

## The role of natural, historical, and cultural places of Sistan in attracting tourists

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**Abstract:** Understanding the concept of sustainable development and the value of natural, historical, and cultural heritage has been raised in the issue of tourism in most countries. Tourism is primarily considered the activities in leisure time, in which the tourist desirably spends his/her purchasing power from the source to the destination. In other words, tourism, from an economic perspective, is a kind of purchasing power transfer from the source to the destination. On the other hand, from a social and cultural view, tourism is an effective factor in cultural exchange and consolidation of human bonds that encourages the national coherence in various regions of a country through domestic tourism and international bonds by foreign tourists. Iran, due to its privileged geographical position which is situated at the intersection of economic and cultural exchanges between the East and the West of the world and given its rich civilization and cultural legacies (Iran is among the top ten countries in the world in this regard), can improve and consolidate its position in tourism industry. Sistan and Baluchestan Province is located in the extreme southeast of Iran and is the entrance and exit gate of Iran to the Indian subcontinent, South-East Asia, and the southern coasts of the Oman Sea (both through land and sea). This province, with its ancient civilization and rich cultural heritage and also diverse climate, is considered one of the potential areas for tourism development. Sistan, as an independent region with a rich history and culture, has significant advantages in tourism industry compared with other parts of the province. Since many infrastructures of transport (Road, rail, air, and sea), facilities, tourism services, and tours are not available in this region or are at a low level, findings of the present study which are based on the documents of plans before and after the Islamic Revolution in Iran not only have proved the anonymity of Sistan as a tourism hub but also have emphasized on the necessity of special attention to this province and particularly Sistan region by planners and national and regional policy-makers.

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### 1. Introduction

Tourism that has long been common as a luxury item only among those who had the financial means, has become a universal industry among other countries, especially industrialized ones after dramatic changes in all social, economic, cultural, and technological aspects in the recent century (BRANDON K. 1996). Since this activity displaces people from their homeland to other regions, it is followed by the purchasing power transfer of tourists from the source to the destination. Hence, there is a competition between countries to attract more tourists and thus gain more share of the value added (HONEY M. 2008). Unfortunately, developing countries like Iran have a little share of the income from tourism industry due to a variety of reasons, especially weakness in infrastructures. Although the tourism industry in Iran has taken into account since the second half of the last century, it has not been associated with a national commitment. However, after the Islamic Revolution in Iran and changes in attitude to functions of tourism and also the outbreak of Iraqi imposed war against Iran, this

industry was practically forgotten. Before the end of the Iran-Iraq war, Iran somewhat paid attention to this issue in the first program of economic, social, and cultural development. But the required infrastructures to move the wheels of this industry were not available. However, this industry was somewhat welcomed by the public. But as the past, only the relatively developed provinces and hubs were in the spotlight and other parts of the country that had previously been ignored again remained hidden from the view of planners and decision-makers. Sistan and Baluchestan Province and particularly Sistan region is a prominent example that is known as the forgotten hub. From the perspective of some archaeologists, Sistan is an archaeological paradise and the scholars who are familiar with the history of this land believe that epics and myths of this area which have been collected in the unique book of Ferdowsi named "Shahnameh" are part of the identity of the ancient Iran. Currently, a collection of ancient monuments and Persian-Sistani epics and myths can be used as the basis of tourism in this region. From the perspective of researchers, Sistan

region, despite the environmental constraints, possesses some natural attractions such as Hamun Lake, Khajeh Mountain, Chah Nime-ha (Half Wells), other geomorphological effects, border marketplaces, and a special geopolitical and geo-economics position that have made it a region with various ancient, historical, artistic, and natural attractions.

The following assumptions have been analyzed in the present study:

1- Sistan has been a forgotten hub in tourism during the last fifty years.

2- Given the tourism potentials of Sistan, this region can be a dynamic and efficient hub in tourism industry motivating the development of whole province.

Nowadays, tourism industry is one of the main sources of income and also an effective cultural factor between countries and has a special attention as the world's largest service industry. Hence, there is an intense and close competition between many countries to increase their benefits and revenue from this international activity. Having a history dating back several thousand years and rich and abundant resources to attract tourists, Iran can actively participate in this global competition and have a remarkable and worthy share from this source of income. However, it is clear that success in this arena and accessibility to material and non-material interests require the understanding of tourism, recognizing its dimensions and impacts, and also familiarity with correct management of institutions and agencies responsible for tourism; a management which is consistent with the latest scientific achievements. Sistan and Baluchestan Province, with natural, historical, cultural, and social attractions and blessings, also has the capacity to attract tourists. Pleasant weather in the coasts of Oman Sea in autumn and winter, hot and cold mineral waters, natural, historic, and active volcanoes such as the Burnt City, Khajeh Mountain, Dahaneye Gholaman City, Chehel Dokhtar Castle, Rostam Castle, Mochi windmills, Howzdar region, etc. are some of features of this region to attract tourists. The author believes that sightseeing and tourist attractions of each region cannot be restricted to historical-ancient monuments remained from ancestors, but natural and human phenomena can be powerful factors to attract and direct tourists.

From a historical, natural, and human perspective, Sistan is a pristine and rare region that has billions of unknown cultural-historical phenomena, civil and legend history, and several unique and exceptional natural phenomena and people in this region, despite all cultural invasions, is still adhere to the traditions of ancestors and value them as a precious heritage. This land has been the

origin of the first advanced human civilizations and the first urban communities. The remnants of the dam raised from the mass of flowing sands of the Burnt City indicate the boom of urbanization and reputation of Sistan in ancient times. Currently, typical areas of tourism to create investment opportunities in Sistan include the Burnt City, Khajeh Mountain, Dahaneye Gholaman City, Chah Nime-ha (Half Wells), etc. One way to qualitatively develop tourist regions and areas is to identify the natural and human potentials of these regions and then plan in order to optimally take advantage of these potentials (Tate, G.P., (1910). With greater understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of Sistan region and considering the existing opportunities, this study aims to direct tourism planning.

## 2. Material and Methods

According to theoretical discussions and practical and quantitative issues, different methods were selected for this study including historical & attributive method and content analysis.

1- Historical & attributive: This method is done using valid documents in order to explain general and common features of historical events and their causes. These researches are faced with many problems including the absence of researcher in the scene of event, incompleteness of collected documents, and organization of information and gathered documents by the researchers themselves.

2- Content analysis: This research is done in order to subjectively and qualitatively describes the content of concepts in a systematic way. In fact, the domain of this research includes oral and written texts about certain subject. Researcher in this study tries to analyze and describe the content of material and spatial and human factors may be considered in the images and maps. The author has endeavored to introduce the potentials and facilities of tourism in Sistan and then used the SWOT model to analyze the strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities of tourism in this region. The term SWOT consists of the first four letters of four words including strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat. SWOT model is the best approach to the strategic planning process. The final analysis in this research is a list of the strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities and then explanation of them using the SWOT model.

### 2.1. Research objectives:

The objective of this study is to identify the potentials and the strengths and weaknesses of tourism and ecotourism in Sistan region and discover the importance of tourism in this region which can be summarized in the following items:

1- Identifying the relationship between tourism and urban sustainable development.

2- Identifying the ways to reduce the adverse effects of tourism development on urban sustainable development indices.

3- Reviewing the effects of tourism on employment.

4- Supporting the development of tourism in Sistan which stimulates this industry in this region.

5- Implementing a comprehensive tourism plan underlies the promotion of this industry.

## **2.2. Characteristics of the studied area:**

Sistan region is located in southeast of Iran and northeast of Sistan and Baluchestan Province. With an area of over 13,152 square kilometers, this region lies at 31°10'30"N 61°29'45"E. According to the latest divisions of the country, this region has three districts including central, Shibe Ab, and Poshte Ab; 5 cities including Ali Akbar, Mohammadabad, Adimi, Bonjar, and Zabol; and 9 villages (Journey to an unknown nature, an ancient history; 18). Sistan is one of the richest regions of Sistan and Baluchestan Province in terms of cultural, ancient, handicrafts, and tourism potentials. Additionally, ethnic and religious diversity has created a cultural interaction indicating the civilization and ethnic culture of all Iranian tribes in coexistence and respect for humans and their thoughts. Sistan, with an old history, has many tourism and ecotourism monuments and attractions including ancient and historical the Burnt City, Chehel dokhtar Castle, Mochi windmills, Rostam Castle, Howzdar region, Khajeh Mountain murals, ancient city of Gholaman, Chah Nime-ha (Half Wells) with cultural and research complex in the Old Zahedan, the New Castle, Hamun Wetland, Khajeh Mountain, and Rostam Castle.

## **2.3. Tourism and ecotourism potentials of Sistan (Historical, cultural, and natural attractions):**

### **2.3.1. Shahr-e Sukhteh:**

It is located 56 km far from the city of Zabol in the route of Zabol-Zahedan road. This large city, with a history of 5200 years and a surface of 151 acres, is the great honor of Sistanis. This region is the first and largest urbanization place in the East Plateau of Iran that less war instruments have been discovered in this region in archaeological studies indicating that people in this region lived in peace. The cemetery of Shahr-e Sukhteh with a surface of 25 acres and 40000 tombs, as one of the largest prehistoric cemeteries, highly helps studies on the formation of civilization of Helmand borders and the beliefs of its residents. Appellation of Shahr-e Sukhteh, despite several fires occurred, has been due to change in the estuary of Helmand and several droughts (Maurizio Tosi. 1968).

### **2.3.2. Chehel Dokhtaran Castle:**

There is a building known as Chehel Dokhtaran in the wide floor of western Hamun. This building has castle and minaret which located on a

gate in the east side. This minaret shows that there has been two vaulted rooms in each of them. The building of Chehel Dokhtaran, given its location on top of a mountain, has been a place for monitoring and guardhouse (Stein, S.A., (1928).

### **2.3.3. Rostam Castle:**

The ruins of the southern slope of Mount Khajeh hill can be considered as a large castle or town. The castle was used twice and the effects of repair and restoration are clear everywhere in this monument. The oldest repair of the castle dates back to the first century AD during the Parthian dynasty. Castle's restoration also dates back to the third century AD in the early Samanids. This can be found from architecture style, murals, and trim works of this building. The castle consists of a palace and a temple which is royal building and can be related to the period of, Gandoofar, the king of that castle. All the residents now call it "Rostam Castle" (Wheeler, Sir Mortimer, (1962)).

### **2.3.4. Mochi Windmill:**

This monument is located 62 km far from southwest of Zabol and 5 km far from north of archeological site of Shahr-e Sukhteh. It is built on two floors and there are three rooms on the ground floor that one of them is millhouse including a water tank and a place for spinning of stone mill and two other rooms are warehouse or service rooms. Only the wind wheel is mounted on the upper floor. The whole building is fully made of mud and thatch. The thick walls of this building are a sign of its high antiquity. Geographic writers like Jihani in "Forms of the world", Estakhri in "Traditions of Countries", Ibn Hawqal in "Itinerary" have called the windmills a wonder in Sistan.

### **2.3.5. Howzdar region:**

This region is located in the southwest of Zabol and includes the large prehistoric mounds of Shahr-e Sukhteh and the Hill Tasooki and the right side of Zabol-Zahedan road. This region had a high civilization and prosperity at the past times from the late Sassanid to Safavid which reached its peak, but waned during the Qajar dynasty. As mentioned, the peak of magnitude of this region was during the Safavid that the remains of half-destroyed buildings including the palace, inn, castle, numerous windmills, and a collection of houses in Mochi Plain, and Mochi Castle or palace are the memorials of this period in Howzdar region. Mochi Castle was the ruling base of Raeesi dynasty, one of the rulers of Southern Sistan.

### **2.3.6. Khajeh Mountain:**

This is the only complication of Sistan plain which has been formed with hard volcanic material in the middle of the Lake Hamun, 30 km West of Zabol. It is 612 meters high and collections of monuments from different historical and Islamic periods can see

there. A large building and its fire temple, brick castles, old ways and hallways, various forts and walls, several shrines, stone graves, a palace and a small town, a gallery corridor and artworks named Koke Kohzad, Chehel Dokhtar Citadel, Infields Castle, Without-wind Room, Sarsang Citadel, Khajeh Ghaltan Pilgrimage, and the tomb of the old wheat mille are some of these monuments. These building, with their beautiful architecture, are the greatest pre-Islamic brick buildings. Among religions, Christianity, due to the presence of three Magi and Christian monk who are mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew and Zoroastrianism, because of Zoroaster's life and the advent of Christians in this religion which has been mentioned in the Avesta and also Islam are of great importance.

### **2.3.6. Khajeh Mountain Murals:**

The Palace of Khajeh Mountain apparently has been luxurious and decorated with murals, decorative plaster, raised designs, and various statues. Khajeh Mountain Murals indicate the use of a kind of Art Fusion and show that painters have made the traditions of their time enduring using painting and fiction traditions of Greece and Iran. On the other hand, it can be mentioned that the time of drawing these paintings were involved in their style and the first paintings, due to the sense of affection of Parthian to the Greeks, were apparently more inspired by the artists of Greece, while this inspiration has become less or totally lost in recent paintings.

### **2.3.7. Hamun Wetland:**

Hamun Wetland, with a surface of more than four thousand square kilometers, is composed of three parts including poozak in northeast, Saboori in northwest, and Helmand Hamun in west and southwest of Sistan. However, the area of each part depends on the inlet water of boundary river of Helmand other seasonal rivers that enters the wetland and may increase. Although Hamun Wetland is economically of great importance to the residents of Sistan, it is environmentally considered a large and important resource. The protected area of Hamun, due situating in the center of desert and semi-desert areas of Iran and Afghanistan, is actually the only safe environment for migratory birds in the east of our country. The existence of freshwater lakes, wetlands, distribution of water from river flooding, canebrakes, and finally the production of algae, insects, and fishes when water is plentiful have caused this region to be the home to hundreds of migratory birds, especially aquatic and semi-aquatic birds.

### **2.3.8. Chah Nime (Half Well):**

There are large natural holes near New Castle Village that the extra water of Helmand River

flows into them through a channel. These reservoirs, with a capacity of 700 million cubic meters, provide part of drinking water and agricultural water in case of shortage of water. Major cultural and research centers of Chah Nime, with a surface of more than 5000 hectares, provide the areas of applied research and studies for faculty members and students. This center that is one of the country's biggest cultural camps has beautiful beaches, wooded area, nurseries, farms, olive and pistachio gardens, groves, Museum of Natural History, and the only research zoo of the country. Breeding of non-conventional animals such as ostrich, greenhouses, and zoos full of various animal species attract tens of thousands of tourists every year.

### **2.3.9. Dahaneye Gholaman City:**

It is located 2 km far from New Castle Village of Zahak County which is the remnants of a large city from Achaemenid era. This city is important in variety of ways. On the one hand, it is the only mud-brick city of Achaemenid era that indicates the life of kings and their palaces, unlike other cities in this period. On the other hand, this city has not developed without planning but it has been constructed based on maps and planning.

### **2.3.10. The Old Zahedan:**

It is located about 9 km far from northwest of a hill near to Zahedan on top of the heights of Nasser River and Parian River and has been the second capital of Sistanids in the Islamic Period. The Old Zahedan City was constructed on the ruins of dams of Sistan about 420 years ago by Tamerlane. Henry Savage Landor, and English traveler, archaeologist, and geographer, traveled to Sistan in 1901 and called the Old Zahedan as London of the East. There is a collection of Islamic monuments in the Old Zahedan and around it that one of them is located 250 meters far from the east of the Old Zahedan Citadel. Only fort and Timor Castle have remained from this city. This city was consisted of three hamlets including Kohan Dej Citadel, Sharestan, and Rabaz which are surrounded by a wall with defense towers and are in form of a rectangular.

### **2.3.11. Cultural tourism resources:**

- Civilizational and historical monuments
- Baluchi and Sistani rich culture
- Local arts, handicrafts, and local foods
- Live cultures (tribes, wonderful villages, etc)
- Special rituals and ceremonies (Tavangar; 8)

### **2.3.12. Problems of tourism industry in Sistan:**

Tourism-related activities in Sistan and Baluchestan Province and particularly in Sistan region suffer from several problems that the whole country has been grappling with for many years. Some of these problems are as follows:

- Foreign media propaganda and insecurity in the region, including Iran and Sistan.
- Weakness and inefficiency of public and private sectors of tourism in introducing tourism attractions of Iran and Sistan at the world level through global networks.
- Low capacity of occupations in most tourism centers.
- Weakness of banking and financial system in providing e-banking services.
- Shortage of trained manpower in tourism industry.
- Lack of adequate investment in physical and human infrastructure needed for tourism activities.

According to this problem, it can be concluded that merely enjoying the blessings of God and natural and human attractions cannot lead to tourist attraction in a region, but strategic plans and programs are needed to eliminate or mitigate these problems. Elimination of these problems lies in reforming the planning and management system in economic, social, and infrastructural fields of tourism and requires the ambition of all economic officials, experts, and planners (Tavangar; 8).

**3. SWOT analysis of tourism potentials in Sistan:**

It is obvious that Sistan has a number of strengths and weaknesses which affect the process of attracting tourists. Strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities of tourism industry in Sistan are listed in the following tables.

**Table 1:** opportunities of tourism industry in Sistan

Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of adequate security, especially in border areas</li> <li>- Increased unemployment</li> <li>- Drought and lack of rainfall in recent years</li> <li>- Natural disasters such as severe storms and moving sands</li> <li>- Inclement weather and excessive heat, especially in spring and summer</li> <li>- High rate of population growth</li> <li>- Migration of young people from rural areas to large cities</li> <li>- Increased old manpower in villages who cannot work in agriculture sector</li> <li>- Lack of planning by managers to become familiar with tourism culture</li> <li>- Lack of infrastructure projects undertaken by Government</li> <li>- Entry of drugs and smuggled goods from Afghanistan and Pakistani borders to Sistan and other cities of province</li> </ul>
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- An old and ancient history and civilization</li> <li>- Natural, historical, and cultural attractions</li> <li>- Benefiting from wind power (120-day winds of Sistan) for power generation and efficient uses</li> </ul>
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Special geographical location and proximity to Afghanistan and Pakistan</li> <li>- clarification of the position of Sistan in public and private sectors planning as a forgotten hub in tourism</li> <li>- 120-day winds of Sistan for power generation and using intense sun to capture solar energy</li> <li>- The Silk Road and transit roads for a strong business and trade and benefiting from the nearest tracks</li> <li>- Sistan's position as a cultural and historical area in the southeast of Iran is as important as the position of Isfahan or Shiraz in attracting tourists</li> <li>- Border marketplaces created by the government which can be important in terms of trade with Afghanistan and passenger traffic</li> <li>- Young and educated workforce, especially in cities for regional studies</li> <li>- Half wells and optimal use of them for agriculture, aquaculture, livestock, fishing, and as the haven for migratory birds</li> <li>- Construction of a historical town in Zabol to show ancient and epic tragedies</li> </ul>
Threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Security problems caused by the entry of smuggled goods and drugs</li> <li>- having common border with Pakistan and Afghanistan, traffic of insurgent groups, and internal riots in Sistan</li> </ul>

**Table 2:** Sistan tourism development and reform strategies

Spatial structure of Ecotourism	Topic	Spatial structure of tourism	Topic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Using the boundary position of this province and especially Sistan region to develop trade tourism with neighboring countries</li> <li>- Historical, cultural, and natural tourism development plans</li> <li>- The use of traditional industries and handicrafts of the region and provide artistic tourist packages</li> <li>- Development of academic disciplines related to tourism and attracting students from inside and outside the country</li> <li>- The use of solar and wind energy to supply the energy of tourism industries and facilities</li> <li>- Construction of natural aqua parks in typical areas of tourism</li> </ul>	Taking advantage of opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Taking advantage of the ancient history and civilization of Sistan in order to attract tourists through international advertising</li> <li>- Taking advantage of the capability of natural attractions, eco tours, nature tourism, medical tourism, and desert tourism</li> <li>- Typical areas of tourism development plan</li> </ul>	Reinforcement of strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Increasing the border security by strengthening border rules and providing financial incentives to frontier settlers</li> <li>- Preventing the entry of drugs into the country by strengthening border security forces</li> <li>- Resolving ethnic and tribal disputes using the policy of increasing the participation of tribes running local affairs, policymaking, and planning</li> </ul>	Avoiding the threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Eliminating the environmental problems in urban areas by strengthening urban management through employing skilled experts on urban and environmental issues</li> <li>- Local management participation in national and regional policies and programs</li> <li>- Supporting domestic industries by providing financial incentives</li> <li>- Taking advantage of transit position of this province through developing stronger economic relationships with neighbors within the framework of regional and tourism development projects</li> <li>- Preventing informal trade and smuggling by adopting appropriate policies and strategies</li> <li>- Eliminating the problems of urban marginalization through Improving human development indicators in urban and rural areas. Development of tourism by creating good jobs can be useful for this purpose.</li> </ul>	Decrease or eliminate the weaknesses

**4. Discussions**

The importance of Sistan in the history and culture of Iran is completely clear. This region is the place of storing the embryo of Zarathustra, the location that Rostam and his family lived in, the place of Kai Khosrow and Afrasiab battle, the place of Iranian ancient tales, The place of emergence of the first (and currently the only) writing from the early Islam in the East Kerman the Lut Desert, and the center of Zaranj before Islam and ancient Zaranj. According to what mentioned before, Sistan has a rich collection of historic building, ancient sites, economic functions, and natural attractions in the desert and also has the capabilities required to develop tourism industry. This, given other environmental limitations and constraints, requires the special attention of regional and national planners and policy-makers for revival and prosperity of this industry in order to stimulate economic and social activities in this region and make it dynamic. Hence,

it seems that the following plans and programs can be proposed as an introduction provides the necessary substrates in order to attract the attention of policy makers and planners:

1. 1. If tourism is accepted as an industry for earning income on the one hand and consolidating regional and national unity and cultural exchange on the other hand, taking advantage of historic, cultural, and natural capabilities and attractions of each region will be a priority, because some historical and natural obstacles to the development can be overcome this way.
2. Enabling border marketplaces while protecting national security in order to motivate attracting tourists and enhance regional and national bonds would be a very appropriate and efficient support.
3. Directing the handicrafts to produce tourist-friendly products such as needlework, spangle work, pottery, rugs, etc.
4. Constructing a historical town in Zabol to show ancient and epic tragedies in order to make concrete the historical, national, and epic position of Sistan as the symbol of civilization and national identity in ancient Iran. Establishment of a School of Art and required majors (Acting, Theater, Sculpture, Painting, etc) to educate efficient manpower in order to produce animated films and programs, plays, etc for tourists and also to provide part of cultural needs of the society. This also helps the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting to be less depended on foreign similar products, prevents the exit of currency, and reduces the cultural influence of other countries on the mind of children of this country.
5. Creating amusement parks in the route of Zabol-Nehbandan road inside Hamun Lake and around Khajeh Mountain, so that tourists can enjoy the excellent views of the lake, canebreaks, Khajeh Mountain, fishing, hunting, sports fields, beach, swimming, etc.
6. Reconstruction of small islands inside Hamun Lake and the use of local boat (Teuton) can increase the attraction of Hamun Lake for tourists.
7. Establishment of a museum of the history of ancient Iran near Shahr-e Sukhteh, given the vast treasure of this area.
8. Establishment of amusement park and ropeway in Khajeh Mountain.

9. Creating beaches and sports complex near Chah Nime-ha (Half Wells).
10. Utilizing the 120-day winds of Sistan for windmills to produce electricity, etc.

Finally, it can be said that Sistan is a small Iran that requires a strong and independent management with essential funding and facilities in order to handle and recreate these opportunities.

Sistan tourism development and reform strategies based on SWOT model are presented in the following table.

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