

## **Balancing Environmental Conservation and Sustainable Ecotourism Development in Guilan Province, Iran**

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**Abstract :** *This study deals with an ecotourism site set in a coastal area in Iran. The aim of the research is to look at the role of ecotourism in the protection of coastal areas and at sustainable development in Guilan Province, Iran. The method involved using tourists who had travelled to Guilan Province as respondents to a questionnaire survey. The data was analyzed using SWOT strategies, and a descriptive analysis was carried out as a suitable way to achieve the main goal of the research. The analysis of the results of each group surveyed includes a meaningful correlation between the effects of ecotourism and sustainable development in Guilan Province for protecting the coastal ecosystem. The intent is to highlight those aspects which will increase the levels of tourist knowledge, cultural exchange, public participation, investment, job creation and others. It is also suggested that some solutions are identified in ecotourism which are key elements for environmental protection and sustainable development of the coastal area.*

**Keywords -** *Ecotourism, Coastal areas, Caspian Sea Environment, Guilan Province*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Today, tourism as a developing activity in the world, and its economic role, are often an integral part of the income of many countries, and every development of the industry will have effect on society [1]. In this regard, ecotourism, as one of the most significant types of tourism industry, has become involved with development. Now many countries of the world have found that their ability to achieve more income from the tourism industry is a simple way of creating job opportunities [2]. According to WTO<sup>1</sup> predictions, during recent decades the general growth of the tourism industry, it means (2000-2010) has been between 4.3 and 6.7 per cent. These results also reveal that the growth of ecotourism, which is between 10 and 30 per cent, is greater than that of other types of tourism. Although the present number is 7% of whole travelers in the entire of the world, in the coming decades the number of nature lovers will be 20% [3]. Generally, a large extent of the world lies in coastal areas. Coastal tourism is the most rapidly developing area in tourism development. Accordingly, although the development of coastal tourism has many benefits for coastal areas, uncontrolled development in these areas has had various negative environmental impacts. For instance, waste arising from the unplanned development of tourism activities has destroyed environmental marine habitats surrounding coastal areas. These facts reveal that the balance between tourism and the environment is quite sensitive, and that to avoid these circumstances it will be necessary to have suitable planning and sustainable tourism development in coastal areas [4]. Coastal areas, particularly the sandy areas between the wet land and dry land have been especially significant among these areas. This destination has different possibilities for tourists coming to the area. In fact, coastal tourism, as a major type of ecotourism, will be a major source for development of the industry, bringing additional value and income to the coastal cities. In these decades, in comparison with the other types of tourism, ecotourism has a significant emphasis for coastal areas, and we will consider this statement "Coastal environmental Ecology is quite sensitive and vulnerable, and the pressure of tourism activities it can make imbalance in ecological balancing" [5:P.75]. The endorsement of ecotourism should be compatible with the natural environment, because a successful tourism industry will only happen with environmental conservation of the highest order [6]. This relationship in the northern areas of Iran, particularly in the coastal areas of Guilan Province, was considered because of the great natural attractions, suitable climate, and the forest location. In this way tourists are attracted to Guilan Province by the sea as it creates a unique environment which is valued by many tourists for entertainment, relaxation, swimming, and enjoyment of the beautiful view. One of the major reasons for this is the easy and accessible routes in the coastal areas. Also, the distance to the coast is very small and sometimes it is less than 200 meters. But because of the sensitive condition of the coastal ecosystem, the arrival of more tourists to this area needs to take account of the Caspian environment. During recent years the local tourism has been a concern for organizational experts, residents, NGOs and researchers. The aim of this study is to evaluate and validate the positive and negative impacts of ecotourism on the environment and the sustainable development in the area of Guilan Province. This paper will

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<sup>1</sup> World Tourism Organization

describe the methodology (objective and research) and theoretical principles associated with ecotourism in the study area.

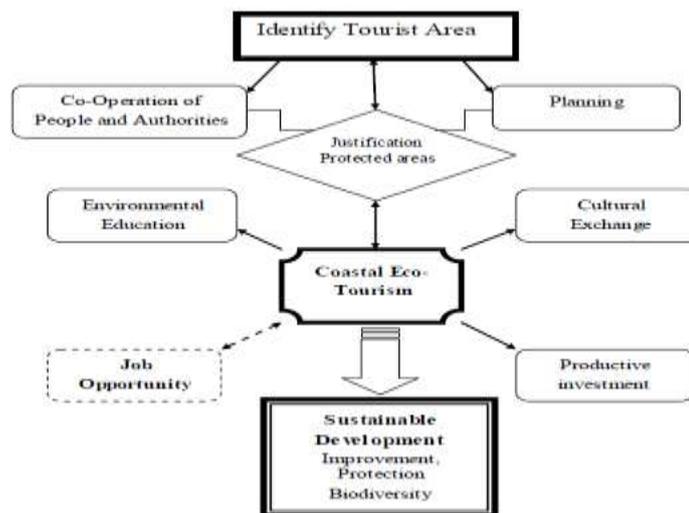
## II. METHODOLOGY

The aim of the study and application of the methodology of the research is descriptive, and the analytical emphasis is on the study area. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of the study.

Therefore, the data for the study were secondary data (documents, library) and data from field work. Random sampling was used to collect data by the Rasgo Rule, and Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which is a measure of the reliability of the results, was computed. The SWOT method was used to analyze the model. The population of the study was 450 tourists arriving in coastal cities of Guilan Province, such as Astara, Rezvanshahr, Bandar-e-Anzali, Astaneh-Ashrafiyeh, Langrood, and Roodsar, during the six months of the first and second quarters of 2010. The major requirements for sustainable development in the coastal areas of this province, according to environmental conservation, and the impacts of ecotourism, are shown in Figure 1.

## III. FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

Tourism is divided into different types according to different environmental conditions [7]. In recent years, ecotourism as a new approach to tourism has been considered more and more by scholars. This type of tourism has been revealed as a popular type in the twenty-first century, which is called the "Ecotourism Century" by the United Nations [8]. On the other hand, the complete phrase of Ecotourism should be Ecological Tourism, which is a new approach in the tourism industry. Ecotourism is composed of a wide range of different options, from scientific visits to random visits to natural areas as holiday activities or as part of a long or short trip[9]. According to the International Ecotourism Society [10: p.2]. The definition of ecotourism is "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people". Therefore, an activity can only be considered to be ecotourism it includes tourism activities. Generally, ecotourism is a complex of tourism activities in the natural and cultural environment and also in the social environment. In this paper we will consider the sustainable development approach to tourism resources [11]. See Figure1.



"Fig 1" Conceptual Framework of the study

## IV. Sustainable Tourism Development

In the first of 1970s, Sachez, WCU<sup>2</sup> and UNET<sup>3</sup> pointed to some of the ways in the definition of sustainable development which include environmental development. The term sustainable development was used for the first time in the mid-1970s and is attributed to Ms. Barbara Ward. This concept was discussed extensively as part of the World Conservation Strategy, with people considering the protection of natural resources and the environment and the optimal way to manage them [13]. Therefore, sustainable tourism development means developing the tourism industry and attracting tourists to an area using the existing resources so that economic, cultural, and social rules are followed and the legal expectations of the community

<sup>2</sup> World Conservation Union

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Environment Programme

are met. Cultural identity, environmental health and an economic balance between the inhabitants and their guests need to be preserved [14].

#### **4.1 Coastal ecology**

Coastal areas are areas where the water and the land meet, and there are links between their ecosystems. The coastal ecology is a naturally evolved system and involves the most sophisticated and productive ecosystem on earth. Coastal areas, and vulnerable land and sea are exposed to potential threats from the accumulation of pollutants. Pollution of sea and land can result from socio-economical development [15].

#### **4.2 Coastal tourism**

Coastal tourism is a multi-purpose activity which includes travel, entertainment, trade and other activities in the coastal areas and the marine environment. Tourism activities are divided into two major groups:

- **Nature-based activities:** such as fishing, swimming, sunbathing, diving, boating, water-skiing and surfing.
- **Activities based on man-made facilities:** such as shopping, entertainment, restaurants, parks, coastal parks, outdoor theatres, and other activities [5].

The population of the world is on the rise. According to forecasts, the current population is 6 billion, and by 2018 it will have risen to 8 billion. Normally the main section of the population which uses the marine environment for recreation and other purposes is drawn to the coast [16].

#### **4.3 Environmental strategy for sustainable development of tourism in the area**

Tourism development strategy requires balancing the environment and tourism; in the long term this means developing programmes and policies which are sensitive to environmental factors and will lead, therefore, to sustainable tourism development and economically sustainable development. Tourism affects the economy through factors such as increasing national income and creating employment, but it can cause damage to the environment. The first approach which comes to mind is an "Environmental Impacts Assessment". There are many definitions of environmental impacts assessments [17]. The two major ones are: "Environmental impact assessment refers to methods to calculate the predicted impacts of an activity deals with Environmental Quality" [18: P.118]; and "Environmental Impact Assessment involves the operation to detect, determine and definition of positive and negative effects on the environment is anticipated operations" [19: P.12]. But in recent decades there has been a concern to develop common strategies for environmental performance. Destructive environmental trends have been in existence for a long time and are permanently increasing. Ecological relationships and ecological development followed the dominant pattern of economic growth, and irreversible negative impacts on the environment and natural resources have been caused. Therefore, in contrast to permanent development, there is a great need for sustainable development [20]. In this way, the most significant of the impacts of environmental assessment in relation to sustainable tourism development include:

1. Reducing the negative impact on the cultural environment that can be vulnerable in the area.
2. Training tourists about the importance of environmental protection.
3. Emphasising social and environmental studies conducted by the basis and using long-term planning to assess the negative and positive impacts of ecotourism and to reduce the negative impacts.
4. Trying to increase economic resources in the host country for the local people, particularly residents who are living in the vicinity of the conservation areas and natural zones.
5. Endeavouring to ensure that the social and environmental limitations of acceptable changes are set by the researchers in collaboration with local residents, and not alone.
6. Reducing the use of fossil fuels, and preserving the natural and cultural environment of plants and local wildlife [21].

## **V. Study Area**

Guilan Province extends over 14,711 km<sup>2</sup> and is located in the north of Iran next to the Caspian Sea; the width of the province varies from 25 to 105 kilometers [22]. The coastline of this province is approximately 270 km along the eastern and western coasts of the Caspian Sea. There are twelve destinations with four regions of the Department of the Environment and the province has two national nature reserves, five wildlife conservation areas, and four conservation areas. Also, the wetlands in this province have a major role in the tourism industry; three of these are registered under the Ramsar Convention. The wetlands include: Anzali Wetland, KiaKalayeh (Langrood District), Bandare- Kia Shahr Wetland, Boojagh International Park, and Dahaneh Sefid Rood [23].



"Fig 2" location of Gilan province Source: [24].

Due to the temperate climate, the smooth and sandy shoreline, the short distance from the centre of Iran, and easy access by land and air, this area is the goal of many tourists in the Nowruz holidays, the summer holidays and other public holidays. The large number of tourists, besides creating income and employment for local people, has sometimes caused the destruction of natural coastal habitats, and these environmental impacts are sometimes irreversible. In this regard, ecotourism with suitable management can increase the investment in the province and benefit national economic prosperity, while also protecting the biodiversity on the shoreline of the Caspian Sea for present and future generations. Six coastal cities were selected to and their features were investigated with a SWOT model. The SWOT Matrix model of indicators in Table 1 shows the basic factors used to rank the cities using the questionnaire results which are shown in Tables 2 and 3.

"Table 1" Tourism sites in coastal areas of Gilan province

STUDY AREAS	COASTAL TOURIST ATTRACTIONS
<b>Astara</b>  48° 52' E 38° 02' N	Shell Coastal Design Trepan Wetland Londveel protected area Coastal location – Bandari & Border town
<b>RezvanShahr</b>  49° 7' E 37° 33' N	Pareh Sar Coastal Complex Tazeh Abad-Rood Sar Coastal Complex
<b>Bandar-e-Anzali</b>  49° 28' E 38° 28' N	Coastal location – Bandari International Anzali Wetland Coastal Village Sarkhankal Wetland Sangachin- Kapoorchal Coastal area Ghoo Seaside Anzali free zone
<b>Astan-e Ashrafiyeh</b>  49° 56' E 37° 16' N	Astaneh coastal parks Fishing waterfront & Kia Shahr Bandar International Wetland and Parks Boojagh & Bandare Kia shahr Dahaneh Sefid -Rood
<b>Lange- Rood</b>  50° 10' E 38° 11' N	International Kia Kalayeh Wetland Chamkhaleh & Chaf Coast Coastal Tourism complex Lange-Rood
<b>Rood-Sar</b>  50° 17' E 37° 08' N	Chaboksar-Saroolat Coastal tourist Coplex Rood Sar- LahLah Rood Coastal tourist complex Chaboksar Rose Sea Design Roodsar Coastal city zone

## VI. RESULTS OF THE STUDY

## 6.1 Coastal tourism development and its impact in study area

Different natural and cultural resources are included in the study: Water & Aquatic, Vegetation, Topographic, Geology and Soil, Climate Change, Historical Characteristics, Characteristics and Guidelines, Construction Activity, and Industries and Infrastructure [6]. The above resources are the most significant in the coastal area for attracting more tourists, therefore, to investigate the research purpose, the population of the study included 450 tourists who travelled to Guilan Province (to the cities of Astara, Rezvanshahr, Bandar-e-Anzali, Astaneh-Ashrafiyeh, Langrood, and Roodsar). Therefore, for these major coastal tourism sites, the results are presented below. To assess the questionnaire, Cronbach's Alpha was calculated, and to investigate the strengths and weaknesses of the present condition we used two formulae: the Chi-squared,  $\chi^2$  test, Cramer's V with the number of degrees of freedom df. These are described in the following table. See Table 2.

**“Table 2”** Assessing to relationship between education level of tourists and their understanding of the capabilities of coastal environment in Guilan Province

Level of recognition Coastal potentialities	Illiterate & Primary	High school	Diploma	Undergraduate	Graduate & above	Total
High Level	7 18/4	12 26/7	97 66/9	118 64/8	24 60	258 57/3
Mid Level	11 29	14 31/1	36 24/8	48 24/8	11 27/5	120 26/7
Low Level	20 52/6	19 42/2	12 8/3	16 8/8	5 12/5	72 16
Total	38 8/4	45 10	145 32/2	182 40/4	40 9	450 100

Sig:0/001 Cramer's V= 0 0/401 $\chi^2=53/67$

With 99% confidence:10Df

**Chi-squared,  $\chi^2 = \text{SUM} ((\text{observed} - \text{expected})^2 / \text{expected})$**

**$\chi^2 = \text{SUM} ((f_o - f_e)^2 / f_e)$**

Where  $f_o$  is the observed frequency and  $f_e$  is the expected frequency.

#### Cramer's V

**Cramer's V** is a way of calculating correlation in tables which have more than 2x2 rows and columns. It is used after the test to determine strengths of association after the chi-squared test has determined significance.

V is calculated by first calculating chi-square, then using the following calculation:

**$V = \text{SQRT} (c^2 / (n (k - 1)))$**

Where  $c^2$  is chi-square and k is the number of rows or columns in the table.

The result is used with a Chi-Square table to determine whether the comparison shows significance.

In a table, the degrees of freedom are:

**$df = (R - 1) * (C - 1)$**

Where R is the number of rows and C is the number of columns.

As will be seen from Table 2 there is a significant relationship between the educational level of tourists and their awareness of the coastlines in the study area. It is revealed that high educational levels in tourists can help them to understand about using the natural resources in the coastal areas, and the costs and negative impacts of tourism will be minimized. Generally, 57.3 percent of them have enough knowledge of the resources found in the coastal area which has been the final destination in their journey. On the other hand, 16% of tourists were not properly aware of the characteristics of the location in which they had chosen to pass their leisure time. They had come just to pass sometime in the natural world without any purpose related to tourism activities. In this regard, many tourists following a tour of the coast demand with respect to these coastal ecosystems and return to that places which the concluding of these statements is in the following in Table 3.

**“Table 3”** Assessing to relationship between sustainable development of coastal areas and the tourists’ desire to visit again tourist sites in the study area

Coastal Zone	Astara	Rezvan-Shahr	Bandar-e-Anzali	Astaneh Ashrafiyeh	Langrood	Roodsar	Total
Tendency to Tourism							
High Level	77 72/7	21 47/7	83 74/1	35 59/3	24 48	51 64/6	291 64/7
Mid Level	24 22/6	9 20/5	26 23/2	18 30/5	15 30	20 25/3	112 24/9
Low Level	5 4/7	14 31/8	3 2/7	6 10/2	11 22	8 10/1	47 10/4
Total	106 23/6	44 9/8	112 24/9	59 13/1	50 11/1	79 17/5	450 100

$X^2=56/23$

Carmer’s V= 0/35

Sig: 0/006

DF: 15

The above table data represents a statistically significant relationship, with a 99% level of confidence, between tourists’ desire to travel back to the sites of the coastal tourism and sustainable coast lines. Among the cities mentioned, the city of Bandar-e-Anzali, because of its special position (its coastal and tourist facilities (listed in Table 1)), has more visitors than other areas, and in this city and those of Astara and Roodsar 74.1%, 72.7%, and 64.6% of tourists are nature-oriented. Rezvanshahr city, with 31.8 percent of tourists being nature-oriented, has the lowest figure.

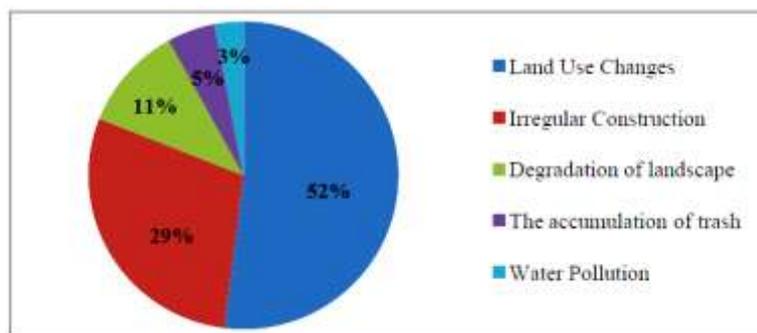
**6.2 Ecotourism and Environmental Impact**

Based on the findings, variables such as land use changes, degradation of the coastal landscape, waste accumulation, increasing indiscriminate construction and pollution of coastal water resources, are all affected by coastal tourism.

**“Table 4”** The environmental consequences of coastal tourism activities

<b>Valid</b>	35
<b>Missing</b>	2
<b>Mean</b>	6/6
<b>Std. Deviation</b>	1/55
<b>Variance</b>	2/41

An average result for the environmental variables is 6.6. Environmental variables can score between 3 and 10. The standard deviation is 1.44 which shows that tourism activities have an effect on local ecosystems. Land use changes show the greatest impact from coastal tourism. If appropriate ecotourism management was applied, the pollution of water supplies and accumulation of waste would be kept to a minimum. And also, preserving valuable coastal resources and the survival of other protected areas were considered inadequate. New areas for continued sustainable development of tourism in coastal areas need to be clearly identified.



**“Fig 3”** Diagram of coastal tourism effects & environmental activities

## VII. CONCLUSION

Today, ecotourism (nature tourism) is one of the most important types of extremely tourism for the economy, and is the most compatible with sustainable development in order to protect the region's ecosystems. The United Nations has called the current century the Ecotourism Century. In this regard, two ecosystems (water and land) are brought together in the coastal area in a destination for many people for business, leisure or other activities in the coastal and marine environment. In the northern areas of Iran, there is a high potential for the utilization of the natural and human resources of the Caspian Sea coastal area, and this area has advantages for tourism over many other countries and regions. Because of other advantages such as access roads and the proximity of the capital city, Tehran, Guilan hosts the annual holiday for large numbers of travelers. Based on surveys taken, Guilan Province, with its approximate length of 270 km along the west and east coasts of the Caspian Sea and coastal tourism in the area, has many capabilities. We have studied how sustainable development of ecotourism in coastal areas of Guilan Province can be achieved and how environmental protection has been affected, by looking at six coastal towns which are sites of seaside tourism in each area (listed in Table 1). In this study the population included 450 randomly selected tourists who travelled to the province in the first half of 2010 (spring and summer). The study used Cronbach's Alpha to assess the reliability of the questionnaire, and the findings were clear that the positive impact of ecotourism in the area includes:

1. Increase awareness of tourists
2. Cultural exchanges between tourists and local people
3. The creation of jobs
4. Productive investment

These are affected by long-term planning in protected areas in the coastal regions such as national parks, the international wetlands of Guilan, and the Gulfs. This can lead to sustainable development in the province. Most of the tourists are interested in travelling to the coastal cities of this province for tourism activities such as swimming, fishing, sailing, water skiing, walking along the beach and using other facilities that are in place for their leisure. But the remarkable point is that the educational level is generally high among the tourists. Considered to be of more significance to the issue of the preservation of coastal ecosystems are demands for further development in the coastal area in order to provide recreational and health amenities. . So Bandar-e-Anzali, due to its advantage of better residential areas and recreational facilities for tourists and its free trade zone (Hassan Rood), Ghoo coastal zone, Sangachin - Kapurchal and other zones, is the goal for most people. Rezvanshahr city, has limited resources compared to the coastal tourist cities of Astara, Astaneh-Ashrafiyeh, Langrood and Roodsar. Also from the field visits and surveys, changing land use in coastal areas is an essential factor in managing the destruction of coastal landscapes and ecosystems and, on the other hand, there is a small role for the pollution of water supplies. Therefore, for sustainable development and environmental conservation in this province, the strategic planners can play a local role in achieving national development programmes.

In this regard, using the SWOT method, the strengths and weaknesses, threats and opportunities were investigated, and strategies and suggestions are presented.

**“Table 5”** Results using SWOT model to consider the protection of the environment and the sustainable development of coastal areas

<b>Strengths</b>	Coastal areas (Shell, Pardeh Sar, Tazeh Abad Rood-Sar, Sangachin coastal area, Kapurchal) Gho Beach, Seaside Park, International Wetlands , National parks, and coastal villages.
<b>Weakness</b>	Parking shortages, traffic around the tourist areas, the lack of appropriate guide, not just advertising, lack of tourism in coastal markets, lack of sports facilities in the efficient management of coastal and weaknesses
<b>Opportunities</b>	Use of coastal resources, ecosystems, tourism market, certain special tours for individuals, Holding conferences for more non-Aboriginal, expansion of sea exercises, diving and swimming area suitable for construction, small and large investors to make better use wetlands of relying on their protection, cultural exchanges
<b>Threats</b>	Changes in land use, construction, indiscriminate cultural invasion, lack of appropriate investment in the tourism sector in sustainable tourism development and coastal ecotourism.

### Recommendation for further study

- Training of tourism guides for tourists in order to familiarize them with the resources of the coastal environment and the protection of the ecosystem of the Caspian region
- Providing encouraging and punitive policies on environmental issues that can reduce negative environmental effects, such as the creation of coastal nature, in accordance with the needs of each area
- Residential units to increase tourism capacity in accordance with national and international tourism standards
- Adequate information to guide tourists, in tourist brochures and advertisements in the mass media and publications
- Travel companies to invest in and develop coastal tourism
- Identify new areas for the coastal recreation such as national parks, and create integrated coastal beaches side by side
- Prevent irregular construction and land use changes
- Health facilities – services and improvements to old sites and to prevent waste
- True culture of tourism in appropriate interaction between people (tourists and officials) and the participation of various social groups in all aspects of cultural, economic, social and environmental management
- Planning and commissioning for coastal and water activities such as fishing, water skiing and diving.

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