

Assessing the Potential of Ecotourism in Kurdistan



Environment

KEYWORDS : Ecotourism, Kurdistan, questionnaire, potential

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ABSTRACT

Ecotourism may be regarded as a management tool that aims to reconcile both conservation and development goals. Tourism based on the Kurdistan Region's pristine landscape as well as historical sites offers great potential for not only generating income but also introducing the region to potential investors. The region, however, must establish a tourism destination identity in order to compete for visitor's 'dollars'. This research is a preliminary study which identifies the potential for ecotourism development in Kurdistan. A semi-structured questionnaire was the primary data collection method used to capture the opinions, interests and feelings among the travelers and to gain an understanding of visitor profiles. Their responses also gave an insight into various constraints in terms of security, infrastructure, information or any other capacity building needs required for future eco-tourism development.

Introduction

The International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas, which conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of the local people." (Fennel, 2001) Hence ecotourism offers an incentive for local people to help preserve and protect their environment and wildlife as it can provide them with a 'sustainable' income from tourism.

Although most of the debate on ecotourism lies around the environmental and economical aspects, it is also important to consider the cultural and social impacts. As tourists visit local indigenous people and exotic landscapes and wildlife, there is a cultural education to be found. By showing tourists a wider and broader perspective of nature and differing cultures, they are perhaps instilled with a greater conservation ethic to act more 'green'. (Farrell and Ward, 2004)

As tourism is, and probably always will be, a huge industry with-in modern day living, ecological tourism can at the very least, despite its negatives if mismanaged, is considered a step in the right direction towards resolving and mitigating the potential outcomes of global climate change. Although ecotourism, as of yet isn't perfect, the concept of it can certainly can be judged to be better than that of traditional tourism.

Study Area

Kurdistan is located in Middle East in the northern part of Iraq and it is an autonomous federally recognized political entity. It borders Turkey to the north, Iran to the east and Syria to the west. It is capital city in Erbil, known in Kurdish as Hewler. The region lies between latitudes 34 42' N and 37 22' N and between longitudes 42 25' and 46 15' east. It covers an area of 15,000 square mile (Fig 3.1), and it's populated by more than 3 million Kurds. The chief towns are Diyarbakır (Amed), Bitlis (Bedlîs) and Van (Wan) in Turkey, Arbil (Hewlêr) and Slemani in Iraq, and Kermanshah (Kirmanshan), Sanandaj (Sine). The region's semi-arid climate, which is been divided into three rainfall and temperature areas according to their topography and altitude, features cold, wet winters and hot, dry summers, except in the mountains, where moderate temperatures in summer and occasional snow in the winter prevail.

Research Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were designed specifically for tourists and local people, used for both key informants and individual respondents selected to participate in the research. Questionnaires were regarded as an effective tool to capture the opinions and feelings among the range of stakeholders on the topic. Local people included guides, drivers, etc. as well as other stakeholders such as municipal officers, forest officers, local politicians. The interviews were conducted for 650 tourists, three locations in Hawler, two in Sulaymania and five in Duhok. The questions were open ended in nature and similar for the key informants and respondent interviews respectively. This provided a basis

on which to compare responses and to understand the different views and opinions over issues raised in the interview guides. Several questions were formulated and rephrased in the field. Field observations were another method applied to shed more light on the status of issues under investigation in the study area. The observations helped to verify information and compare responses gathered from the interviewees.

Observations & Analysis

Table 1. Number of tourists who visit Kurdistan

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	Avg. Yearly Increase (%)	Avg. Monthly Increase (%)
Jan	145,242	172,312	212,506	267,500	272,121	21.84	
Feb	221,321	236,153	252,564	293,562	302,203	9.14	4.42 ↑
Mar	401,203	415,243	431,025	435,985	463,750	3.90	12.89 ↑
Apr	310,126	365,245	442,372	453,579	474,501	13.25	0.94 ↓
May	284,256	312,989	391,125	399,564	455,022	15.02	1.98 ↓
Jun	225,456	276,568	292,125	349,868	415,621	21.09	3.08 ↓
Jul	254,653	325,985	368,872	401,234	465,853	20.73	3.30 ↑
Aug	301,564	312,356	359,124	394,751	440,987	11.56	0.09 ↓
Sept	198,223	215,642	321,025	353,281	412,536	27.03	3.41 ↓
Oct	172,398	209,587	316,872	323,698	391,682	31.80	1.15 ↓
Nov	127,214	162,324	214,895	279,959	320,525	37.99	4.37 ↓
Dec	101,234	125,923	172,783	191,105	234,005	32.79	5.07 ↓
Total	2,742,890	3,124,327	3,770,288	4,137,086	4,648,806	17.37	

Fig. 1 Nationality of tourists

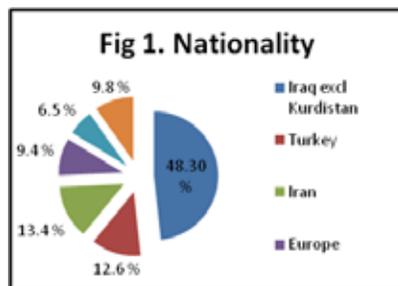


Table 2. Age of group and sex wise distribution of tourists

Age	Percentage	Sex	Percentage
18-25	41 %	Male	58 %
26-40	33 %	Female	42 %
41-60	19 %		
Over 61	7 %		

Fig.2 Deciding factors for a holiday

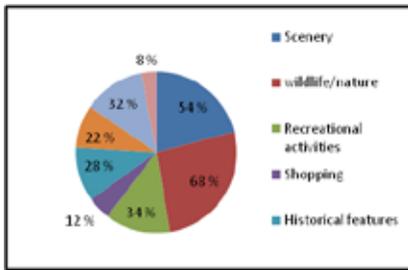


Table 3. Importance of accreditation while choosing a holiday destination

Response	Percentage
Yes	68 %
No	32 %

Fig.3 Awareness of Kurdistan

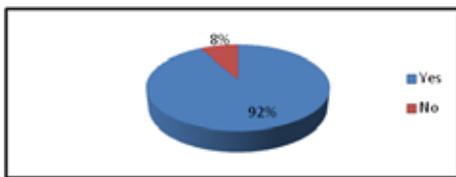


Table 4. If "yes" what would mostly attract you there?

Response	No. of tourists
Scenery	36 %
Wildlife / nature	56 %
Recreational activities	26 %
Shopping	22 %
Historical feature	34 %
Food and drink	62 %
Culture	34 %
Other	14 %

Fig. 4 Negative factors of travelling to Kurdistan

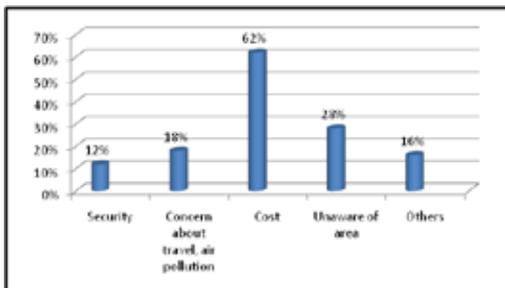


Fig. 5 Types of accommodation preferred

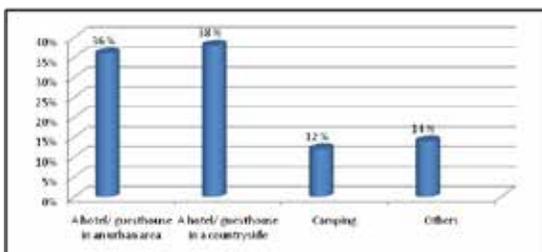


Fig. 6 Length of Stay in Kurdistan

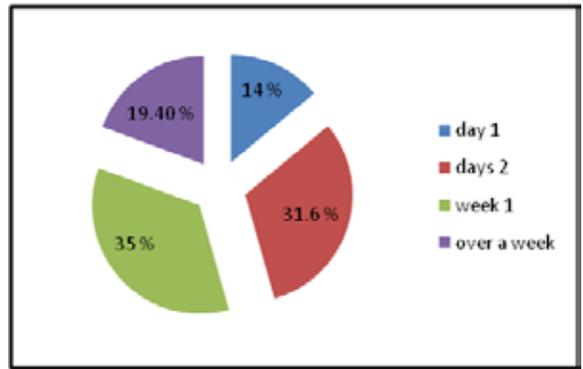


Table 5. Transportation used

Transportation	Percentage
Own car	47 %
Rented car	24 %
Rented bus	23 %
Bicycle	6 %

Fig. 7 Season wise distribution of Tourists

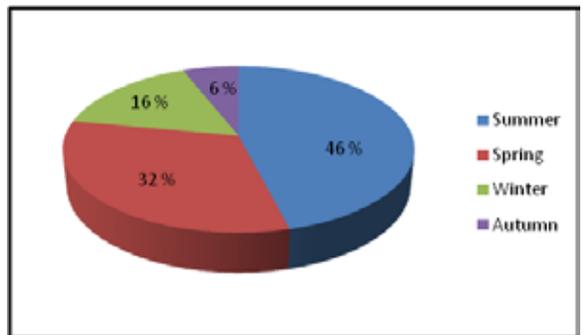


Table 6. Interests of tourists

Interest	Percentage
Photography	28 %
Bird watching	14 %
Trekking	8 %
Water surfing	2 %
Sight-seeing	48 %

Fig. 8 Expectations of tourists from agencies responsible / government

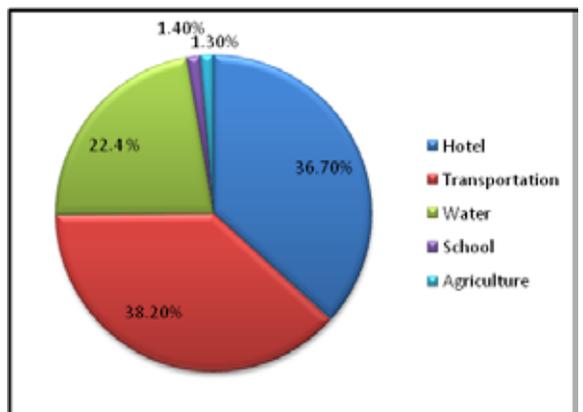


Table 7. Adequate Information provided to tourists

Information	Percentage
Yes	18 %
No	44 %
Only if asked	38 %

Discussion

The region already attracts tourists from the arid and hotter region of the southern parts of Iraq. About 70 % of the respondents spent their holidays overseas, at least once, within the last 2 years. Only 14 % of them spent their holidays in the Middle East, at least just once in their life. Although 70 % of the respondents had heard of Kurdistan and 50 % knew where it was, none had ever been to Kurdistan or even to Iraq for that matter.

According to Pizam and Mansfeld (1996), tourism is greatly dependent on security and peace. It is understood from the results that security is the first and primary reason that would prevent people considering a holiday to Kurdistan (BBC News, 2007) as about half of the respondents thought of Kurdistan from a security point of view and were linking it to be in the same condition as the rest of Iraq. That may be because Kurdistan is a region in a country whose image reflects bombs, kidnappings and beheadings.

The second important factor that would put off foreign residents planning holidays to Kurdistan was lack of knowledge about the area. Kurdistan was not an active member of the tourism industry in the past, with almost no air service few years back, inbound or outbound tours and no tourism media coverage. It did not have a role in shaping international tourism at the beginning of the millennium.

Wildlife and landscape as well as genuine culture are abundant in Kurdistan. The result from this survey showed that people were interested to see mostly bear, leopard and ancient forests if they went to Kurdistan for a holiday. These categories should be advertised on public and overseas brochures for visitors who consider holidays to Kurdistan. According to Horwich et al, 1993, ecotourism must be seen as a collaborative effort between local people and concerned, informed visitors to preserve wild lands and their biological and cultural assets through support of local community development.

Lastly, accreditation and certification programmes should play a big rule in the ecotourism sector in the region (McGahey, 2006). About 60% of the respondent for this survey thought that an accredited (certified) destination was important for them when selecting a holiday destination. At the same time, accreditation and award schemes are major points with respect to promoting greener tourism industry practices and sustainable tourism management achievements where monitoring and rewarding are concerned. The majority of accreditation schemes relates to the genuine ecotourism practice and promotes continuous improvement (Crouch et al. 2005).

Conclusions

Lack of knowledge about the area also influenced people’s attitudes towards considering a visit to Kurdistan. Meanwhile, the extensive land of pristine forest which support an enormous amount of landscapes and wildlife and also plentiful of historical features will always remind the world of the genuine culture and the motivation to real ecotourism potentials. This indicates that the Kurdistan regional government, public agencies and tourism organizations that manage tourism sector should be proactive by creating and expanding international tourism in the place and generate approaches to promote ecotourism programmes, which encourage visitation and communicate the opportunities and advantages of adventure traveling in the region.

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