

Original Research Article

**Tourists' Perspective on Ecotourism Infrastructures in Mazandaran Province of Iran**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study follows a quantitative approach aiming at exploring the tourists' perspective towards accommodation services from Mazandaran, to identify tourists' perspective towards accessibility services from Mazandaran and to explore tourists' perspective towards facilities from Mazandaran. A questionnaire was mailed to 122 tourists from the state, regional and foreign tourists where they were re required to demonstrate their ecotourism development prospects by ranking the items as 1. Poor and 5. Strong. The findings indicated that the tourists had a complimentary view of homestay standard and operation, but they were not satisfied with tents sites in summer. Besides, the tourists were more optimistic about the road quality as well as cycling, but they did not show their interest in terms of trails and observation point's services for bird watching and skiing routes. Furthermore, the tourists ranked indicator facilities as the least favored. They believe that the café and restaurant, as well as parking areas, are not well organized and showed their concerns about the bathroom, washing equipment, waterfall, and washroom facilities.

**Introduction**

The ecotourism sector is growing worldwide as a modern face of tourism with minimal effect on nature and contributes to biodiversity and ecosystem conservation (Mree et al., 2020). Honey (2008) reported that ecotourism is low-impact travel to vulnerable scenic and protected areas, albeit generally on a limited scale, helping to inform tourists, provide environmental support, encourage economic growth, albeit nurture different cultures (Ewebiyi et al., 2019).

However, in 1988 the World Trade Organization proposed the concept and principles of ecotourism, with direct links to sustainable growth and development (Romana, 2016). It is also a responsible path to natural resources that seeks to protect healthy local communities' climate and well-being and is known as a sustainable growth resource in the tourism field (The World Ecotourism Society, 2013). To achieve the most beneficial facets, therefore, the construction of ecotourism infrastructures is essential. However, tourist-friendly countries with natural scenery will raise national income per capita, and Iran will reach the World Tourism Organization's estimated revenues if it invests in improving tourism infrastructure. Also, Mazandaran province can play a significant role in attracting Ecotourists with its fertile, majestic, and pristine ecosystems and numerous plant and animal species.

The specific geographical conditions, climatic diversity, and specific topography and geomorphology conditions in Iran indicate the unique potential in the country's ecotourism region, particularly in the Mazandaran province. It is even though this

ecotourism infrastructure was not adequately built-in Mazandaran. Ecotourists also have an environmental focus and may play an essential role in preserving and maintaining the atmosphere and fostering the awareness of the forest within the societies' people. In terms of ecotourism opportunities and environmental change, Iran is among the top five countries in the world. Given the country's capability and ability, factors such as the lack of proper ecotourism facilities, which often triggers natural scenery degradation, are the critical reasons for not drawing Ecotourists to Iran. The growth of beauty and reach of the ecotourism region must be accompanied by consideration and fulfillment of tourists' demands. In other terms, much focus has been given to the views of tourists, in specific critiques and recommendations, as well as rates of satisfaction when creating ecotourism infrastructures (Harianto et Al. 2020).

The tourism infrastructure includes ancillary and complementary facilities, equipment, systems, processes, and resources necessary for every tourist destination's functioning. This primarily includes roads, railways, airports, and the like, which make a tourist destination accessible for tourists. Perception is historically and socially formed and is linked to different influences such as history, race, faith, laws, and social strain. The definition standard experienced by ecotourists originates from the level of expertise. The happiness and viewpoint of tourists have hardly been examined. This paper intends to examine the viewpoint of tourists on ecotourism infrastructures and limitations towards ecotourism facilities and services in Mazandaran Province. Iran concerning their duration of stay and the ecotourism facilities they used during their visit to Mazandaran Province and the capacity of ecotourism and provided solutions to the obstacles to ecotourism.

### **Tourism**

Tourism has been one of the key motivating factors behind rapid development in a variety of countries and areas across the world. Tourism has become a global trend due to growing people's spare time, rising discretionary income, and creating more reliable travel, rendering more countries available. Centered on the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) concept, tourism can be described as moving beyond the stock area for one year from one stage to another. There are several explanations for traveling citizens, such as leisure, entertainment, sport, schooling, and industry. According to the UNWTO tourism highlights (2015), vacation travel, entertainment, and other modes of leisure accounted for just over half of all foreign tourist arrivals in 2019 (1.4 billion). Tourism is very significant and has a direct impact on the fiscal, social, and cultural growth of the regions and countries of destination.

However, UNWTO has been active in ecotourism since the early 1990s and has established a series of recommendations focused on the close connection between protected area and tourism, intending to ensure that tourism contributes to and does not weaken the function of protected areas.

### **Tourism in Iran**

In Iran, tourism is extensive, offering a variety of activities from hiking and climbing in the mountains of Alborz and Zagros to beach holidays by the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea. The Iranian Government has made concerted attempts to draw visitors to the country's diverse attractions, and in recent years, arrivals have increased. According to the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization (ICHTO), there are 8-9 million tourists from abroad who visit Iran as of 2019.

Before the 1979 Iranian revolution, tourism was marked by a significant number of tourists traveling to Iran for its varied attractions, including cultural splendors and a full and scenic environment ideal for a range of activities. The bulk of international tourists to Iran since the revolution have been religious pilgrims and businesspeople (Khoshnevis et al., 2017).

The glamorous tourism region and the fresh air, the pleasant scenery and sightseeing and the green mountains, the fascinating location, the lake, the magnificent waterfall, the raw full of flowers and trees, the peaceful shore, the forest and mountain adjunction and the shore. Ambitious and turnstile art and cultural resources can be turned into one of Iran's most significant and beautiful and glamorous pole (ICHTO) by improving tourism facilities and tourism welfare equipment according to the section on economic growth and other social aspects.

### **Tourism in Mazandaran**

In Mazandaran province, the state of the tourism industry has always been in this direction. If we speak about tourism, our dream refers to some significant cities such as Esfahan, Shiraz, Kermanshah, and Hamedan. However, Mazandaran is met with little recognition due to its stunning and desirable tourism venue. In this critical situation, we have tourist services and adequate publicity. This location will transform into a tourist hub. It has several historical and religious sites owing to its unique state. The coastal plateau of the Caspian Sea is one of the significant areas of recreation and tourism (Aryan, 2015).

Eastern Mazandaran is a little unusual and provides a unique, enticing position compared to other places in this province owing to its air and land links with other places in this province. Noshahr is Mazandaran's only city that communicates with every part of our nation or planet with ground, sea, and weather links. The sea allowed Noshahr to link with the Caspian Sea's international port border, and the transmission of trade and culture occurs. The presence of a modern airport for air connectivity and a beautiful road for territorial connectivity have ranked this city's condition in the tourism industry (Divsalar & Azami, 2014). Kandelos, Khezh Nabi Dam, Sisangan Stream Div, and Jungle Park are Noshahr's beautiful and crowded locations. And on Chalos. Because of the magnificent view of this route, there is almost no one in Iran crossing from the rugged axis of Haraz, hoping this path did not end. Excitement and the fun hoariness that comes to any traveler by traveling from this path eventually lead to calming the Valesht pool, Jungle Finn Park, Namak Abroad Tele Kabin, beautiful Kelardasht countryside and Chaykhoran palace. The city of Zirab, Pol Sefid, Joybar, Nor, Babol, Babolsar, Neka, Varsak, and Qaemshahr is the city of this province. It has developed attractive geographical, cultural and urban Mazandaran besides different villages with their unique manner and custom (Hassanzadeh, 2014).

### **Tourists' Perspective**

The visitor view analyzes co-creation as it unfolds in the travel field, encompassing the actions and emotions involved in encounters, before, after, and after the trip. The following parts describe the main dimensions contained in the literature and address them. The visitor refers to any part of the tourism experience, process, or total. Co-creation includes interrelated interaction processes and activities that link visitors and other stakeholders before travel (before consumption), during a stay at the destination (during consumption) and after travel (after consumption).

The visitor regularly engages in events requiring on-site training. Visiting attractions and locations requires participating in events that are viewed as relaxing, separate from daily tasks, and possibly significant, based on entertainment or learning. Involvement stimulates curiosity and intent of the tourist when in situ and hence gives significance to the holiday of travel. During on-site interaction, the visitor communicates with others. Co-creation activities on-site involve the participant physically, emotionally, and mentally, thus linking visitors, their relatives and associates, other guests, residents, workers, and different styles of suppliers in the room or atmosphere of the event (Campos, Mendes, Valle & Scott, 2018).

Karl (2018) concluded that adding a tourist and destination viewpoint allows for more comprehension of the decreasing difference between tourist styles from conceptual to actual destination choices. However, certain variables have been incorporated into a typology of tourism affected by respondents' nationality or cultural context. Thus, the transferability and generalization of these findings is the drawback of his research.

### **Ecotourism Infrastructure**

Ecotourism includes a wide variety of responsible, nature-based events that promote the enjoyment and awareness of natural resources by tourists and are maintained to be environmentally friendly. Infrastructures for ecotourism should concentrate on showcasing and appreciating the natural values of a region, and should not require changing the natural environment for practices contrary to that intent. (Boley & Green, 2016).

The Protection of Nature calls for the creation of commercial, low-impact ecotourism facilities developed on national parks. The requirements of the NC Act ensure that all ecotourism infrastructures accepted are in the public interest, leisure practices, environmentally friendly, and, to the fullest degree possible, conserve the ecological state of the area, and maintain its cultural heritage and ecological values. Every approved facility must be sensitively planned and maintained to ensure that it is consistent with the nature and character of the site and complements the management of the National Park it is situated in (Leung, 2018).

Nonetheless, the relevant ecotourism facilities will be linked to a strong attitude and high capacity to overcome challenges in the infrastructures of national parks. Managers will have the underlying curiosity for issues such as: Creating suitable facilities for the eco-tourist location, enhancing education, and increasing local citizens' consciousness by arranging tourism and related resources training courses for them (Miller, 2017) and promoting regional ecotourism by publishing its logo online, distributing posters, brochures or arranging reward tours. Besides, the quality of facilities should be increased, and, with reasonable financial control, tourism goods should be diversified (Leung 2018).

### **Accommodation**

Visitor accommodation as an organization that provides its facilities and resources to individuals or groups. Examples involve but are not restricted to, hotels, motels, guest rooms, and company apartments/chalets (Akyeampong, 2007). Nonetheless, it can be defined in its entirety as any facility offering tourists or individuals temporarily away from their usual place of residence or work a psychological basis (Mensah & Dei-Mensah, 2013). The bedrooms are necessarily the principal items provided by the

lodging facilities to their customers. However, a variety of other attractions and services available for rent include restaurants and bars (food and beverage), recreational facilities (swimming pools, basketball courts, horseback riding), exercise centers (spas), and conference and meeting spaces for visitors to use among others. In modern times, the hospitality facilities have placed a significant emphasis on conferences due to the increase in business travel.

### **Accessibility**

Accessible tourism allows individuals with access needs, including attributes of independence, vision, hearing, and cognitive access, to work individually and with equality and integrity through the provision of widely constructed tourism goods, facilities, and ecosystems. Which involves individuals in wheelchairs alone or with help, helping sticks or crutches, disabled guests with trolleys and heavy bags, visual and hearing impairments, soldiers, pram households, and pregnant women. They are expected to ride as they wish (Darcy & Dickson, 2009).

Visitors with disabilities want the service provider to unrestrictedly access the resources and amenities to spend their fun leisure time at the famous tourism destination. Therefore, disabled travelers need special assistance and help in achieving the goal. Exceptional support for disabled visitors is based on a regular program of public transit, lodging, and travel facilities. Nevertheless, the heart of the service company should be well aware of special incentives that make a customer happy about additional support, contribution, reward, or economic benefits (Ideas 2012).

### **Facility**

Tourist facilities are tourist or tourist services such as lecture rooms, restaurants, gift shops, toilets and recreational facilities that do not provide a hotel or tourist accommodation; 'transport effect analysis' means a review of the transport effect created by a proposed development on the current and planned road system, 'Mobility Management Plan' means a policy or plan outlining how mobility requirements are to be addressed in all modes of transportation, such as (but not limited to) public transit, private transportation, Switching and cycling, including whether parking requirements should be accommodated, including off-site parking, including what parking facilities will be required; 'transport usage' includes land use, building or agreement for the provision of transportation services for public goods (including liquids including gases) or for passengers via rail, boat, sea or pipeline, including the usage of particular properties; buildings or infrastructure for the purposes of a pier, a train station, a bus depot or a taxi exchange, a transportation undertaking devoted to the delivery of a transport service; includes a public private initiative such as a railway station, a bus terminal, a taxi rank, a mass transit junction, an ancillary harbor without an airport or a helicopter landing pad; 'Urban planting' implies the growing of crops in relatively small industrial or peripheral areas; for own usage or selling in nearby dull markets; because, for the purposes of this planning management framework, the planting of an individual's garden in a dwelling is not regarded as urban farming; 'Used' includes 'designated or planned for use' in addition to its specific meaning; use or facilities required to provide engineering and related resources for the proper functioning of urban growth requiring a water reservoir (law insider).

### **Research Objective**

1. To investigate tourists' perspective towards accommodation services from Mazandaran.
2. To identify tourists' perspective towards accessibility services from Mazandaran.
3. To explore tourists' perspective towards facilities from Mazandaran.

### **Methodology**

The study is based on a quantitative approach where quantitative data are collected to investigate the perspective of tourists about ecotourism infrastructures. The study's population is comprised of 122 tourists from the state, regional and foreign tourists. The population comprises 53.3 % males and 46.7 % of females from diverse places around the globe. The questionnaire used to collect data is divided into three parts, namely, demographics of respondents, travel behavior, and infrastructures for ecotourism. Besides, the infrastructure for ecotourism is divided into three parts, such as accommodation, accessibility, and facilities. Tourists were required to demonstrate their ecotourism development prospects by ranking the items as 1. Poor and 5. Strong. The 122 questionnaires were also obtained successfully.

### **Findings**

#### **Respondents' Demographics**

The table below shows the participants' demographics including age, gender, educational qualification and Current occupation.

Table 1.1. Demographic

	<b>Category</b>	<b>Percentage of Tourists</b>
<b>Age</b>	18-24	5.7
	25-34	39.3
	35-49	41.8
	50-64	12.3
	65+	.8
<b>Gender</b>	Male	53.3
	Female	46.7
<b>Education</b>	Primary/Intermediary	5.7
	Secondary	5.7
	Diploma	7.4
	Undergraduate	22.1
	Postgraduate	59.0
<b>Current occupation</b>	Student	18.9
	Employed	50.0
	Unemployed	10.7
	Retired	3.3
	Other	17.2
<b>Total</b>		<b>122</b>

Based on table 1.1, the range of respondents' age was as follows: 41.8 percent were between 35-49 years old, 39.3 percent were between 25-34 years, 12.3 percent were between 50-64 years old, 8 percent were more than 65, and 5.7 percent of respondents were between 18-24.

Moreover, 53.3 percent of respondents were male, and 46.7 percent were female. Furthermore, 59 percent of participants were Postgraduate, 22.1 were Undergraduate, 7.4 percent had Diploma, and respondents with Secondary and Primary/Intermediary have experienced the same rate, 5.7 percent. Although results show that 50 percent of visitors were employed, 18.9 percent were students, 10.7 percent were unemployed, 3.3 percent were retired, and 17.2 percent chose "other".

### **Respondents' Travel Behavior**

This study often focuses on general issues about the travel conduct of the respondents. A different interpretation of respondents' travel behavior would reflect the desires of tourists and how tourists should act during their trip while selecting facilities. The following table indicates tourists' behavior.

Table 2.1. Travel Behavior

	Category	Percentage of Tourists
<b>How do you travel to Mazandaran?</b>	A package tour	13.1
	Semi-package tour	9.8
	Free and Independency	63.9
	Other	13.1
<b>How many times have you visited Mazandaran?</b>	Once	2.5
	Twice	13.1
	Thrice	9.8
	Four times or more	74.6
<b>How long do you usually stay in Mazandaran?</b>	1-2 days	13.1
	3-5 days	37.7
	A week	26.2
	A fortnight	1.6
	A month	20.5
<b>What activities would you like to choose in Mazandaran?</b>	Jungle Tracking	73.0
	Animal Observation	5.7
	Mountain climbing	6.6
	Water fall exploration	5.7
	Backpacking	2.5
	Other activities	6.6
	<b>Total</b>	<b>122</b>

Table 2.1 describes the percentage of respondents' travel behavior in term how they travel, with who, how many times they visited, how long they stay, and which activities do they choose? Results show that most of the respondents preferred traveling free and Independent with 63.9%. Moreover, the majority of them tarry 3-5 days with 37.7% and a week with 26.2%. Furthermore, most of the respondents traveled Mazandaran Four times or more, with 74.6%. Besides, the majority of respondents usually have chosen Jungle Tracking for their activity with 73 % and Animal observation, Mountain Climbing with 5.7 %, 6.6 %, respectively.

**Participants' perspective of Accessibility, Accommodation and Facilities**

Table 3.1 indicates the overall mean and standard deviation of accessibility, accommodation and facilities regarding respondents' perspective from Mazandaran. Table below shows overall tourists' perspective.

Table 3.1. Overall tourists' Perspective

<b>Accessibility, Accommodation, Facilities</b>			
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Accommodation	122	3.02	.72
Accessibility	122	2.69	.79
Facilities	122	2.67	.79

Based on table 3.1 shows that the overall respondents' perceptions towards "Accommodation", "Accessibility" and "Facilities". Among these and based on respondents' ranking "Accommodation" stands at first place (M= 3.02, SD= 0.72); "Accessibility" stands in the next place (M= 2.69, SD= 0.79); and "Facilities" stands in the third place (M= 2.67, SD= 0.79).

### Respondents' perception of Accommodation

Accommodation is a group of rooms, or building which someone may live or stay and is important to any tourists who want to travel to another destination or on a trip as you are always going to need a place to stay such as hotels, caravan parks, and campsites. The following table explains accommodation.

Table 4.1. Accommodation

<b>Accommodation</b>			
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Hotel quality and services	122	3.17	.89
Motel quality and services	122	2.91	.90
Suit quality and services	122	3.15	.93
Campaign areas and services	122	2.86	.97
Tent sites in summer	122	2.73	1.08
Home stay quality and service	122	3.30	.97

Table 4.1 shows accommodation quality based on visitors' perspective. By Respondents' ranked, Homestay quality and service stands first (M= 3.30, SD= 0.97) and Hotel quality and services are in the second place (M= 3.17, SD= 0.89), while Tent sites in summer have seen the lower rate (M= 2.73, SD= 1.08).

### Respondents' perception of Accessibility

Accessible tourism is the continuing initiative to ensure that residents have exposure to visitor destinations, goods, and facilities, irrespective of their physical restrictions, conditions, or age. Accessibility helps anyone to share in and appreciate the opportunities for tourism. While its influence spreads to the broader community outside the visitor recipients, embedding openness in society's social and economic principles. The table below describes accessibility.

Table 5.1. Accessibility

<b>Accessibility</b>			
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Quality of roads	122	2.94	.88
Cycling routes	122	2.40	1.09
Excursionist on wheelchair	122	2.14	1.09
Excursionist walker	122	2.59	1.16
Paths & walking tracks	122	2.85	1.00
Internal transport	122	3.07	.90
Bridges and walkways	122	3.00	1.00

Trails and observation points for bird watching	122	2.74	1.07
Skiing routes	122	2.50	1.12

The respondents showed their perspective of accessibility by ranking the item Internal transport with (M= 3.07, SD= 0.9), while Excursionist on wheelchair experienced the lowest with (M= 2.14, SD= 1.09). Moreover, Quality of roads and quality of Paths & walking tracks saw rate (M= 2.94, SD= 0.88), (M= 2.85, SD= 1.0) respectively.

**Respondents' perception of Facility**

Tourism facilities include tourist or guest services such as lecture halls, bars, retail stores, toilets, and leisure facilities, which do not require a hotel or tourist accommodation (Law-insider Online Dictionary, 2020). The following table shows the facility.

Table 6.1. Facility

Facilities	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Zip lines equipment's and safety	122	2.81	1.07
Binoculars and a camera for bird watching	122	2.45	1.06
Café and restaurant	122	3.58	1.01
Sheltered or outdoor housing for watching animals	122	2.53	1.17
Toilet cleanliness and washing equipment	122	2.41	1.14
Parking areas	122	2.86	1.06
Availability of high-speed internet and Wi-Fi	122	2.68	1.01
Bike service/ hire shop	122	2.63	.99
Signage for vehicles and pedestrians	122	2.74	.96
Tourism information center	122	2.70	1.04
Paved roadways	122	2.67	.91
Garbage Bin	122	2.71	1.04
Washroom facilities for waterfall	122	2.43	1.04
Climbing equipment's	122	2.75	1.01
Horseback-Riding areas	122	2.66	1.07
Spotlight in trekking routes for night	122	2.62	1.06
Shelter houses for trekkers	122	2.58	1.01
Interpretation signs for trees and fauna	122	2.54	1.17
Rafting facilities	122	2.59	1.14
Sky diving and surfing facilities	122	2.45	1.06

Table 6.1 shows the participants' perspective on Ecotourism Facilities in Mazandaran province. Meanwhile, the highest rank of facilities belongs to Café and restaurants with (M= 3.58, SD=1.01), the lowest rank is for Toilet cleanliness and washing equipment (M= 2.41, SD=1.14). Moreover, Tourism information center (M= 2.7, SD=1.04), Bike service/ hire shop (M=2.63, SD=0.99), Shelter houses for trekkers (M= 2.58, SD= 1.01), are in the seven and fourteenth place, in order.

**Discussion**

It is highly emphasized in the previous chapter that the satisfaction of tourists is related to tourism infrastructures. Infrastructures are divided into three aspects. The First dimension, called accommodation, includes six items reflecting aspects of a Variety of lodging considering their quality and service. Table 4.1 indicates that the homestay and hotel have the highest selection of accommodation in Mazandaran. However, other types of accommodation with a small difference are also of interest to tourists. The 'homestay' is used to the age-old travelers with a family (Richardson, 2004). This form of accommodation has been known to add a homey touch to tourist overnight facilities. (Ricky Nutsugbodo, 2017).

Besides, another factor is accessibility regarding types of roads, routes, and paths of ecotourism, and other aspects related to nature's physical environment. According to Table 5.1, it is clear that in the access roads section, the most abundance is through



internal transportation and walkways. However, in this section, there is very little difference between other factors. Only wheelchair access is much more limited. It shows that in Mazandaran, the necessary arrangements have not yet been made for people with disabilities in the ecotourism sector. Even though modern society is increasingly aware of the need for tourism accessibility for disabled people. (Souca Maria Luiza, 2011).

Third, the dimension facility includes items referring to the different activities in nature and recreational and sports facilities, and food and beverages are reviewed. Table 5.2 shows that the Cafe and restaurant have the highest score, which indicates the variety and quality of food. Also, other facilities are used by tourists with minimal differences. Of course, most tourists are less satisfied with the condition of the toilets. For many tourists, the food and beverage form an essential part of the travel experience. Many tourists gain great enjoyment from dining in local restaurants. (Mark Camilleri. 2018).

### Limitation

This study is carried out by general Iranian tourists, who could only be reached in a short time. The convenience of sampling procedures using email, Instagram profile, and WhatsApp invitation could limit the likelihood of having the correct sampling unit and numbers. The time limit of the analysis provided only 122 sample sizes, meaning that the sample size could be expanded by at least 268 sample sizes where the margin of error is 5%, and the confidence level is 90%.

### Conclusion

The research explored the tourists' viewpoint on ecotourism infrastructures in Mazandaran province, Iran. Tourists have been postulated to be more optimistic about the standard of lodging infrastructure related to connectivity and amenities. In terms of homestay standard and operation, the tourists have a positive perspective about the accommodation facilities. Although, in summer, the participants have a negative perspective on the type of services such as tent sites. Accessibility was the second indicator, where the respondents demonstrated their perceptions. They showed a positive perspective of the road's quality and cycling routes but were less satisfied with the trails and observation point's services for bird watching and skiing routes.

Moreover, the visitors in Mazandaran province rated the facilities as the least preferred predictor. They had their concerns with the café and restaurant as well as parking areas. The respondents were not satisfied with the cleanliness of the bathroom and washing equipment, waterfall, and washroom facilities.

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