

The Evaluation of the Eco-tourism and Geo tourism in Maragheh, Iran: A SWOT Analysis

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ABSTRACT: The major objective of this study is to investigate the geo-tourism and ecotourism capabilities and limitations of Maragheh and to develop the best strategy toward improving and enhancing tourism management in this region. For this purpose, SWOT strategy planning method was used based on identification of weaknesses and strengths points (internal factors) and opportunities and threats (external factors). Furthermore, Likert spectrum was used to rank the internal and external factors in order to come up with SO, WO, ST, WT strategies. The study suggests that the region has a high potential regarding tourist attraction. The internal factors of this study (point2.97) indicate that the strength points of the region are more than the weakness points. In addition, the matrix of the evaluation of the external factors (point2.90) shows that the opportunities of the region are more than its threats. It further argues that the macro tourism strategies of the region must be developed in such a way to make the best use of the local possible opportunities.

Key words: Ecotourism, Geo Tourism, Maragheh, SWOT

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism industry with particular emphasis on geo-tourism is one of the most successful industries in the world. It has remarkable impacts including gaining exchange, as well as developing cultural - scientific relationships, creating direct and induced job opportunities (Nohegar et al., 2010). Geo tourism as one of the branches in tourism could enhance our knowledge in order to preserve our natural resources (TorabiFarsani et al., 2011).

Iran is being considered as one of the attractive tourism destination (Mahdavi et al., 2010). However; there exist some political as well as social factors that affect the industry. It has been argued that Iran's political instability could be considered as one of the drawbacks (Tavallai, 2007). Furthermore, reluctance with regard to tourism investment in the country and high risk of investment, negative impression of international tourists with respect to Iran are being considered as other barriers of the industry. However, low level of advertisement, inadequate expert labor force, and insufficient level of local general participation need extra attention. Many Iranian cities possess a lot of eco-tourism and geo tourism attractions including forests, rivers, wild life, hot water spring, caves natural habitats and desert parks.

Maragheh possesses high potentials regarding tourism activity, due to all of its geo-tourism potentials including its climatic characteristics, high mountainous areas, plains, ample water resources, thick forests, pastures with variable species, springs etc. along with geomorphologic characteristics.

Thus the major objective of this paper is to evaluate the potentials as well as feasibilities regarding the development of eco-tourism and geo tourism in the study

area. Further it emphasizes identification of the pertaining barriers, as well as to propose an appropriate tourism strategy bytaking into account the exiting opportunities and strengths.

Literature review

Since the middle of twenty century, great amounts of researches have been conducted regarding tourism and geology. However, this multi -field subject is still passing its first stage. Inskip, Edward (1991), in his research divided the tourism resources and attractions into natural attractions, cultural and historical attractions and specific man made ones. Wearer and Lawtona (1999), criticized the low performance of the authorities and poor governmental establishments in the field of tourism and eco-tourism in Kenya and Costa Rica. He further studied the effects of ecotourism on the social-economical evolution of these regions. Geo tourism, introduced publicly in (2002) by the Travel Industry Association of America and the National Geographic Traveler Magazine. It incorporates sustainability principles. In July 2008, five US government agencies joined the National Geographic Society to formally adopt the principles of Geo tourism (Moffet et al., 2008). Honduras was the first country to make Geo-tourism in its national tourism strategy (National Geographic Society, 2005). This applies to Norway, Honduras, Romania, the Cook Islands, California's Redwood Coast, Portugal's Douro Valley, Montreal, Greater Yellowstone, Baja California, Sierra Nevada and Guatemala as well (ClaudJoly, 2009; Dion et al., 2009; National Geographic, 2010; Sejvar et al., 2010).

There are various methods for studying tourism, and since it is affected by different factors and variables the application of SWOT will be a great help.

The tourism management model namely SWOT is used in different parts of the world. Nilsson (2004), in one of his study via SWOT model, provided a conceptual framework for the system analysis of his studied region. He analyzed all of the strengths and weaknesses as well as the existing opportunities and threats. Houben and Lenie (1999), using SWOT model, analyzed the effective factors in occupational (business) management.

The Study Area

Maragheh is located in the foothill of Sahand Mountain. It stretches along Sofichae River. Its area has been amounted up to 2647 hectares. Climatically speaking, it possesses semi-cold to cold climate. According to Domarton's classification its general climate specifications falls into cold-semi arid climate with resemblance with Mediterranean cold climate. Comparing with other eastern Azarbayeejan's cities, Maraghe enjoys mild climate in summer as opposed to cold climate in

winter (Morvarid, 2010). Topographically speaking Maragheh is located in Sofichae's valley which encompasses many parallel small valleys as well as relatively dense drainages. Taking into consideration the formation and sediments eastern part of the city possesses a very dense drainage system. To the north and west city is surrounded by Gosheer and Peernabi with elevation of 2200 meters. Average altitude is 1485 meters above sea level (Maragheh's comprehensive design, 2006). This mountain range in turn is associated with Choanchae basin in west and Sofichae basin to east.

Orchard belts are located in western part of the city. It surrounds residential areas. The city itself is surrounded by steep forest. They have medium density population. Northern part of the city that is southern Sahand's range represents a very precious pasture (The consultant engineers of the role of environment on development plan of Maragheh, 2006).

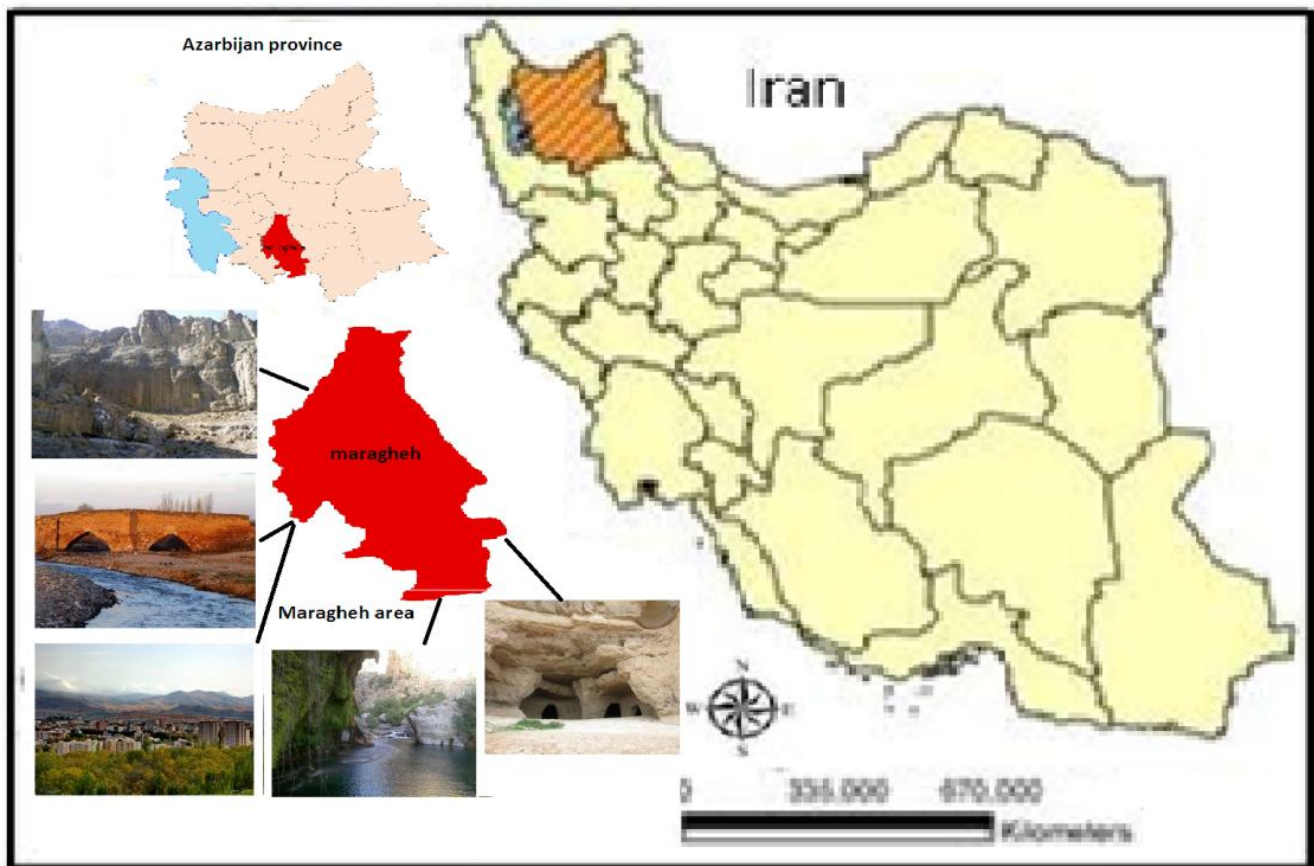


Figure 1. Maragheh Spatial Position and the Study Area

Materials and Methodology

Taking into consideration the objective of this study, the determination of ecotourism and geo-tourism capabilities. The fundamental research method of this study is based on survey method with the application of questionnaires. As such 120 questionnaires were distributed among tourists of the region during peak time that is the end of spring till almost end of summer. In order to analyze the obtained data as well as to propose the optimum strategy with regard to tourism development, this study plans to apply SWOT technique. Taking into account both internal and external factors, we identify strengths, opportunities, weaknesses, and threats.

As a further step, these factors were weighted by experts, tourists and host community using Delphi technique. This resulted in strategic internal and external factors which our final strategy will be based on. Moreover, Likert spectrum was used in order to rank both internal and external factors and determine the priorities. At the end by combining these factors we came up with the following strategies:

- 1-combination of strengths and opportunities (SO)
- 2- Combination of strength and threats (ST)
- 3- Combination of weaknesses and threats (WT)
- 4- Combination of weaknesses and opportunities (WO)

The elimination or at least the mitigation of weaknesses and threats require utilization of the strengths and opportunities. This paper conducted within three stages including data gathering and analysis, comparison and decision making.

Research findings

In order to accomplish the objectives, based on fieldworks and the relevant documents, Maragheh's attractions, facilities and services along with its limitations were determined. Using Delphi technique based on expert's opinion regarding tourism different aspects lead us to determination of both internal and external factors with respect to eco-tourism and geo-tourism in Maragheh. This in turn, was associated with field technique as well as documentation. This is followed by two rounds of questionnaires in order to come up with ultimate factors. In order to determine the impacts of the relevant factors questionnaires were distributed among experts as well as tourists in peak tourism time. This was done via application of Lickert spectrum. This is followed by extracting averages regarding each factor. This leads to weighing procedure and identification of final scores regarding the degree of the importance of each factor. Needless to say that final score computation for each factor was converted to 1 (unit) scale so that the summation of all of the scores would come to 1. Was applied in order to rank, weigh and determine the magnitude of different factors (Tables 1 and 2).

Corresponding score related to internal factors (2.97) indicates that Maragheh's tourism strengths are more than its weaknesses. This requires taking advantage of these strengths regarding macro tourism strategies.

Final score associated with external factors (2.90) suggests that there exists more opportunities comparing with threats. This in turn requires utilizing all of

opportunities with respect to macro tourism strategies. It in turn, leads to SWOT Matrix.

This is followed by the comparison stage regarding different strategies

The major objective of next phase is the determination of strategy with implication capability. This in turn indicates the application of external and internal factor matrix. Taking into account the corresponding figures regarding the evaluation of the internal factors (2.97) and external factors (2.90) for tourism activity Maragheh would accommodate in cell 5. That is the most appropriate strategy in which would correspond with those strategies which aim to maintain the current and prevailed conditions and status (Fig.1).

Chosen strategies based on internal and external matrix are associated with strengths and opportunities and possess invading and rival nature. The followings are the itemized final strategies regarding tourism development in Maragheh.

1-Taking advantage of well aware people regarding tourism in order to improve the implication of tourism (S6 O4).

2-development of cultural and natural tourism attractions through job opportunities and provision of cultural products, varied tourism attractions and their corresponding low costs (S3O1O7 O8).

3-Taking advantage of well aware people regarding the development of community based organizations for conserving environment which in turn will lead to more relationships between the city and its villages and subsequent cultural interactions with tourists (S6 O8 O5).

4-Taking advantage of local participation and the tendency toward receiving more tourists which in turn will lead to subsequent provision of job opportunities and cultural products (S5O1O7 O8 O9).

5-optimum accessibility and the existence of sufficient and good roads create more relationships between city and its villages (S4 O5).

Table 1. The evaluation of internal factors governing tourism in Maragheh

Internal factors	Ratio	Rank	Final score	Considerations
S ₁ :Estate lands' ownership	0.11	4	0.44	High potential regarding regional planning in general and tourism planning in particular
S ₂ : Low costs of the tourism facilities and services	0.08	3	0.24	Low general costs with emphasis on low entrance tourist attraction costs
S ₃ : Variation and quantities of tourism attractions	0.11	3	0.33	Spectacular wildlife and vegetation covers
S ₄ :Optimum accessibility	0.06	3	0.18	Miles of well paved and high quality roads
S ₅ : Local community participation and their degree. of resistance or tendency against tourists	0.07	3	0.21	Local people are well aware of tourism attractions
S ₆ :Awareness of influential and educated persons regarding Maragheh's tourism activities	0.12	3.5	0.42	qualitatively, educated people comparing with Others are more influential
W ₁ Low knowledge of local people regarding tourism culture	0.07	2	0.14	Low level of tourism knowledge correspond with less tourist's arrivals
W ₂ Climatic limitations	0.08	2	0.16	Seasonality of tourism activity
W ₃ Inadequate tourism advertisements	0.05	3	0.15	Low level of advertisement is associated with low level of tourist arrivals
W ₅ Low level of tourism accommodations, infrastructures and services	0.05	3	0.15	Poor tourism activity due to inadequate services and Infrastructures
W ₄ Lack of tourism specialized labor force	0.08	3	0.24	Lack of tour guides will leave some of the tourism attractions remained unknown
W ₆ Low level of computer and ICT knowledge of tourism involved people	0.05	3	0.15	The need for application of electronic business and Computerization in tourism activity
W ₇ Low level of conservation and preservation regarding natural tourism attractions	0.08	2	0.16	High level of destruction and unsustainability
Total	1		2.97	

Table 2. The evaluation of external factors governing Maragheh tourism activity

External factors	Ratio	Rank	Final score	Considerations
O ₁ : Job opportunities	0.13	3.5	0.455	provision of local employments
O ₂ : High number of potential tourism investors	0.03	2	0.06	High level of tourism investments will lead to more tourism development
O ₃ : Earning exchange via international tourists 'arrival	0.05	1.5	0.075	presence of foreign tourists will lead to more positive economic impacts
O ₄ : Improvement of tourism attractions along with tourism development	0.1	3	0.3	High motivations and interests of officials Toward the industry
O ₅ : Mutual relationships between the city and its villages	0.06	2.5	0.15	this type of relationship dictates more unity
O ₆ : Using close by tourism training centers	0.06	2	0.12	highly trained labor force will attract more tourists
O ₇ : Providing souvenirs and tourism cultural products	0.08	3.5	0.28	This will enhance tourists' attraction
O ₈ : Cultural interaction	0.06	3	0.18	High level of interactions between local people and tourists
O ₉ : Local participation regarding environmental conservation	0.06	3	0.18	this kind of involvement will lead to better environment and as a result attractions of more tourists
T ₁ : Ambiguity in tourism development approaches and strategy	0.03	2	0.06	There exists no comprehensive definition of the field
T ₂ : Negative impression of foreign tourists toward Iran	0.04	2	0.08	There exists negative attitudes toward Iran
T ₃ : Low level of local official authority	0.1	3	0.3	this level of authority will lead to some Problems
T ₄ : Unstable political situation regarding international tourists	0.05	2	0.1	this is a major barrier for foreign tourists
T ₅ : Lack of sufficient budget and financial support for tourism development	0.12	4	0.48	The higher the budget, the more would be the number of tourists
T ₆ : Low level of competition	0.04	2	0.08	Low level of tourist is associated with l level of investment
Total	1		2.90	

Table 3. SWOT matrix

Internal and external factors	Strengths (S)	Weaknesses (W)
Opportunities (O)	Aggressive strategies(SO)	Conservative strategies (WO)
Threats (T)	Competitive strategies (ST)	Defending strategies (WT)

Herrison et al, 2007

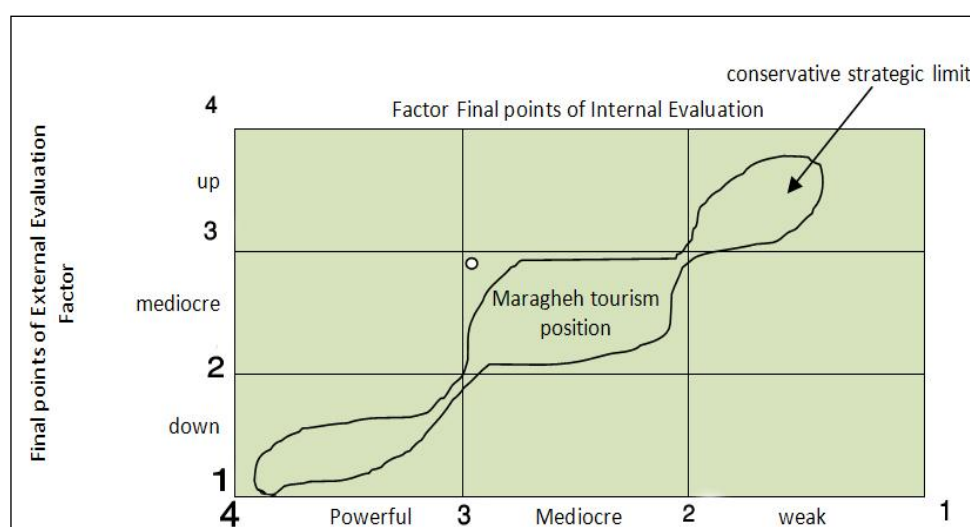


Figure 1. The diagram of internal and external matrix of the tourism of Maragheh.

Table 4. Strengths weaknesses, opportunities, and threats Matrix

		Strengths	Weaknesses
Internal factors	External factors	S ₁ : Estate lands' ownership	W ₁ : Low knowledge of local people regarding tourism culture
		S ₂ : Low costs of the tourism facilities and services	W ₂ : Climatic limitations
		S ₃ : Variation and quantities of tourism attractions	W ₃ : Inadequate tourism advertisements
		S ₄ : Optimum accessibility	W ₄ : Lack of tourism specialized labor force
		S ₅ : Local community participation and their degree of resistance or tendency against tourists	W ₅ : Low level of tourism accommodations, infrastructures and services
		S ₆ : Awareness of influential and educated persons regarding Maragheh's tourism activities	W ₆ : Low level of computer and ICT knowledge of tourism involved people
			W ₇ : Low level of conservation and preservation regarding natural tourism attractions
Opportunities	Strategy based on SO	Weakness opportunities strategy	
O ₁ :Job opportunities O ₂ :High number of potential tourism investors O ₃ :Earning exchange via O ₄ : Improvement of tourism attractions along with tourism development international tourist's arrivals O ₅ :Mutual relationships between the city and its villages O ₆ :Using close by tourism training centers O ₇ : Providing souvenirs and tourism cultural products O ₈ :Cultural interaction O ₉ :Local participation regarding environmental conservation	1- Combination of (S ₂ S ₃ O ₁ O ₇ O ₈) Taking advantage of low costs of the tourism facilities and services along with variation in tourism attractions and cultural interaction potential in order to enhance tourism capabilities regarding creation of Job opportunities through Provision of souvenirs and tourism cultural products 2-Combination of (S ₄ O ₅) High level of accessibility and taking advantage of good quality road will lead to well established relationships between the city and its villages 3- Combination of (S ₅ O ₁ O ₇ O ₈ O ₉) Taking advantage of local community participation and their tendency toward tourists through taking job opportunities including provision of regional cultural products 4-Combination of (S ₆ O ₄)Taking advantage of aware and educated influential persons regarding Maragheh's tourism activities in order to improve tourism attractions and subsequent tourism development of the region 5-Combination of (S ₆ O ₈ O ₉) Taking advantage of aware and educated influential persons regarding Maragheh's tourism activities in order to create local participated institution for conserving environment which in turn, will lead to well established relationships between the city and its villages and more subsequent cultural interaction with tourism	1- Combination of (W ₃ O ₉) Provision of broad advertisements through local involved people 2-Combination of (W ₄ O ₄ O ₆) Improving labor force skill through the utilization of close by tourism training centers in order to improve tourism operation 3-combination of (W ₇ O ₂) Quantitatively and qualitatively improve tourists' accommodations through potential tourist investors 4- Combination of (W ₇ O ₉) Conservation of tourist's attractions via both local people and officials	
Threats	Strategies based on ST	Strategy based on WT	
T ₁ :Ambiguity in tourism development approaches and strategy T ₂ :Negative impression of foreign tourists toward Iran T ₃ : Low level of local official authority T ₄ :Unstable political situation regarding international tourists T ₅ :Lack of sufficient budget and financial support for tourism development T ₆ : Low level of competition	1-Combination of (S ₂ S ₃ T ₄ T ₂)More emphasis on domestic tourism market 2-Combination of (S ₃ T ₁)Development of all regional tourists' attractions in order to make tourism approaches as clear as possible 3-Combination of (S ₃ T ₁ T ₂)Emphasis on Islamic countries with regard to foreign tourists 4-Combination of(S ₆ T ₆)Encouraging aware and educated influential persons regarding Maragheh's tourism activities to invest in tourism industry	Combination of(W ₃ W ₆ T ₂ T ₃ T ₄) Taking into consideration all internal limitations, weaknesses as well as external threats, before taking any severe actions regarding these issues, efforts should be placed on absorbing domestic tourists rather than foreign ones more specifically on mountainous areas.	

CONCLUSION

As mentioned in the main body of the paper the strengths regarding Maragheh tourism development are as follows:

- Awareness of influential and educated persons regarding Maragheh's tourism activities
- Estate lands' ownership
- Low costs of the tourism facilities and services
- Variation and quantities of tourism attractions
- Optimum accessibility

Local community participation and their degree of resistance or tendency against tourists. However, low

level of tourism accommodations, infrastructures and services, lack of tourism specialized labor force, low knowledge of local people regarding tourism culture, low level of conservation and preservation with regard to natural tourism attractions, climatic limitations, inadequate tourism advertisements and low level of computer and ICT knowledge of tourism involved people are the major weaknesses regarding tourism activities.

Maragheh is endowed with some opportunities. Providing souvenirs and tourism cultural products, improvement of tourism attractions, high number of potential tourism investors, providing job opportunities, cultural interactions, earning exchange via arrival of

international tourists, Using close by tourism training centers, local participation regarding environmental conservation and mutual relationships between the city and its villages are being considered as major opportunities.

However, Maragheh is encountered with some threats. Low level of competition as well as local official authority, unstable political situation regarding international tourists, negative impression of foreign tourists toward Iran, ambiguity in tourism development approaches and strategy and lack of sufficient budget and financial support for tourism development are the major threats.

Referring to the summery of internal factors analysis, the average weighed score is 2.97. This in turn indicates that macro strategies should stress on these strengths in order to combat with the weaknesses. Relevant authorities could improve tourism activity in the region through appropriate planning and devoting the needed budgets.

Referring to the summery of external factors analysis, the corresponding average is 2.90. This indicates that regional opportunities are more than the threats. This in turn dictates that the macro tourism strategies should emphasize on taking advantage of these opportunities as much as possible.

Maragheh through appropriate planning will have high potential for being considered as one of the tourism international destination. Moreover; this study could further expand by application of quantitative models including MCDM and fuzzy MCDM and their combination with SWOT technique.

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