagers and visitors were rising. Nevertheless, it was admitted that good quality items could still be found such as given (home-made shoes), wood-carvings, traditional Kurdish dresses and materials made by weavers as depicted in Fig. 4.

2. Economic impacts

Nearly all respondents believed that tourism generated income and employment, constituted a market for local products and helped to diversify the economy. Despite doubts by some individuals about the propriety of women's greater prominence resulting from rural tourism, it was agreed that they had become the main breadwinner in certain households. Money was earned by females from the making and sale of handicrafts and cooked foods and operating home-stay accommodation. Economic rewards for locals were, however, comparatively small and it was calculated that less than 10% of village residents depended on tourism for their livelihoods. Any employment was seasonal and poorly paid. National tour operators and travel agents were thought to gain most as tourists came primarily from towns and bought packages from businesses there. Service providers such as transportation companies were also often based outside the locality and overnight tourists were rare. One respondent who ran a small hotel in the village stated

Tourists come here every day. We see almost more than 500 tourists coming every day, but few of them stay in this hotel and other accommodations in the village, most of them are same-day visitors that will stay in city hotels. We have very minimum of benefits, a major portion of this benefit will go to travel agents and other service providers.

Interviewees who were not directly involved in tourism criticised how any earnings were unevenly distributed within the village and concentrated amongst those supplying accommodation, catering



Fig. 4. Traditional Kurdish dresses and materials made by weaver.

and local transportation. Non-beneficiaries felt that tourism had failed in its supposed function as a tool for poverty eradication and also delayed the addressing of fundamental structural inequalities.

With regard to outward migration, respondents conceded that a shrinking agricultural sector and fewer jobs in the village had prompted many younger residents to move to towns. Amongst motivations were the search for employment and especially within government, education, enhanced marriage prospects and a better standard of living. Some had left for large cities such as Tehran to work temporarily as manual labourers and then remained after securing permanent posts. It did not seem to interviewees that tourism had a significant effect on slowing this pattern of migration, although it was recalled that some individuals had returned from urban centres in order to set up a tourism business. More than half of those with family members who had migrated said that these relatives would come back if suitable jobs were available in a thriving tourism industry backed by the authorities.

3. Environmental impacts

Tourism was felt to have heightened villager awareness of the environment and its value and had led to the founding of a Hawraman non-governmental organisation dedicated to conservation. Nevertheless, without exception, respondents concurred that tourism had negative impacts on the environment. Erosion, degradation, littering, fire risks and vandalism were highlighted. The majority (80%) of interviewees claimed that uncontrolled construction had occurred with undesirable consequences. There had been a rush to open tea-houses, small supermarkets, guesthouses, and handicraft shops which the village had not the capacity to accommodate. In addition to physical damage, land and property prices had escalated. There were complaints that trees and stones had been illicitly used for building, depleting natural resources. However, it was noted that general development was to blame for much environmental destruction which was then exacerbated by tourism. According to one respondent

Traditionally, Hawraman was famous for its rocky orchards and high quality fruits; unfortunately, the water that was being used for irrigation was transferred for villager's consumption, and the

orchards were dried. Residents cut orchard trees and sold out for constructions.

Visitors were condemned for their irresponsible behaviour in leaving rubbish at camp sites and tourist attractions which created a fetid smell in the village. The litter problem was made worse by the fact that there were no containers for garbage or formal method of collection. Traffic congestion and noise pollution during the peak season was another serious worry for all the interviewees. Roads were narrow and, although receiving more than 200 vehicles every day, there was no car park in the village.

4. Sustainable rural tourism and barriers to development

In reply to a question about how they understood sustainable tourism and their preferred type of tourist, respondents spoke about tourism that brought assorted benefits to local people and assisted in preserving their culture. Destination residents should be involved in decisions, not dictated to by outsiders, and enjoy an improved life because of tourism. Jobs should be available for their children and overall resources better protected for the younger generation. Visitors who were responsible, respectful of customs and traditions and cared about nature and the environment were desired. In reality, most (83%) respondents agreed that tourism threatened fragile natural or cultural heritage in Hawraman Takht due to intensive tourist activity. A minority (27%) described some positive effects such as the safeguarding of monuments, but opponents believed that conservation of rural culture and nature was inadequate and had been neglected by both policy-makers and practitioners.

Officials had encouraged villagers to participate in rural tourism schemes on the grounds that it would help end their poverty and improve the local infrastructure. Tourism was presented as a substitute for agriculture and husbandry which had been in long term decline. However, a majority (81%) of respondents said there had been very little interest and engagement in formal rural tourism initiatives by the local community. There were expressions of disillusionment, stemming from past failures to fulfil promises, leading to reluctance to participate. Other impediments to taking part were perceptions

of insufficient resources devoted to the programmes, an absence of administrative mechanisms and a feeling of exclusion. It emerged that locals had not been consulted previously in decision-making about tourism development or been offered assistance to help them make the most of opportunities. There was a desire for empowerment through means such as the acquiring of the skills essential to set up a tourism business and access to funding.

All interviewees complained about the level of support received from the government for developing tourism, particularly with respect to lower than expected financial aid for renovating and converting old premises for tourism uses. Contrary to assurances, it was impossible to get bank and other loans due to strict regulations and high interest rates. Many (42%) households were keen to open a small or medium scale tourism business in the village, although they were mindful of possible harm and envisaged the conversion of existing buildings and not new structures. However, they did not possess the requisite financial capability and argued that government money was channelled into study plans and publicity in local and national media. Licensing for the construction and operation of tourism establishments was a further barrier as procedures were said to be very difficult and time consuming. Overall, official tourism policies were seen to be deficient and the authorities to be ineffective with no clear approach to managing tourism in the village. Coordination amongst relevant agencies was lacking and residents too were at fault for failing to cooperate.

Speaking about current conditions in the village, most (74%) respondents referred to serious weaknesses in infrastructure and public services. Examples were quoted of unsatisfactory transport networks, telecommunications, water supply, waste disposal and sewage. Shortcomings in the stock and standard of tourist accommodation, catering, attractions and transportation were also observed. There were calls for more art galleries and rural museums to educate tourists about local culture and heritage. Household heads asserted that the village could not cope with the rising volume of tourists without investment in infrastructure. They explained that the main road leading to the settlement was only wide enough for two cars passing side by side and often closed when there was only a little snow. In addition, roads to other villages were not surfaced with asphalt and in a very bad state of repair so that travel could be arduous and dangerous. The gravest anxiety was the lack of sewage and waste disposal in the village. Visitors were adding to the population and pressures on public services, but poor sanitation and the accumulation of rubbish was endangering hygiene and introducing disease.

7. Conclusion

The interviews revealed that villagers had an appreciation of the concept of sustainable rural tourism, but felt that it was not being practised by either private industry or government or, indeed, fellow villagers. While recognising some advantages popularity with tourists had brought to the village and its population, these appeared to be offset by fears of harmful consequences. Economic rewards were perhaps the most welcome, followed by the stimulation of socio-cultural and natural heritage awareness and conservation. The manner in which traditional society and culture was at risk from tourism was, however, a primary concern alongside the over-burdening of infrastructure and degradation of the fabric of the village and its physical environs. Unsurprisingly, vested interests exercised an influence and those who gained most from tourism were likely to be more enthusiastic in its support. There seemed to be some resentment within the community about inequalities in how the financial returns from tourism were shared. It is also worth noting that many respondents were keen to set up tourism businesses and critical of official failure to help them do so. Dissatisfaction with government and its tourism strategy was a dominant theme of discussions and there was a divergence between the aims of rural tourism projects and the manner in

which execution had been attempted, stated goals proving elusive. It may be that unrealistic objectives were set by policy makers and planners who had insufficient experience and expertise and that the expectations of villagers about tourism's contribution to economic and social revitalisation were over-optimistic. Authorities appeared reluctant to communicate with local residents and take into account their needs, compounding any misunderstandings.

It would seem therefore that tourism cannot be seen in Iran as a key driver of growth for rural economies and an economic activity approved by resident populations; rather, it is a supplementary source of income which assists in development while arousing strong criticism. Opposition and concern about tourism cannot be ignored and must be addressed if progress is to be made. While exhibiting interest in sustainable rural tourism, in common with governments worldwide, official policies for Iran's villages formulated to date have been incomplete and not properly integrated into wider plans. Resources are being damaged and depleted and locals excluded in a way contradictory to principles of sustainability. One of the challenges for the future is to reconcile divergent viewpoints and devise effective sustainable rural tourism projects which actively involve inhabitants. However, further research is necessary to compare and contrast the experiences of Hawraman Takht with other villages. More thorough impact analyses can be conducted and interviews sought with authorities to better evaluate the dynamics of formal decision making. The results of such work would help cast light on rural tourism in general and the distinctive destination of Iran in particular.

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