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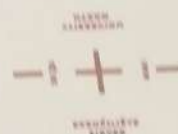
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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM IN AZERBAIJAN: CURRENT SITUATION, PROBLEMS AND SOLUTION

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ABSTRACT

In the non-oil sector of Azerbaijan, tourism is seen as one of the most promising areas. Azerbaijan has a strong potential to develop tourism with rich natural and historical-cultural recreation resources. After gaining independence in 1991, a new tourism strategy was developed in the country and an independent tourism policy was started. Taking into account the importance of tourism for the country, tourism development priorities and targets have been identified in regional development programs as well as on tourism related documents. The "Strategic Road Map", approved in December 2016, can be considered as a new stage in the development of the country's tourism. In recent years, the positive results of the measures taken in the field of tourism infrastructure development, promotion and personnel training in Azerbaijan are observed. Growth in the number of foreign tourists visiting the country and revival in domestic tourism are indicators of progress in tourism. In Azerbaijan tourism development is essential for the protection of nature, such as the conservation, rational use of natural and historical-cultural recreation resources, solving existing problems in tourism and ecotourism in order to sustain sustainable development of tourism.

Keywords: *sustainable tourism, tourist infrastructure, strategic roadmap, ecotourism*

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a powerful factor of the economy, an influential social institution, as well as a public welfare and culture of the society. It promotes the growth of people's living standards and their spiritual enrichment. Increasing the contribution of tourism to the country's economy, the rational use of natural resources and the high competitiveness of tourism destinations, led to its sustainable development. Socio-economic development of Azerbaijan has opened new opportunities for sustainable development in tourism. In a country with a rich tourism potential, a range of measures taken in acceleration of tourism reforms, strengthening of infrastructure and protection of environment can be seen as important steps towards the sustainable development of tourism. The multidimensional research and development perspectives of this field are crucial in ensuring sustainable development of tourism. In this article, the current situation and problems of sustainable tourism in Azerbaijan have been analyzed and solutions have been sought. The article outlines the differences in sustainable tourism among developed countries and developing countries, including Azerbaijan, and states the need for a sustainable tourism model for developing countries. Taking into account the relevance of the topic, sustainable tourism and its significance, tourism in Azerbaijan, the reforms in the independence period have been analyzed, the potential of regions in terms of tourism sustainability has been evaluated and comparative analysis and generalization methods have been used in the article along with statistical and regional analysis methods.

2. BRIEF OVERVIEW OF HISTORY OF TOURISM

Looking at the history of travels in Azerbaijan, it is still possible to see that trade in the Middle Ages was mainly for trade, religious visits and treatment. Caravanserais, built between major and middle cities as well as trade points, were the main overnight destinations. In the Middle Ages, those who visited Ateshgah temple in Absheron dominated India and other eastern countries.

Visits from the country are mainly focused on the cities of Mecca, Mashad and Karbala. Religious sites and therapeutic centers prevail among the regions visited throughout the country. In the second half of the 19th century, Azerbaijan became one of the world's oil centers, increasing the flow of Western businessmen and companies to the country, and played an important role in the construction of European-style hotels. At that time, sharp increase in tourism travel made by Azerbaijani rich people to Europe and Russia can be seen as well. Rapid development of the oil industry has changed the cultural landscape of the capital Baku. Today, many magnificent buildings attracted by foreign tourists have also been built by oil millionaires at that time. After the establishment of the Bolshevik government in Azerbaijan in 1920, the nature of development of tourism changed and tourism was developed within the framework of the Soviet system. In the Soviet era, especially after the Second World War, the construction of social enterprises expanded, ten tourist bases were opened in Azerbaijan, and touristic routes were organized to different regions. The vast majority of tourists coming to Azerbaijan in that period were from other Soviet republics, and in the 1980s the number of tourists coming beyond the Soviet Union was around 50,000. The majority of foreign tourists were citizens of the socialist countries, and the main place of visit was Baku. In the Soviet era, Azerbaijan's tourism potential was not properly evaluated, and environmental protection measures were insufficient. At that time, opportunities for exploring the impact of tourism on the environment were limited and no serious investigations were carried out on this issue. Despite promoting the development of mass tourism in the Soviet Union, tourism infrastructure, personnel training and service levels have dropped far short of international standards. Decisions of the USSR and the Council of Ministers on the development of tourism on the Caspian coast of Azerbaijan were accepted, but the collapse of the Soviet Union did not allow this to happen.

3. AZERBAIJAN TOURISM IN INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

The main objective of the first 10 years of independence of Azerbaijan was to ensure economic stability, but there was no progress in the development of services, including tourism, but some of the people who left their homes after the occupation of Armenia were placed in tourist camps and sanatoriums. Thus, in the first years of independence, as in other sectors of the economy, tourism also experienced a decline, while economic stability in the late 1990s also had a positive effect on tourism. Adoption of the Tourism Act on June 4, 1999, stimulated the development of infrastructure and the opening of tourism companies, and accelerated the process of contributing region's recreational resources to tourism. Significant changes in the field of tourism in Azerbaijan happened in the beginning of the 21st century. By the decree of President of the Republic of Azerbaijan dated August 27, 2002, No. 1029, the "State Program on the Development of Tourism in the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2002-2005" was approved, and the conditions for the efficient use of tourism potential have been created (Soltanova, 2015, p.162). State Program on Tourism Development in the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2010-2014 (April 6, 2010), State Program on the Development of Resorts in the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2009-2018 (February 6, 2009) and "Tourism Strategic Roadmap for Industrial Development" (December 6, 2016) aims to transform tourism into one of the leading sectors of the country's economy. These documents are of great importance in terms of ensuring the sustainable development of the tourism sector. Implementing a series of activities related to tourism education during the years of independence has contributed to the training of qualified personnel. In 2006, the Azerbaijan Tourism Institute was established and in 2014 it was renamed the Azerbaijan University of Tourism and Management. In this high school, personnel covering key areas of tourism are being trained. Additionally, tourism faculties have been opened at several universities of Azerbaijan, and staff training has started in the regions. It should be noted that, despite certain improvements in staff training in the field of tourism, there are a number of problems in this field.

Implementing reforms in the tourism sector has shown its positive results. Strengthening the stability and tourism infrastructure in the country made it possible to hold the 2012 Eurovision Song Contest, the 1st European Sports Games in 2015, and the Islamic Solidarity Games in 2017.

4. CURRENT SITUATION OF TOURISM IN AZERBAIJAN

Over the past 25 years, significant work has been done in the field of tourism development in Azerbaijan, the legislative base of tourism has been strengthened, promotion activities have been expanded, and state programs on the development of this sphere have been prepared. Thanks to these measures, significant increases have been registered in the number of foreign tourists, as well as hotels and travel agencies. The dynamics of foreign tourists can be found in the table below.

Table 1: Breakdown of foreigners and stateless persons arriving to Azerbaijan (The State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Statistical Yearbook (publication) 2018, p 25.)

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Number of foreigners and stateless persons arrived to Azerbaijan	2 508,9	2297,8	2 006,2	2 248,8	2 696,7
including tourism purpose of which:	2 129,5	2159,7	1 921,9	2 044,7	2 454,0
leisure, recreation tourism	705,2	709,9	668,8	697,1	839,3
business tourism	648,9	670,5	632,3	691,7	834,4
treatment tourism	46,2	46,3	36,5	41,5	49,1
religious tourism	13,7	13,7	11,5	12,6	14,7
visiting friends and relatives	673,7	677,1	542,0	562,0	674,9
other tourism purpose	41,8	42,2	30,8	39,8	41,6
other purpose	379,4	138,1	84,3	204,1	242,7

Looking at the tourism market of Azerbaijan, we will witness the increasing number of tourists from different countries every year. If in 2005, 692,700 foreign tourists visited Azerbaijan, then in 2009 this figure was equal to 1.0 mln. In 2010, it reached 1.9 million people (Soltanova, 361). Although the number of tourists coming to the country in 2015 has dropped slightly in comparison with 2014, in 2017 it was about 2.5 million. In recent years, it is possible to observe that tourists come mostly on recreational or business purposes, or just to see their relatives. In recent years, there has been some increase in the number of visitors for both treatment and religious purposes. Once capacity of hotels and similar establishments changes by economic regions. In 2017, capacity of hotels throughout the country was 41611 bed places, 15781 bed places (38%) were in Absheron economic region (including Baku). The capacity of Guba-Khachaz on this indicator was 10162 (24.2%), Shaki-Zakatalan - 4308 (10.3%). The total capacity of remaining 7 economic regions was 27.5 % (The State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2018, p.62-63.). 40% of hotels are in Absheron and surrounding territories because of the capital city of the country which locates in this territory, as well as its favorable geographical position and historical development. The relative elevation of the number of places in Guba-Khachmaz and Sheki-Zakatala regions is due to the richness of natural recreation resources and the development of transport infrastructure. Economic regions with an absolute majority of hotels are the most popular tourist destinations in the country. 40.4% of foreign tourists coming to Azerbaijan used automobile, 42.7% airlines, 11.4% of railways, 0.7% by sea and 4.8% by other transport routes. (The State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 24). As it is seen from the statistics, only a small number of tourists coming to the country have used sea and railways. This is due to the lack of speed and low comfort levels of off-road vehicles. Inefficient use of cruise tourism potential is one of the weak points of tourism in Azerbaijan.

The low level of comfort in the majority of trains, the lack of infrastructure and the low level of service lead to less use of the railways by tourists. Launching of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway in 2017 has increased the importance of railways in terms of tourism. At the initial stage, one million passengers will be transported by this line. This figure is expected to rise to 3 million in recent years. For the passenger trains operating on the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars route, the Azerbaijani side has ordered 30 types of wagons to the Swiss company Stadler. Wagons are manufactured in four categories: "standard", "comfort", "business" and "restaurant". Azerbaijan Railways CJSC plans to organize passenger transportation by 2019 in Baku-Tbilisi-Kars route. For this purpose, new wagon types produced by Swiss STADLER Rail Group will be brought to Azerbaijan in the first quarter of next year. At present, German Donauwörth and Treuchtlingen railway stations are tested for all parameters of passenger carriages, which will operate on the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway route (Azerbaijan Railways Department, 2018, <https://ady.az/az/news/read/990/43>).

5. SUSTAINABLE TOURISM AND ITS IMPORTANCE

Sustainable development term started to gain importance and be discussed thanks to World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) published in 1987 and called Brundtland Report shortly. According to WCED sustainable development is described as “a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own need” (WCED, 1987, p.42). Expressed simply, sustainable tourism can be defined as: "Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities" (WTO, 2018, <http://sdt.unwto.org/content/about-us-5>). Factors such as natural and cultural-historical recreation resources, tourism infrastructure, ecological legislation, geographical location of destinations, availability of qualified personnel and public awareness of environmental awareness play a crucial role in the development of sustainable tourism. The effectiveness of sustainable tourism depends on the level of development of countries. Developed European countries, as well as the United States, Canada, Japan, have developed infrastructure and are pursuing an environmental protection policy. These countries, which have rich tourism traditions, prefer the use of "environment-friendly" technologies. In these countries, the importance of the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) reports and the implementation of a strong control system over the Carrying Capacity are of great importance in optimizing the economic impact of economic activities. Therefore, developed countries have achieved success in the development of sustainable tourism. The level of development of sustainable tourism in developing countries is even lower. Many of these countries are trying to get as many tourists as possible and to maximize their tourism's economy. In developing countries, trends in the development of mass tourism are hampering the transition to sustainable tourism. While many countries have different economic and political systems and different development levels, most countries see sustainable tourism as one of the priority areas. It is better understood that sustainability of tourism is important for its stable development. Due to development of sustainable tourism, it is possible to preserve both natural and historical-cultural recreation resources, improve their quality, and preserve them for future generations. On the other hand, improving the welfare of the peoples, raising the satisfaction of visitors, enlightenment of tourists and indigenous people on the environment, preserving the aesthetic appearance of natural and cultural landscapes are among the main goals of sustainable tourism. Targeted development and poverty reduction measures make sustainable tourism more attractive.

6. CURRENT SITUATION OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN AZERBAIJAN

Sustainable tourism development in Azerbaijan is characteristic of developing countries. A number of reforms have been performed in relation to the development of tourism, a certain infrastructure has been created, tourism legislation has been improved, and a network of hotels that can accommodate 4-5 million tourists a year in a country with a population of 10 million has been established. The necessity of sustainable tourism development has been highlighted in tourism travel programs and the Strategic Road Map, and sustainable development of tourism has been included in the priority targets. At the same time, it is encouraged to optimize the impact of tourism on the environment, to develop ecotourism, pasture tourism and agrotourism. In recent years, enhancing environmental protection, expanding the range of protected areas, and applying modern technologies for environmental control are crucial for the sustainable development of tourism. The application of the Asan Visa system accelerated the flow of foreign tourists. In recent years, tourism destinations network has been expanded in the country, enhancing environmental protection in tourism areas, opening new jobs in the region, increasing income of local residents from tourism, and organizing gourmet tours to the regions have boosted hopes for sustainable tourism development. The necessity of awareness-raising activities in the field of sustainable tourism has become clear and the first steps have been taken in this area. The announcement of tourism as one of the priority areas among non-oil sectors and expanding the scale of reforms in the tourism sector is of great importance in terms of sustainable tourism development. The Tourism Roadmap on the Strategic Roadmap on the Development of Tourism Industry has highlighted the importance of sustainable tourism development: "The tourism sector is a continuation of environmental sustainability, cultural heritage, and protection and development efforts "(<https://president.az/articles/22134>, 2016). Establishment of the State Tourism Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 2018 can be considered as an important step in the development of sustainable tourism in the country.

7. PROBLEMS OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN AZERBAIJAN

Despite some progress in the field of tourism in Azerbaijan, there are a number of problems that hinder the sustainable development of tourism. These problems that cover most areas of tourism can be summarized as follows:

- Tourism infrastructure is poor and it is felt especially at overnight stays and transport.
- Hotels have been distributed unevenly across the country and one-third of them are gathered in the Absheron Peninsula, where the capital Baku is located.
- Low quality of services in hotels, motels and camping stays.
- There is a shortage of qualified personnel in the field of tourism, and 10% of the employees in the field of tourism are qualified personnel.
- Environmental protection measures related to tourism destinations are insufficient.
- The Caspian Sea and coastal zones, which are considered to be an important tourism destination, have been polluted with oil waste. The lands polluted in Absheron peninsula more than 10,000 hectares.
- There are gaps in the field of tourism legislation.
- There is no clear statistical information on domestic tourism activities.
- The number of scientific researchers in the field of sustainable tourism is limited and limited.
- There are a number of shortcomings in the sphere of tourism education. There are fewer quality textbooks available, and researchers and students have limited experience.
- Enlightenment measures in the field of tourism and ecological consciousness are insufficient.

- The norms relating to carrying capacity are not complied with and do not comply with Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA).
- Investing in tourism is insufficient, and bureaucratic maneuvers make it difficult.
- Tourism promotion and advertising are not enough.

In recent years, tourism development has created a basis for sustainable tourism development in the country, but the country is still at the forefront of sustainable tourism.

8. SUGGESTIONS FOR SOLUTION OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM PROBLEMS

In our opinion, implementation of the following measures can have a positive impact on sustainable tourism development in Azerbaijan:

- Preparation and implementation of a special vaccine program for sustainable tourism.
- To develop tourism infrastructure in the regions using the experience of developed countries.
- Improving the quality of service and increasing the range of tourism enterprises.
- Taking into account the carrying capacity of the regions in the organization of tourism routes.
- Development of tourism education, preparation of high quality textbooks, taking measures to promote environmental awareness of secondary schools.
- Ensuring internships for students and researchers of local tourism institutes at foreign universities and tourism organizations.
- Improving ecotourism and tourism legislation.
- Strengthening environmental protection measures and making the use of treatment facilities in enterprises.
- Expansion of scientific research in the field of tourism, organization of international and national congresses on sustainable tourism.
- Expansion of participation in international tourism exhibitions.
- Expansion of advertising on country tourism.
- Implementation of modern technologies for regular monitoring of ecological situation in tourism destinations.
- Application of modern methods of domestic tourism statistics preparation in the country.
- Detailed study of the impact of tourism activities on the development of regions.
- Development of the gifted goods sector.

Implementation of the above-mentioned measures can accelerate the development of sustainable tourism and increase the contribution of tourism to the country's economy.

9. EVALUATION OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM POTENTIAL OF AZERBAIJAN

The potential of sustainable tourism in Azerbaijan is diverse according to regions. One of the main goals in our article is to evaluate the sustainable tourism potential of the regions. During the evaluation of the sustainable tourism potential of each region, natural and historic-cultural recreation resources, tourism and transport infrastructure, environmental degradation rates have been used. The natural and economic resources generating the tourism potential of each region are assessed by a 10-point system. The points given to the indicators were summed up and divided by the number of indicators and average number was calculated.

Table following on the next page

Table 2: The potential of sustainable tourism of Azerbaijan in regions (Bayramli, 2018)

Economic regions	Indicators						Average indicator
	Climate	Hydrography	Forest resources	Transportation	Historical-cultural recreation resources	Ecological purity degree	
Absheron (including Baku)	7	3	3	10	10	5	6.3
Guba-Khachmaz	7	7	8	8	6	8	7.3
Sheki – Zagatala	8	8	8	7	7	8	7.6
Ganja-Gazakh	7	8	6	7	7	7	7.0
Lankaran	8	8	8	7	6	8	7.5
Aran	5	6	3	6	6	6	5.3
Upper Garabag	9	6	6	8	8	6	7.1
Kalbadjar-Lachin	7	7	5	6	7	5	6.1
Daghlig Shirvan	7	7	8	6	7	7	7.0
Nakhchivan	7	6	6	6	8	7	6.6

It is possible to classify the regions in terms of sustainable tourism potential. The regions with average point over 7 (Guba-Khachmaz, Shaki-Zakatala, Ganja-Gazakh, Upper Garabagh, Daghlig-Shirvan) are high, 6-7 points (Absheron, Kalbajar-Lachin and Nakhchivan) regions - moderate, and less than 6 points can be referred to regions with a weak tourism potential. Depending on the development of sustainable tourism in Azerbaijan, it is possible to change places in the upcoming classification system in the future.

10. SUMMARY

Azerbaijan, with rich natural and historical-cultural resources, has broad opportunities for the development of sustainable tourism. The reforms in the tourism sector during the years of independence, state tourism programs and the preparation and implementation of the Strategic Road Map, the development of transport, hotel and other infrastructure, and environmental protection have created a basis for sustainable tourism development in the country. New tourist destinations have been created in the direction of development of tourism and the flow of foreign tourists to the country has increased. As a result of sustainable tourism potential assessment in Azerbaijan, Guba-Khachmaz, Sheki-Zakatala, Ganja-Gazakh, Upper Garabagh, Daghlig-Shirvan regions are more promising in terms of sustainable tourism is seen. It should be noted that along with the development of sustainable tourism in the country, there are a number of problems. In developing countries, including Azerbaijan, strong tourism infrastructure should be established, environmental protection measures should be strengthened, staff training should be improved in the field of tourism, Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) reports need to be made compulsory. Sustainable tourism in Azerbaijan is characteristic of developing countries and a special model of sustainable tourism different from developed countries should be applied to these countries. The occupation of 20% of Azerbaijani lands by Armenia, the presence of densely populated tourism resources in the occupied territories, destruction of natural landscape and economic and social infrastructure in occupied territories have made Azerbaijan unable to utilize tourism potential.

After withdrawal of Armenia from occupied territories, it will be possible to use the rich tourism potential of Nagorno-Karabakh and its surrounding regions. Thanks to the continuation of tourism reforms, the planned tourism policy and the public-private sector partnership in the field of tourism, Azerbaijan can become a country where sustainable tourism develops.

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