



An Evaluation of Niche Tourism Potentials in Ghaleh-Rudkhan Tourism Target Village Using Activity-Based Segmentation

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Abstract

Purpose - Niche tourism refers to how to use a particular tourism product tailored to the needs of a particular segment of the market. Places with niche tourism products are able to achieve a high position and consolidate their future position in the tourism market. This type of tourism helps distinguish tourism products by creating an image of the destination and helping compete in the increasingly crowded environment of the tourism market. This paper investigates and analyzes the niche tourism attractions in Ghaleh Rudkhan tourist destination village using activity-based segmentation, the attitudes of the host community in dealing with niche tourism development, and the ability to implement tourism projects and socio-economic factors influencing tourism development in the region, which eventually offers solutions to overcome the current and potential challenges in the study area. To collect the data, interview-based methods, focus group interviews, individual observations and analysis of the documents obtained from different sources were used.

Design/methodology/approach - A questionnaire was designed and distributed among 383 tourists and 190 rural employees. The data of this study were mainly evaluated using thematic and content analysis methods. Besides, we have also introduced the niche tourism potentials and tourism activities in the region.

Finding - The results show that thanks to the economic and social opportunities, local communities support tourism development in Ghaleh Rudkhan; however, the challenges associated with tourism marketing, event management, uncertainty of private sector investors and environmental issues must be addressed through a participatory approach.

Key words: Special interest tourism, Niche tourism, Activity-based segmentation, Participation, Ghaleh Rudkhan tourist destination village.

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1. Introduction

For more than the last two decades, tourism in many cities and regions of the world was traditionally planned and managed as ‘mass tourism’ to attract the general public. In this approach, the potential negative socio-economic and environmental impacts of tourism are less considered while natural resources along with its development are seen as fundamental sources of tourism (Golzadeh, 2015). Accordingly, the mass development may be described as an unplanned form of planning (Esmailzadeh et al., 2011). The attraction of many tourists to a destination and the pressures of demands make tourism resources often vulnerable to changes (Ghadami et al., 2009). Realizing that this form of tourism development is unsustainable, in the late 1980s, sustainable tourism development was proposed and other forms of tourism with their new products were introduced as an alternative to traditional tourism. Alternative tourism is generally defined as a form of tourism that is consistent with natural, social, and local values and allows the host community and tourists to enjoy positive interactions and shared experiences (Leksakundilok, 2004). The need for alternative tourism has been predetermined by many factors including the factors related to leisure, individual desire for recreation, environmental concerns and biodiversity, natural curiosity to discover different cultures and customs, regional improvement, revitalizing rural areas in the mountains, and creating new jobs for local communities. In addition, the diversification of activities in cities and tourist destination regions on the one hand, and the changing lifestyles in developed countries on the other hand, led to efforts and planning to attract special interest tourists. According to the definition given by the World Tourism Organization (1985), special interest tourism refers to a particular type of tourism in which the tourist has a particular interest in visiting tourist attractions and participating in individual and group activities with the aim of developing his or her interests. Other scholars have also provided various definitions for special interest tourism. Hall and Weiler (1992) stated that special interest tourism is formed when the intent and motivation for travel are determined by a particular interest. Derrett (2001), Swarbrooke and Horner (1999) along with Douglas et al. (2001) gave a broader definition and attributed some features to special interest of tourism as it follows,

- Motivation to participate in new or existing interests
- Doing activities for a particular purpose or reason
- Compliance with sustainability principles

Simply put, special interest tourism refers to offering customized tourism activities that meet the needs and interests of individuals and groups. The world tourist destinations seek to make money from such emerging tourism opportunities and seize the opportunity to create or expand their tourism markets. Niche tourism is an example of the special interest tourism. Niche tourism, as a form of special interest tourism, demonstrates the decision making power of the consumers. This type of tourism is the bridge between the producers and consumers, between reality and imagination, between wishes and their realization. ‘Niche tourism’ has been described as the opposite of ‘mass tourism’ and represents a more complex set of practices which makes a distinction between tourists. The term "niche tourism" is derived from "niche marketing". *Niche* in English means a hollow place in a wall, often made to hold a statue, and in French it means ‘to nest’, and ‘niche marketing’ is a product or service targeted on a small segment of the market whose existing goods or services have failed to appropriately meet their needs (Bigdelo, 2006). Niche markets could be geographical areas, a particular industry, race, or a particular group of people (Mirakzadeh & Bahrami, 2011).

2. Research Theoretical Literature

Hutchinson (1957) became well-known by introducing the idea of a *niche*, an optimal place where an organism can utilize its resources over its competitors (Robinson & Novelli, 2008, p.4 and Adah, 2014, p.99). Keegan et al. (1992) then described the niche as a smaller market that does not deal with competing products. Dalgic and Leeuw (1994) believe a niche is the process of focusing marketing resources and efforts on a specific market segment. They point out that niche companies generally focus their marketing activities on a limited segment of the market with a small number of customers and competitors through the application of company expertise, product differentiation, marketing relationships and customer focus. Prabakaran and Panchanathan (2011) define the niche as a way of meeting customers’ needs by coordinating goods and services into small and profitable marketplaces that have been overlooked by others. Lew (2008) observed that for many years, tourism has focused on globalization as a change in technology without paying attention to the reality of emerging tourism

and the tendency of customers to seek new tourism attractions based on the purposes and niches. Although much research has been done on special interest tourism, niche tourism as a concept and theory was not fully explored until 2000. In 2002, the Crichton Tourism Research Center at the University of Glasgow held a conference on niche tourism, where tourism industry professionals coined “niche tourism” (Ali-Knight, 2010). Novellis (2005) attempted to articulate the fundamentals of the niche tourism product and consumption by introducing two theoretical thresholds based on his previous studies. Robinson and Novelli (2008) believe that the studies on niche tourism are still in their infancy. At this stage, the conceptual development of niche tourism through a particular approach is inefficient and multiple approaches should be used to describe and examine the capabilities of niche tourism. These approaches include activity- experience (pilgrimage, cycling, photography, and research), market segments (youth tourism), and specific subjects (gourmet, ethnography, geotourism, etc.). The diversity of approaches, emphasizes the fact that niche tourism is a particular field of study that requires careful consideration when choosing concepts. The niche tourism framework was formulated in Figure (1), according to MacLeod (2003) and Novellis (2005). In this framework, while introducing the concepts of

macro niches, a variety of micro niches are mentioned that provide attractive and lively features in attracting special interest tourists. Given the diverse nature of niche tourism and its related products, other approaches are also used to define this form of tourism as it follows,

A Geographical and Demographic Approach: The location and population involved where the tourism consumption processes take place. These may belong to an urban, rural, coastal or alpine environment, within a developed or a developing context; but what matters is its relevance to the specific activity that the tourists want to engage in.

A Product-centric approach: Where activities, attractions, lodging, food, and other amenities are emphasized. These are key components of the niche tourism destination mix which are tailored to the needs and wants of specific tourists.

A Customer-related approach – tourist requirements and expectations are the focus of the niche tourism marketing approach. Attention is placed on the relations between the demand and the supply side; it looks at what specialty activities tourists are seeking for in order to have a satisfactory holiday experience, whether a simple observation of nature or the direct participation in the unique lifestyle of the hosting community (Novelli, 2009, p.9).

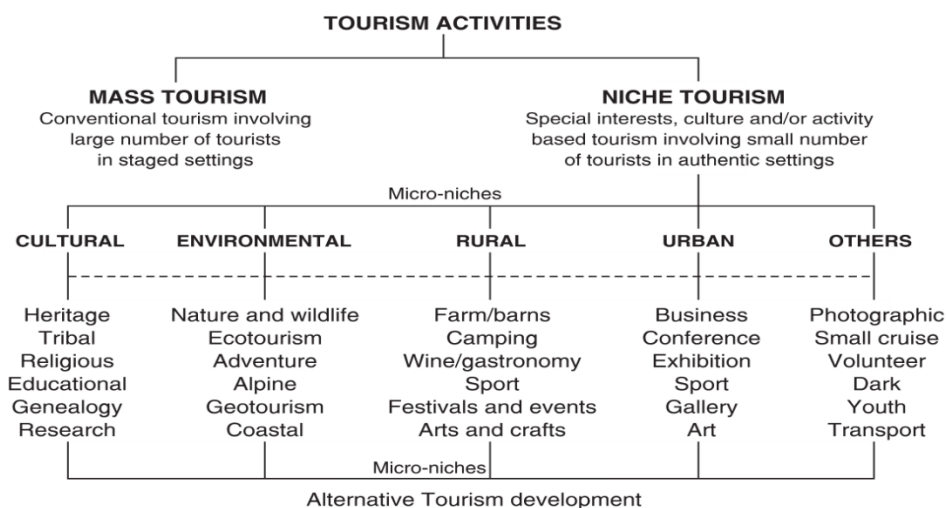


Figure 1. Components of Niche Tourism
(Source: Novellis, 2005)

The approach of the present research on niche tourism is to pay particular attention to all three geographical and demographic, product-centric, and customer-related approaches. In the geographical and demographic approach, the rural environment of

Ghaleh Rudkhan and tourism activities in this area are the target of niche tourism, not the well-known tourist attractions, Rudkhan Castle. The product-centric approach emphasizes the presence of tourists and the local community in various activities and sectors of

the region and the customer-related approach, focuses on the needs and expectations of tourism, the guest community (tourists) and the host (the rural population).

This study discusses the diversification and full utilization of the tourism potentials based on activities in Ghaleh Rudkhan tourism village, and argues the existing tourism approaches are temporary and incomplete and far from sustainable tourism development policies. Activity-based segmentation approach was adopted in this study to identify the niche tourism potentials in tourism in Ghaleh Rudkhan tourism village. In market segmentation in general, companies and organizations identify and classify customers into groups that are clearly defined by similar characteristics, needs and desires (Lamzden, 2011, p.120). But in the activity-based segmentation, companies choose market segments which are more empowered to serve, rather than try to compete in a full-fledged market against superior competitors (Kotler & Armstrong, 2014, p.292). Using this approach, while considering two key components of location and customer, the activities observed and experienced, as well as potential and unused activities are taken into account and their practical implications are presented.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Geographical Scope of the Research

From the political point of view, based on the latest administrative divisions, Ghaleh Rudkhan is located in Gorab-Pas rural district (Dehestan), the Central District of Fouman County in Guilan province. The village has a scattered texture that is bounded by the forest lands on the north, the village of Sayed Abad on the east, forest lands on the south and the village of Fusheh on the west. The village is located at 37°07'N 49°16'E. The village is 1 km away from Gorab-Pas village, 25 km to Fouman County and 46 km to Rasht. The average altitude of the village varies in the study area, with the average altitude varying from 250 m to 750 m near the castle (Mirzaee, 2013:87). Figure (2) shows the geographical location of Ghaleh Rudkhan village.

According to the 2016 National Population and Housing Census and the Management and Planning Organization of Guilan Province, Ghaleh Rudkhan village has a population of 538 people living in 195 households, which shows an 11.8% decline compared to the last statistical period (610 people and 199 households). The people of Ghaleh Rudkhan village in their order of priority, work in agricultural, industrial and service sectors. The main crop products of the rural farmers in the agricultural sector are tea and rice, and their main horticulture crops are pomegranate, grape, and apple respectively (General Population and Housing Census 2016).

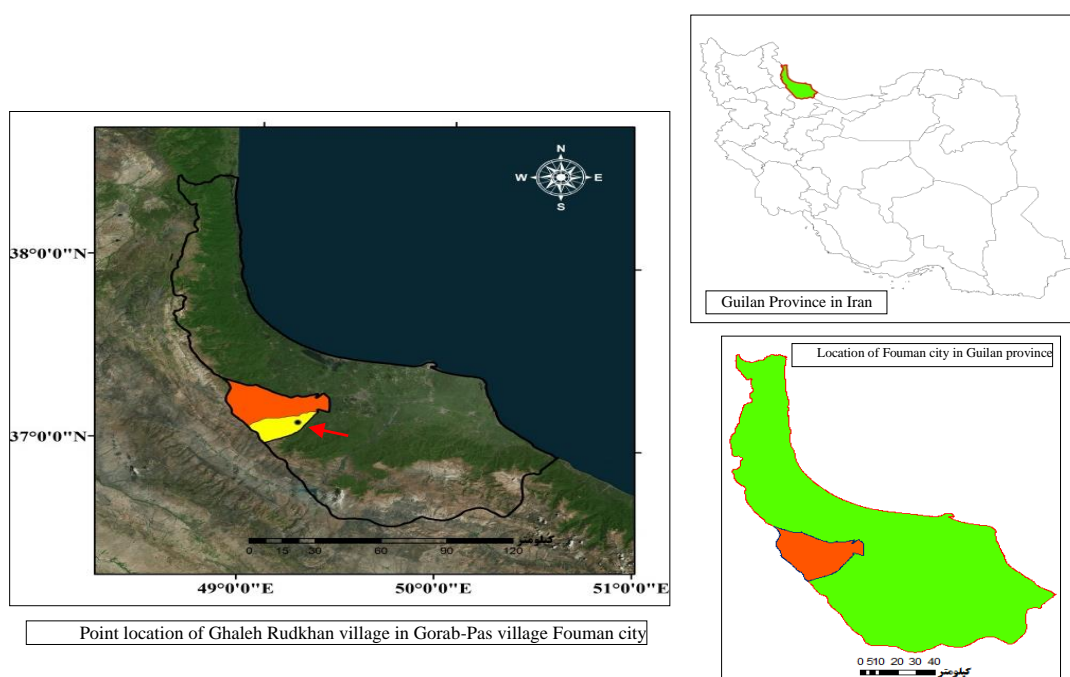


Figure 2. Location of Ghaleh Rudkhan village in Gorab-Pas rural district, Fouman County, Guilan Province (Source: Research findings, 2019)

3.2. Methodology

The research was conducted using interview-based methods, focus group discussions, questionnaire compilation and distribution, individual observations and analysis of documents obtained from various sources. Multiple research methods were adopted in this study to provide statistical confidence of the insufficient information. Interviewing is one of the most basic data gathering techniques or tools in which the interviewer collects, describes and examines the data relevant to the purpose of the research, with an in-depth examination of the interviewees' perceptions, attitudes, interests and aspirations (Karimi & Nasr, 2013). Interviews were conducted between May 2016 and December 2019, a period in which the researcher visited the study area on several occasions to collect the data. Respondents to these interviews, given the purpose of the study were identified and met in an appropriate manner. Respondents included the rural administrator (Dehyar) of Ghaleh Rudkhan, the Director of Ghaleh Rudkhan research base, an expert on cultural heritage working at Ghaleh Rudkhan Museum, and the representative of Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicraft Organization in Fouman County. The questions were about the tourism activities observed in Ghaleh Rudkhan tourism village, views on tourism development in the area, statistics of incoming tourists and their nationalities, and current and potential tourism challenges in the study area.

Discussion with the focus group was also used to identify the most important tourism capabilities of Ghaleh Rudkhan tourism village. Focus group research is a way of collecting qualitative data that involves people in an informal group discussion or multiple discussions about a particular topic or sets of topics. Focus groups are considered less threatening for many research participants because they provide a suitable environment for discussing their perceptions, ideas, beliefs, and thoughts (Husseini, 2015, p.14). The researcher consulted with Dehyar in selecting six rural experts who were going to participate in the focus group. The number of participants according to Ghauri and Gronhaug (2010) is sufficient and manageable. The researcher also directed the session by trying to focus the group on the discussion topics.

Using field survey method, a questionnaire was used to study the host community and tourists. The required components of the questionnaire were identified during an interview with Guilan tourism experts. Respondents' demographic variables in the questionnaire of local community and tourists, included the demographic characteristics of age (year), gender (male, female), educational levels (high school degree or lower, associate degree, bachelor's degree, master's degree and above), average monthly income (less than 10 million Rial, 10 to 20 million Rial, 20 to 30 million Rial, 30 to 40 million Rial, 40 million Rial or above), and variables that provided some information about individuals' mastery of the subject including rural tourism (very much, much, some, little), experience in tourism (yes, no), interest in cooperative tourism (very much, much, some, little). These variables were used in descriptive statistics.

Specific questions of the questionnaire developed for local residents were about the status of Ghaleh Rudkhan tourism village, the number of tourists visiting the rural tourist attractions, tourism benefits for the host community, the ability to run tourism projects and participation of the residents in the local tourism development. The questionnaire designed for the tourists focused on identifying the motivations of the visitors, engaging the host community and tourists in tourism projects and favorite tourism activities along with how they learned about tourism attractions.

In order to assess the validity of the questionnaires and interview questions, the researcher asked 10 tourism professors and experts to comment on the following items:

The conformity of the questions with the main research objectives and variables; Scientific content of the questions; the conformity of the questions with the options; the composition of the questions; deleting or adding the questions. After receiving the comments of the professors and experts, their comments and suggestions were included in the draft questionnaire and, then, the final researcher-made questionnaires were prepared.

To assess the reliability of the research questionnaires, the questionnaires were distributed to 22 target population members, including 10 elected local residents and 10 visitors to Ghaleh Rudkhan tourism village with a total of 20

acceptable responses. After collecting them, Cronbach's alpha was calculated and a value of 0.86 was obtained, which is acceptable.

In order to receive the comments made by local residents, 190 questionnaires were distributed among the villagers working in tourism who answered the questions in the presence of the researcher.

Cochran formula with an error of 0.05 was used to calculate the sufficient statistical population of tourists to distribute the questionnaires among them based on the number of incoming visitors to Ghaleh Rudkhan in 2018 (185635 people) the result of which was 383.

Three methods were used to analyze the statistical data of this study: content analysis, thematic analysis, and SPSS (version 21). Content analysis is the process of converting qualities and then converting the same quantity to quality (Ghaedi & Golshani, 2016, p.57). This method applies to open-ended questions in which the answer of one interviewee is different from the other interviewees. This method is effective because of the understanding of the research objectives and the coverage pattern of the interview guide (Misiko, 2013, p.11). In thematic analysis, the researcher analyzes the vocabulary and code descriptions associated with each open-ended question and categorizes them into relevant themes, and assigns a unique numerical code to each theme. This enables the researcher to identify the challenges that are likely to affect tourism. A unique numeric code was assigned to answer each closed-ended question, and SPSS was used to facilitate quantitative analysis of the codes.

To analyze the descriptive statistics, statistical methods including frequency and histograms, as well as normality tests were used. For this purpose, the demographic data of the subjects including gender, age, education level, average monthly income, familiarity with rural tourism, and interest in cooperative tourism activities were studied and descriptive statistics on each of the variables were examined. Concerning the inferential statistics, as the data were not normally distributed, chi-square test was used for the data analysis, and SPSS (version 21) was used for data analysis.

4. Research Findings

Ghaleh Rudkhan tourism village with many tourist attractions such as Forest Park, Wooden

Bridge, Dalaneh Behesht Pavement, Rudkhan Castle including King's Castle, Officer's Castle and unique forest landscapes, have not been studied so far from the perspective of niche tourism and its future sustainable development, and the local community's participatory approach to tourism projects; therefore, this study investigate those capabilities in order to help diversify and develop tourism in Ghaleh Rudkhan village and increase income, employment and reduce rural migration rates. To this end, two types of questionnaires were designed and distributed to 383 randomly selected tourists in the region and 190 rural employees who were purposefully selected based on the Census 2016. We collected the views and comments of both statistical communities about the presence of tourists, their tourism activities in the region, attitudes of the local community towards tourism, feasible tourism projects in the region, and the anticipated roles of the host community in tourism development. In order to complete the research data, several interviews were conducted with tourism authorities, focus groups, and tourists visiting the tourist attractions of the Ghaleh Rudkhan in 2016-2019 in the form of open-ended and closed-ended questions. It was suggested that they were used in formulating the questionnaire and analyzing the data. In this study, three main questions were addressed qualitatively by interviews, and quantitatively by questionnaires:

- Do the visitors and locals like tourism activities?
- What are the tourism activities conducted by the visitors and locals?
- What tourism projects are in the top priority of the visitors and locals?

Tables 1 and 2 as well as Charts 1 and 2 were plotted to examine the demographic data and descriptions and related descriptive statistics. Table (1) shows the demographic status and descriptions of the statistical population of Ghaleh Rudkhan tourist destination. According to this table, the majority of respondents are men (61.35%), the highest frequency (20-30 years) is 50.13%, and the least frequency is for those over 60 years old (0.78%). The highest frequency of education level among the participants is the bachelor's degree (45.95%), the highest frequency of monthly income ranges are 10-20 million Rial and then 20-30 million Rial. 38.38% of the

tourists have a high level of familiarity with rural tourism and 42.03% of the respondents expressed

a great interest in cooperative tourism activities.

Table 1. Demography of the tourist participants (n =383)

(Source: Research findings, 2019)

Variables	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
Gender			
Male	235	61.35	61.35
Female	148	38.64	100
Age			
20-30	192	50.13	50.13
31-40	133	34.72	84.85
41-50	39	10.18	95.03
51-60	16	4.17	99.2
Over 60	3	0.78	100
Level of education			
High school	11	2.87	2.87
Diploma- Associate degrees	109	28.45	31.32
Bachelor	176	45.95	77.27
Master's degrees and higher	87	22.71	100
Monthly income (Iranian Rial)			
Less than 10 million	62	16.18	16.18
10-20 million	131	34.20	50.38
20-30 million	126	32.89	83.27
30-40 million	43	11.22	94.49
40 million and more	21	5.4	100
Familiarity with rural tourism			
very high	59	15.40	15.40
high	147	38.38	53.78
A little	139	36.29	90.07
little	38	9.92	100
Interest in tourism participatory activities			
very strong	61	15.92	15.92
strong	161	42.03	57.95
a little	131	34.20	92.15
little	30	7.83	100

Table 2. Demography of local workers in Ghaleh Rudkhan village participating in the research (n=190)

(Source: Research findings, 2019)

Variables	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
Gender			
Male	150	78.94	78.94
Female	40	21.05	100
Age			
20-30	34	17.89	17.89
31-40	79	41.57	59.46
41-50	43	22.63	82.09
51-60	19	10	92.09
Over 60	15	7.89	100
Level of education			
High school	69	36.31	36.31
Diploma- Associate degrees	83	43.68	79.99
Bachelor	33	17.36	97.35

Variables	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
Master's degree and higher	5	2.63	100
Monthly income (Iranian Rial)			
Under 10 million	97	51.05	51.05
10-20 million	68	35.78	86.83
20-30 million	19	10	96.83
30-40 million	4	2.10	98.93
40 million and more	2	1.05	100
Familiarity with rural tourism			
very high	23	12.10	12.10
high	54	28.42	40.52
a little	72	37.89	78.41
little	41	21.57	100
interest in tourism participatory activities			
very strong	72	37.89	37.89
strong	64	33.68	71.57
a little	33	17.36	88.93
little	21	11.05	100

Table (2), shows the demography and data description of the resident population employed in Ghaleh Rudkhan tourism village. It should be noted that the occupational diversity of respondents in the public and private jobs (agriculture, livestock, industry and services), in tourism and other related sectors is included. According to the tables (1) and (2), the majority of respondents are men (61.94%), the highest frequency of age groups is within the range of 31-40 years comprising 41.57% of the population, and the least frequency is for those over 60 years old (7.89%). The highest frequency of education level among the participants is the high school diploma and associate degree (43.68%), and for

the highest frequency of monthly income, the average monthly income was used, because the farmers' income was dependent on their agricultural product and they had no monthly income. An income of less than 10 million Rial was the most frequent rate (51.05%). 40.52 percent of the local employees had "very high", and "high" familiarity with rural tourism, and 71.57% of respondents had expressed "very high", and "high" interest in participatory tourism activities.

Figure (3) shows the statistical comparison of tourists and the local community's familiarity with rural tourism, and Figure (4), shows the interest level in tourism participatory activities based on the feedback from two populations.

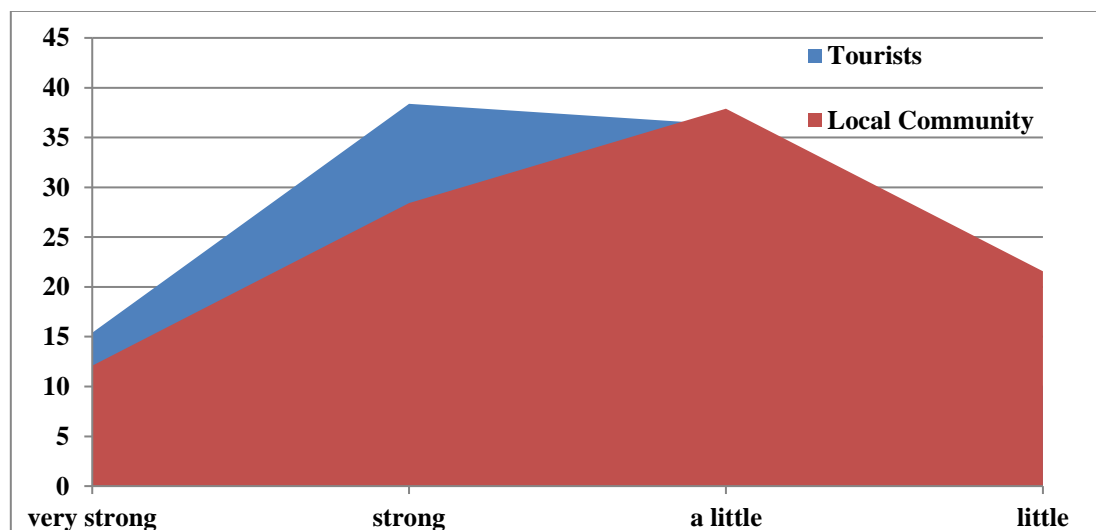


Figure 3: The statistical comparison of tourists and the local community's familiarity with rural tourism

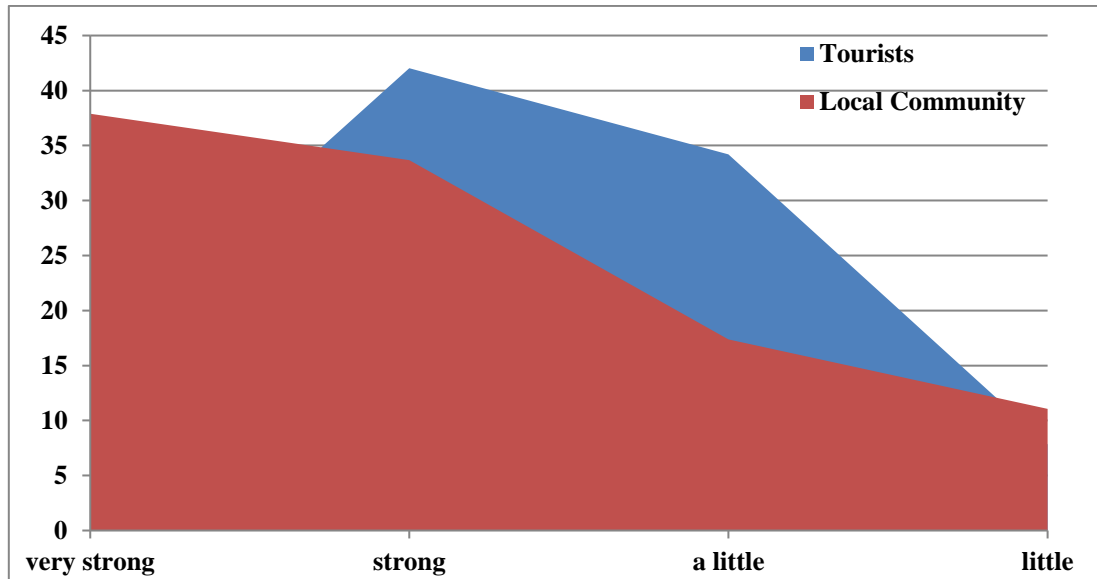


Figure 4. Interest level in tourism participatory activities based on the feedback from two populations.

In order to investigate the inferential data of the research, analyzing the significance level of the statistical population, the chi-square index was used to evaluate the overall fit of the model and calculate the difference between the estimated and observed covariance matrices. The significance level of the chi-square index (the significance of

the model fitted to the available data) for its low values should be greater than 0.05. In fact, the p-value index is a measure of non-significance of chi-square, with values below 0.05 indicating no significance. In contrast, the p-value should be above 0.07 so that chi-square can be significant.

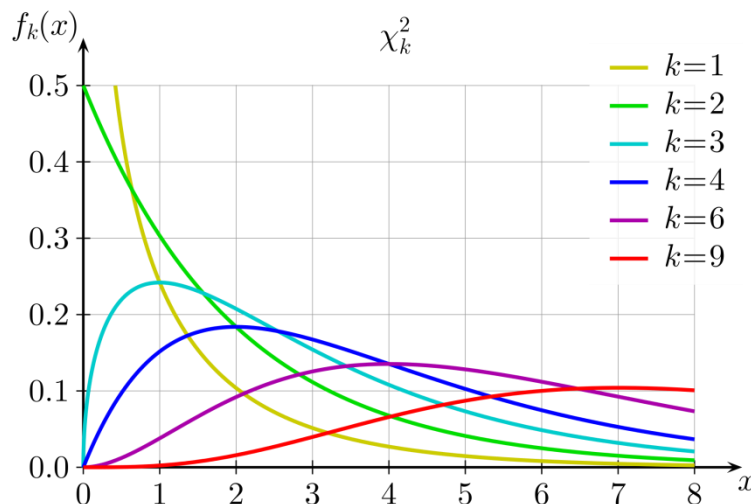


Figure 5. The chi-square theoretical distribution with different degrees of freedom (k)

Of the 190 locals who participated in the survey, 79.1% agreed to the presence of tourists in the village, however, the respondents had different views (Chi-square with 1 degree of freedom, and a significance level of 0.001, was equal to 12.1157). Of the 383 tourists participated in the survey, 81.46% expressed interest in travelling to

the study area individually or in organized tours. There is a significant difference between independent travelling, travels organized into a tour, and integrated travelling (independent and organized) (chi-square with two degrees of freedom and a significance level of 0.001 was equal to 15.2018).

In analyzing the questionnaires of tourists and local employees of Ghaleh Rudkhan tourism village, the research topics such as niche tourism activities, attitudes of local community towards tourism, feasible tourism projects and socio-economic factors affecting the development of special tourism are presented in [Tables 3 to 6](#) and [Figure \(5\)](#).

4.1. Niche tourism activities

Ghaleh Rudkhan tourism village with its historical, natural, and cultural attractions, provides tourists with a variety of incentives. According to [Table \(3\)](#) visits to forest park of Ghaleh Rudkhan, the recreation along the Ghaleh Rudkhan River, the purchase of local souvenirs and handicrafts, and enjoying various indigenous and local foods are among the most important incentives for tourists to visit the area.

Table 3. Tourist activities observed in Ghaleh Rudkhan tourism target village

(Source: Research findings, 2019)

Incentives	Agree (Frequency)	Agree (%)	Disagree (Frequency)	Disagree (%)
N=383	157	40.99	226	59.00
To go hiking and visit the Ghaleh Rudkhan castle	357	93.21	26	6.78
To visits forest park of Ghaleh Rudkhan	167	43.60	216	56.39
To take memorable photos with local costume in a photography center	208	54.30	175	45.69
Leisure along the Ghaleh Rudkhan River	124	32.37	259	67.62
To stay in the village	227	59.26	156	40.73
To enjoy various indigenous and local foods	258	67.36	125	32.63
To purchase local souvenirs and handicrafts	157	40.99	226	59.00

According to the findings of [Table \(3\)](#), and in-person interviews with the tourists, visiting Rudkhan Castle and climbing 935 steps in a 60 minute walk to reach the historic castle while steps may be slippery due to the rainfall does not

interest most tourists especially the elderlies, families with young children, the handicapped, etc., and mainly young tourists with a high level of physical activity visit the historic castle.

Table 4. Activities of local residents in the tourist attractions of the study area

(Source: Research findings, 2019)

Incentives	Agree (Frequency)	Agree (%)	Disagree (Frequency)	Disagree (%)
N=190				
Recreation	71	37.37	119	62.63
Tourist guides	83	43.68	107	56.32
Supply of local souvenirs and dishes	169	88.95	21	11.05
Photography in Photography Centers	53	27.89	137	72.11
Catering services in restaurants and buffets	48	25.26	142	74.74
To rent houses to tourists	131	68.95	59	31.05

According to [Table \(4\)](#) and views of tourism authorities, focus groups and local residents in Ghaleh Rudkhan tourism village, due to marked lack of facilities and few job opportunities in the area, tourism is a very convenient and profitable option for the rural economy; however, due to the lack of specialized tourism training, the opportunity has not been realized so far.

[Figure \(6\) and \(7\)](#) show the tourism activities of the tourists and local residents based on the population's views. According to the survey, the majority of tourists tend to visit Ghaleh Rudkhan forest park, and local residents are more likely to provide tourists with local souvenirs, food, rent houses, and earn more money from these activities.

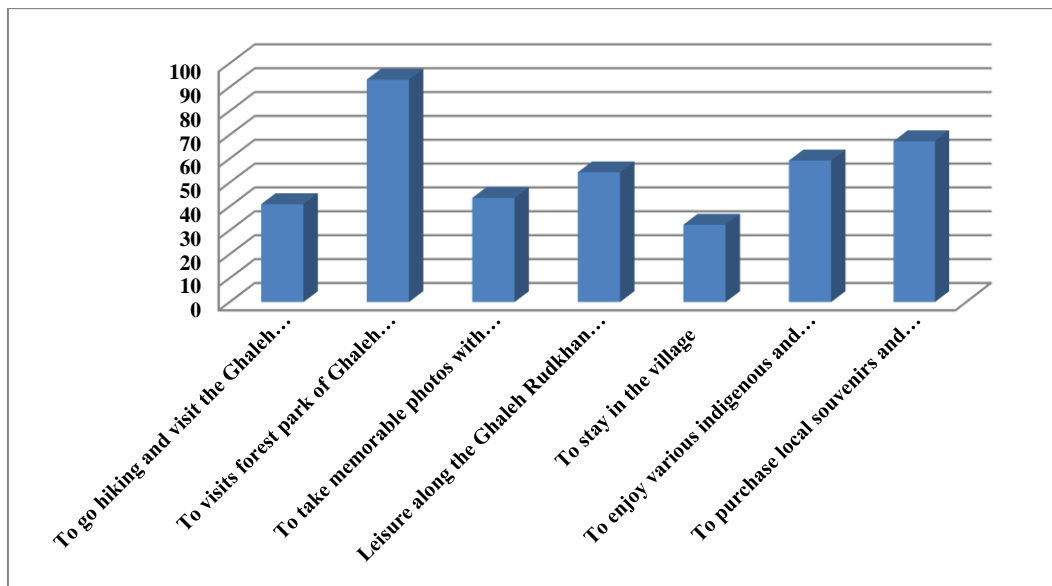


Figure 6. Observed tourism activities among the tourists and locals

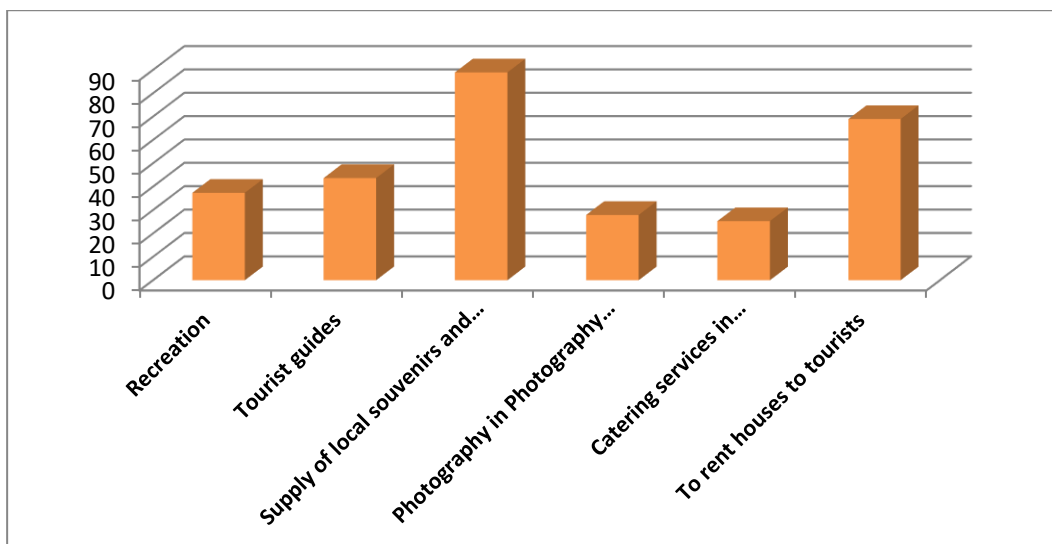


Figure 7. Observed tourism activities among local community

4.2. The attitudes of the local community towards tourism

The satisfaction of the local community with the development of tourism is of great importance, because inadequate tourism facilities in the rural tourism sector, the constraints in the livelihood and economic sectors in different areas such as agriculture, livestock, etc. have made the living conditions far from ideal (Mirzaee, 2013). Therefore, the development of tourism, especially niche tourism can be a good alternative to utilizing all the capacities available in the village and, consequently, the activity of the local community throughout the year. Findings show

that 59.8% of local residents have a friendly attitude towards tourists, while 5.4% have an unfriendly attitude and 34.8% have a belief in dual behavior (friendly and unfriendly). 81.31% of tourists found the behavior of local residents friendly, 4.7% unfriendly and 13.99% believed the locals have a dual behavior. Accordingly, the hospitality of the local rural community of the Ghaleh Rudkhan tourism village is confirmed, however, this study shows that this feature can be affected by taking photographs without permission, not paying local guide fees and parking vehicles in the public passages. Tourists, on the other hand, also expect the locals not to

force them buy local products or charge a higher price for the services they receive.

4.3. Feasible tourism projects

According to Table (5), local residents believed that fixing the access road to the village and establishing cultural centers are the top priorities of niche tourism projects in the area. The road to Ghaleh Rudkhan tourism village is narrow and winding, and the presence of tourists during the tourism peak creates many problems for the traffic and security of local residents and tourists. Therefore, suitable infrastructures and facilitating access to tourist attractions are among the main needs of local residents. As Ghaleh Rudkhan is a poor village lacking cultural centers, the creation of a cultural center is essential to preserve indigenous and local cultural values, and old and modern arts and crafts, the aesthetic values and cultural heritage by creating an exhibition hall and

strengthening the intellectual and social relations of local residents.

The top priority for a feasible niche tourism project from the tourists' point of view is to build a gondola transit to facilitate visiting the historic attractions of Ghaleh Rudkhan village. The walkway, with nearly 1,000 steps, make it difficult for the elderly, the disabled, and families with young children, to get to the castle, and many tourists skip visiting the castle at the beginning or halfway. In response to this request, it should be noted that Ghaleh Rudkhan is a National Historic Landmark with the reg. no. 3/154, and since 2012 multiple conservation areas have been determined by Cultural Heritage Organization of Iran and the use of any facilities that may disturb the natural scenery such as gondola transit, electric poles, etc. is prohibited and it is essential to obtain permission from the Directorate General for Cultural Heritage for building any tourism facilities.

Table 5. Priority tourism projects in views of the local residents and tourists in the study area
(Source: Research findings, 2019)

Projects	Agree (Frequency)	Agree (%)	Disagree (Frequency)	Disagree (%)
Tourist (N=190)				
Residence	73	53.26	179	46.73
To build camping areas	41	34.72	250	65.27
Gondola transit	147	83.02	65	16.97
Local residents (n = 190)				
Cultural centers	9	83.68	31	16.32
Gondola transit	149	54.73	86	45.26
To build camping areas	73	17.36	157	82.63
To fix access road to the village	41	97.36	5	2.63
Cultural centers	147	53.26	179	46.73

4.4. Socio-economic factors affecting the development of niche tourism

According to the surveys carried out in this study, 49.98% of the local residents in Ghaleh Rudkhan tourism village expressed their willingness to cooperate with the government in development of tourism projects, 43.6% preferred combined method of cooperation with the public and private sectors, and 6.42 % liked to work with NGOs.

78.5% of local residents believe that the economic management of rural tourism projects should be conducted by themselves and the authorities should avoid outsourcing as working with external workers limits the ease and management of tourism projects in the area. Table (6), shows the anticipated roles of local residents in niche tourism development projects in the study area.

Table 6. the anticipated roles of local residents in niche tourism development projects in the study area

(Source: Research findings, 2019)

Projects	Agree (Frequency)	Agree (%)	Disagree (Frequency)	Disagree (%)
Tourist (N=190)				
To follow up and approve the projects	73	38.42	117	61.58
To identify feasible projects in the village	41	21.57	149	78.42
To provide a solution	147	77.36	43	22.63
To sponsor the projects	9	4.73	181	95.26
To management the project	149	78.42	41	21.580

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The tourism industry, like other sectors of the industry, is undergoing a social and economic transformation. Accordingly, the popular tourist markets of the last decades, currently are not highly demanded and tourists are constantly searching for new markets. The diversity of activities in cities and regions of tourist destinations, on the one hand, and the changing lifestyles in developed countries, on the other hand, have led to efforts and plans to attract tourists with special interests (The comprehensive plan to increase inbound tours and improve technical capacity of the Iranian tour leaders, 2008). Read (1980) for the first time defines special interest travel. Since then, more specialized divisions in tourism with special interests have been provided by Hall and Wheeler (1992), Derrett (2001), Swarbrooke and Horner (1999) and Douglas et al. (2001). Torabi Farsani and Shafee (2018) introduced the keyword of "niche marketing" to describe special interest tourism. The niche marketing in tourism is a set of methods and activities that differentiate between tourists and offer activities and services based on the study of tourist behaviors, their travel motivation and needs. A niche market focuses on a specific product and emerges based on customer demands. In addition, the niche market is an opportunity to provide tourists with high quality services. The niche market increases the competition and business opportunities; in this type of marketing, the two components of location and customer are very important. The niche market focuses on the needs of specific customers and believes that one should address the general needs of the customers and meet their specific

needs by delivering specific products with a higher quality in the competitive market. In this research, given the advantage of this market, niche tourism is taken into consideration.

Niche tourism, as a specific tourism product, can position itself as a special tourism destination tailored to the specific needs of a particular customer/market by providing niche tourism products, and by creating an image helps tourism destinations to differences in their tourism products and survive in the increasingly competitive and crowded market. With the aim of introducing the niche tourism markets of Ghaleh Rudkhan tourism village, the diversity of these tourism activities have been discussed from the perspective of niche tourism based on tourism activities.

5.1. Scientific and educational niche tourism

Plant and animal community, especially in protected areas, is one of the most important tourist attractions in the present century. According to surveys among the different tourist trips, the highest growth rate is seen in environmental trips. Such trips are one of the most profitable tourism trips (Papoli Yazdi, & Saghae, 2014). The vegetation of the study area is in the vegetation region of Hirkani forests which includes part of the mountains, the intersection of Guilan province and Fouman Natural Resource Conservation Area, and Malkavan forests. These forests are reminiscent of the Tertiary Era (Cenozoic) and are, therefore, known as "ancient forests", and the main species of the area, having a jackal, fox, boar and brown bear (Qahreman Izadi, & Ayatollahi, 2013). Paying attention to the scientific tourism attractions of the plants and animals in the study area and undertaking scientific tours with the aim of introducing and

better identifying this niche is one of the tourism potentials in the study area.

Holding food festivals with the aim of introducing and experiencing cultural tourism attractions, cooking and preparing local cuisine and becoming familiar with the food culture of the inhabitants of Ghaleh Rudkhan village, training local handicrafts and local language are among other educational niche tourism opportunities in this area.

5.2. Livelihood niche tourism

Residence in Ghaleh Rudkhan tourism village, hiking and experiencing their daily chores, working in tea and rice fields of the village, preparing food with the products harvested from the farms are among the livelihood niche tourism attractions in the study area which along with the well-known tourist attractions of the village can generate economic benefits by targeted tours.

5.3. Sports niche tourism

One of the sports niche tourism opportunities in the study area is to benefit Ghaleh Rudkhan River in holding "catch-and-release" fishing festivals. Ghaleh Rudkhan River is one of the most important and less considered tourism capitals of the region. Ghaleh Rudkhan River is a subdivision of the Pish Rudbar River, forming two branches of the river: Ghasht Rudkhan and Ghaleh Rudkhan (Abedi, & Yousefi, 2015). Ghaleh Rudkhan River has two main tributaries called "Nazaralat" and "Heydaralat". The Nazaralat which is a larger tributary, originates from an altitude of 2300 meters, and Heydaralat from an altitude of 2000 meters. The river is home to *Salmo trutta fario*, which have been disappearing in recent years due to overfishing and river pollution. Holding responsible catch-and-release fishing tourism tours is an aid to protecting this species and sensitizing local authorities to tackle the pollution issues in this forest and beautiful river. Native and local sport festivals and competitions such as the Guilani Wrestling, Lafandbazi, etc. are among the other sports niche tourism attraction in the study area.

5.4. Nostalgic historical niche tourism

Historical nostalgia is a mental structure created by a group or people of a community. The nostalgic tourist seeks places or objects to revive his sense of the past (Nick Raftar et al., 2019). The Ghaleh Rudkhan castle also known as the 'Seksar Castle' and 'Hesami Castle' with an area

of more than 50 thousand square meters is one of the largest military castles of Guilan and Iran, which has experienced many historical events since its construction (Sassanid era) (Abbasi, 2006). Reconstructing the historical events of the castle based on historical documentation and their live presentation for tourists is one of the niche tourism attractions of the area.

5.5. Health niche tourism

One of the most common and popular forms of tourism is hiking for the sake of health benefits (Ghareh Nejad, 2009). Nature therapy, one of the sub-sectors of health tourism relies on using climate and natural features of the region. Summer resorts are known in the world and Iran for their natural therapeutic features. Ghaleh Rudkhan village, thanks to its tranquil and forested environment and its high altitude has the capability to create a rural retreat. This feature allows for tours with specific health tourism interests.

Despite all of the niche tourism opportunities and potentials in one place, the success of a tourism destination in attracting tourists and sustainable development depends on several factors. The most influential factor is the competency and functional ability of tourism managers in the development, packaging, and delivery of components that provide entertainment, enjoyment, and satisfaction to destination tourists/visitors (Hose, 2008). On the other hand, the satisfaction of the local residents and their participation in development of tourism in the region are among other necessities for the success of tourism destinations. The findings show that Ghaleh Rudkhan tourism village, despite various tourist attractions, has not been able to provide income generating job opportunities for the local inhabitants. The study of the population employed in the village showed that 51.05 % of them had a monthly average income of less than 10 million Rial. Since the livelihoods of the villagers were mainly dependent on agricultural and livestock employment opportunities which are seasonal jobs, they do not have continuous income; therefore, paying attention to the tourism sector and taking advantage of its economic benefits will help tackle economic problems, create new jobs for local residents and empower the community. Statistical analysis of this study showed that 17.89% of rural employees were young people between 20 and 30 years, which causes migration

of this group and decrease the population of the village. The niche tourism perspective seeks to take advantage of the neglected opportunities in the tourism sector and take a responsible approach to tourism in the regions and provide job opportunities for local residents, especially young people. The study of the education level showed that the rural students had the opportunity to study in elementary and secondary schools and pursue other courses in Fouman County as the nearest urban center. Therefore, people with a bachelor's degree and above comprise about 20 percent of the population which is another factor leading to the migration of rural residents. Holding specialized courses on tourism and hospitality with niche tourism approaches in Ghaleh Rudkhan Tourism by the [Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization](#) as well as the Technical & Vocational Training Organization of Guilan province, enhances the professional and specialized skills of the inhabitants in the field of tourism. Following these specialized trainings and meetings, the local community's familiarity with participatory activities in rural and niche tourism grows as they get more interested in tourism. Creating and developing tourism infrastructure in the village with an emphasis on cultural function and improvement of the rural roads, not only is a cause for the satisfaction of the local inhabitants and reducing their presence in neighboring cities for recreation, but also diversify rural niche tourism attractions and increase their visit to the area.

The most ideal conditions for the development of niche tourism in the region would be to organize and guide specialized tours. These tours, undertaken by specialized guides, tour leaders and travel agencies are held in a way that minimize the negative consequences of tourism by avoiding public annoyance through informing the tourists about the destination conditions, the do's-and-don'ts of the host-guest community and environmental protection recommendations. Based on the activity-based niche tourism, it is recommended to prepare niche tourism travel packages for the region, to market, advertise, and hold photography tours, hiking tours in the Forest park, tea and rice tours in the harvest season, to hold farm tours, and make residence in the village, undertake historical tours with emphasis on the

evolution of the historic castle of Ghaleh Rudkhan (from Sassanid until now) to make sport tours in catch-and-release fishing festivals, food, and nutrition tours, scientific, training tours, etc.

In order to improve the conditions and quality of niche tourism tours of Ghaleh Rudkhan, it is important to pay attention to the tourism facilities and infrastructure of the area and implement the tourism projects mentioned in the research such as facilitating access to the historic castle, and building residence facilities. The participation of local residents in identifying, implementing, constructing, and monitoring the implementation process is the demand of the local community from public and private investors active in the regional tourism; these factors synergize the potentials of rural niche tourism development. In order to develop sustainable niche tourism based on the activities in Ghaleh Rudkhan tourism village, the following suggestions and solutions are offered:

- To use government incentives to invest in tourism destination villages and attract foreign investors.
- To cooperate and interact with Dehyari and the Rural Council as local administrative bodies involved in policy makings, management and implementation of various tourism training programs, development of necessary infrastructure, assistance in attracting financial resources, etc.
- To timely collect garbage, and build sewage disposal systems in tourist attractions.
- To adopt up-to-date marketing strategies in support of niche tourism activities such as introducing special tourism attractions to travel agencies, tourism websites or social media.
- To create a cultural center in Ghaleh Rudkhan tourism village, to promote social and cultural relationships with local residents and spend leisure time as an indoor tourism facility to introduce local cultural heritage values and as a gathering place, especially during rainy days and unfavorable weather conditions.

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ارزیابی پتانسیل های گردشگری جاویژه روستای هدف گردشگری قلعه رودخان با استفاده از بخش بندی مبتنی بر فعالیت

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چکیده مبسوط

۱. مقدمه

اصطلاح «گردشگری جاویژه» از اصطلاح «بازاریابی جاویژه» اقتباس شده است. بازار جاویژه ها می توانند مناطق جغرافیایی، یک صنعت خاص، نژاد و یا گروه خاصی از مردم باشد. با توجه به ماهیت متنوع گردشگری جاویژه و محصولات مرتبط با آن، رویکردهای دیگری نیز در تعریف این شکل از گردشگری مورد استفاده قرار می گیرد از جمله: رویکرد جغرافیایی و جمعیتی، رویکرد محصول محور، رویکرد مشتری محور. در رویکرد جغرافیایی و جمعیتی؛ محیط روستای هدف گردشگری قلعه رودخان از منظر فعالیت های گردشگری و نه صرف توجه به جاذبه گردشگری شناخته شده شاخص آن که دژ قلعه رودخان است مورد مطالعه قرار می گیرد. در رویکرد محصول محور، بر حضور گردشگران و جامعه محلی در فعالیت ها و بخش های مختلف و متنوع گردشگری منطقه تأکید می گردد و رویکرد مشتری محور نیز به نیازها و انتظارات گردشگری، جامعه مهمان و میزبان اشاره دارد. مسأله مورد بررسی این پژوهش، تنوع بخشی و بهره گیری از تمامیت ظرفیت های گردشگری مبتنی بر فعالیت در روستای هدف گردشگری قلعه رودخان است و رویکردهای گردشگری موجود را واجد بهره برداری مقطعی و ناقص و به دور از سیاست های توسعه پایدار گردشگری معرفی می نماید.

۲. مبانی نظری

گردشگری با علائق ویژه: (SIT) ارائه فعالیت های گردشگری- سفارشی است که منافع خاص گروه ها و افراد را جلب می کند. در این حالت، گردشگری برای برآوردن یک علاقه یا نیاز خاص انجام می شود. این گردشگری شامل شامل چهار تجربه اصلی است: اقناع کننده و پرثمر، غنچه، ماجراجویانه و آموزشی است.

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بازاریابی جاویژه: عبارت است از هدف گرفتن یک کالا یا خدمت به سوی بخش کوچکی از بازار که کالاها یا خدمات موجود نتوانسته اند نیاز آنها را به طور مطلوب برآورده سازند. گردشگری جاویژه: به عنوان یک محصول خاص گردشگری می تواند متناسب با نیازهای یک مخاطب خاص/ بازار خاص و با ارائه محصولات خاص جاویژه، به ایجاد و تثبیت موقعیت خود به عنوان مقاصد گردشگری جاویژه مبادرت ورزد.

۳. روش پژوهش

این پژوهش با بهره گیری از روش های مصاحبه محور، گفتگو با گروه کانونی، تدوین و توزیع پرسشنامه، مشاهدات شخصی و تجزیه و تحلیل اسناد موجود از منابع مختلف انجام پذیرفت. استفاده از روش های چندگانه تحقیقاتی در این تحقیق به منظور اطمینان آماری از اطلاعات ناکافی موجود اتخاذ گردید. به منظور تجزیه و تحلیل داده های آماری این پژوهش از سه روش استفاده گردید: تحلیل محتوا، تحلیل مضمون و استفاده از نرم افزار SPSS نسخه ۲۱. در بررسی و تحلیل آمار توصیفی این پژوهش، از روش های آمار شامل فراوانی و نمودار هیستوگرام، و همچنین آزمون های نرمال بودن استفاده شد. در بخش آمار استنباطی، نیز با توجه به اینکه داده های پژوهش از توزیع نرمال تبعیت نمی کردند، از آزمون آماری کای اسکور استفاده شد و تجزیه و تحلیل داده ها استفاده از نرم افزار SPSS نسخه ۲۱ انجام شد.

۴. یافته های تحقیق

روستای هدف گردشگری قلعه رودخان با دارا بودن جاذبه های گردشگری ممتاز، تا کنون از منظر قابلیت های گردشگری جاویژه و توسعه پایدار آتی آن و رویکرد مشارکتی جامعه محلی در پروژه های گردشگری قابل انجام در آن، مورد مطالعه قرار نگرفته است به

ایده‌آل‌ترین شرایط به منظور توسعه گردشگری جاویژه در مناطق، برنامه‌ریزی و هدایت توره‌های تخصصی سازمان‌دهی شده است. این توره‌ها که توسط راهنمایان تخصصی آموزش‌دیده و از سوی تورگردانان و آژانس‌های مسافرتی برگزار می‌گردد به دلیل آگاهی دادن به گردشگران در مورد شرایط مقصد مورد بازدید و باید‌های و نبایدهای ارتباط جامع‌میزبان و مهمان و توصیه‌های حفاظتی زیست‌محیطی، پیامدهای منفی گردشگری را به حداقل می‌رسانند و مانع رسیدن جامعه به سطح‌آزدگی از حضور گردشگر می‌شوند. بر اساس جاویژه‌های مبتنی بر فعالیت‌معرفی شده روستای هدف- گردشگری قلعه‌رودخان، تهیه بسته‌های سفر جاویژه‌های منطقه و بازاربایی، تبلیغات و برگزاری توره‌های تخصصی عکاسی، توره‌های طبیعت‌گردی و پیاده‌روی در پارک جنگلی قلعه‌رودخان، توره‌های کشاورزی در فصل برداشت چای و برنج، توره‌های گردشگری مزرعه و اقامت در روستا، توره‌های تاریخی با تأکید بر معماری سیر تکوین دژ تاریخی قلعه رودخان (ساسانیان تا کنون)، توره‌های ورزشی در شاخه ماهیگیری بگیر و رها کن، توره‌های خوراک و غذاشناسی، توره‌های علمی و آموزشی و ... پیشنهاد می‌گردد. به منظور بهبود شرایط و ارتقاء کیفیت توره‌های جاویژه گردشگری روستای هدف گردشگری قلعه‌رودخان، توجه به تسهیلات و زیرساخت‌های گردشگری منطقه و اجرای پروژه‌های گردشگری مطرح شده در پژوهش همچون تسهیل دسترسی به بنای قلعه تاریخی و احداث اقامتگاه حائز اهمیت است. مشارکت ساکنان محلی در شناسایی، اجرا، ساخت و نظارت بر حسن اجرا، درخواست جامعه محلی از سرمایه‌گذاران دولتی و خصوصی فعال در گردشگری منطقه است و این عوامل سبب هم‌افزایی توان توسعه گردشگری جاویژه روستا می‌گردد.

کلیدواژه‌ها گردشگری با علائق ویژه، گردشگری جاویژه، بخش بندی مبتنی بر فعالیت، مشارکت، روستای هدف گردشگری قلعه رودخان.

تشکر و قدرانی

پژوهش حاضر حامی مالی نداشته و حاصل فعالیت علمی نویسندگان است.

همین جهت این مطالعه با هدف تنوع‌بخشی و توسعه گردشگری روستای هدف گردشگری قلعه‌رودخان و افزایش درآمد، اشتغال و کاهش نرخ مهاجرت روستائینان به بررسی این قابلیت‌ها پرداخته است. در تحلیل پرسشنامه گردشگران و شاغلین محلی روستای- هدف گردشگری قلعه‌رودخان، در محورهای مورد پژوهش چون فعالیت‌های گردشگری جاویژه، نگرش جامعه محلی نسبت به گردشگری، پروژه‌های گردشگری قابل انجام و عوامل اجتماعی - اقتصادی تأثیرگذار بر توسعه گردشگری جاویژه مشخص شد که، بازدید از پارک جنگلی قلعه‌رودخان، تفریح و تفرج در کنار رودخانه قلعه‌رودخان، خرید سوغات و صنایع‌دستی محلی و صرف غذاهای متنوع بومی و محلی از مهم‌ترین انگیزه‌های حضور گردشگران در منطقه است. نتایج نظرسنجی شرکت‌کنندگان محلی این پژوهش نشان داد که با عنایت به کمبود امکانات شدید منطقه و کاهش فرصت‌های شغلی، گردشگری گزینه‌ای بسیار مناسب و سودآور برای اقتصاد روستا قلمداد می‌گردد، لیکن به دلیل عدم آموزش تخصصی گردشگری و مهمان‌پذیری امکان بهره‌برداری از این فرصت تا کنون محقق نگردیده است.

اکثریت گردشگران تمایل به بازدید از پارک جنگلی قلعه‌رودخان را دارند و ساکنان محلی تمایل بیشتر به عرضه سوغات و غذاهای محلی و اجاره منزل شخصی به گردشگران دارند و از این فعالیت‌ها درآمد اقتصادی بیشتری کسب می‌نمایند. یافته‌های پژوهش بیانگر این مطلب است که ۵۹/۸ درصد ساکنان محلی نگرش دوستانه نسبت به گردشگران دارند در حالی که ۵/۴ درصد نگرش غیر-دوستانه و ۳۴/۸ درصد نیز اعتقاد به رفتار دوگانه (دوستانه و غیر-دوستانه) گردشگران داشته‌اند. ۸۱/۳۱ درصد از گردشگران، رفتار ساکنان محلی را دوستانه، ۴/۷ درصد غیردوستانه و ۱۳/۹۹ درصد رفتار دوگانه را انتخاب نمودند. ساکنان محلی اصلاح مسیر دسترسی به روستا و ایجاد مرکز فرهنگی را از اولویت‌های پروژه‌های گردشگری جاویژه منطقه خود عنوان نموده‌اند و اولویت پروژه قابل اجرا گردشگری جاویژه از منظر گردشگران، احداث تله‌کابین به منظور تسهیل در بازدید از جاذبه تاریخی قلعه‌رودخان است.

۵. بحث و نتیجه‌گیری



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