

Sustainable Strategies for Managing Rural Tourism in Abyaneh Village, Isfahan

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Abstract : Problem statement: Rural areas in Iran are one of the most popular tourism destinations. Abyaneh Village is one of them with a long history behind it (more than 1500 years) which is a national heritage site and also is nominated as a world heritage site in UNESCO tentative list from 2007. There is a considerable foundation of religious-cultural heritage and also agricultural history and activities. However, this heritage site suffers from mass tourism which is beyond its social and physical carrying capacity, since the annual number of tourists exceed 500,000. While there are four adjacent villages around Abyaneh which can benefit from advantages of tourism. Local managers also can at the same time prorate the tourists' flux of Abyaneh on those other villages especially in high-season. The other villages have some cultural and natural tourism attractions as well. Goal: The main goal of this study is to identify a feasible development strategy according to the current strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of rural tourism in this area (Abyaneh Village and four adjacent villages). This development strategy can lead to sustainable management of these destinations. Method: To this end, we used SWOT analysis as a well-established tool for conducting a situational analysis to define a sustainable development strategy. The procedures included following steps: 1) Extracting variables of SWOT chart based on interviewing tourism experts (n=13), local elites (n=17) and personal observations of researcher. 2) Ranking the extracted variables from 1-5 by 13 tourism experts in Isfahan Cultural Heritage, Handcrafts and Tourism Organization (ICHTO). 3) Assigning weights to the ranked variables using Expert Choice Software and the method of Analytical Hierarchical Process (AHP). 4) Defining the Total Weighted Score (TWS) for each part of SWOT chart. 5) Identifying the strategic position according to the TWS 6) Selecting the best development strategy based on the defined position using the Strategic Position and Action Evaluation (SPACE) matrix. 7) Assessing the Probability of Strategic Success (PSS) for the preferred strategy using relevant formulas. 8) Defining two feasible alternatives for sustainable development. Results and recommendations: Cultural heritage attractions were first-ranked variable in strength chart and also lack of sufficient amenities for one-day tourists (catering, restrooms, parking, and accommodation) was first-ranked weakness. The strategic position was in ST (Strength-Threat) quadrant which is a maxi-mini position. According this position we would suggest 'Competitive Strategy' as a development strategy which means relying on strengths in order to neutralization threats. The result of Probability of Strategic Success assessment which was 0.6 shows that this strategy could be successful. The preferred approach for competitive strategy could be rebranding the market of tourism in this area. Rebranding the market can be achieved by two main alternatives which are based on the current strengths and threats: 1) Defining a 'Heritage Corridor' from first adjacent village to Abyaneh as a final destination. 2) Focus on 'educational tourism' versus mass tourism and also green tourism by developing agritourism in that corridor.

Keywords : Abyaneh village, rural tourism, SWOT analysis, sustainable strategies

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