



# Sustainable Tourism Design through Preserving Regional Identity: A Study from Iran

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## Abstract

Recent efforts dedicated to the further development of tourism have significantly increased awareness and boasted the economic growth of Iran. Accordingly, Eslami Island project aimed at advancing the regional and national tourism. Regional identity was the key factor in the design process for Eslami island tourism developments, meeting its obligation as a sustainable system. This article explores the importance of 'regional identity', and its use to regenerate the project, thus portraying other principles of sustainable tourism.

Keywords: Identity, sustainable design, tourism development, Iran

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## 1.0 Introduction

Government institutions have made constant attempts to develop the tourism industry in Iran. They have recognized various touristic regions, paths, and poles with different magnitude and potential. One of such notable touristic development projects was for the North West of Iran, the Eslami Island. This island locates next to the Urmia Lake, which is the most visited place in the North West of Iran. This project plan covers a large area of about (1100 acres) and provides general services and activities, including restaurants, hotels, camping units, research centre for ecotourism, etc.

The project aimed to design a tourism complex for overflowing tourists from Sharafkhaneh port, the nearby touristic centre in Uremia Lake. The main aim in design of this project was to propose sustainable tourism planning with especial interest to 'regional identity'. Because, there have been few studies within this scope in the tourism industry of Iran. Identity is a decisive factor in attracting tourists to a place. If a tourism project does not have a sense of belonging, its users will abandon the place at the end. This study used two strategies to distinguish and regenerate the regional identity. Firstly, study focuses on the principal factors affecting the transformation of identity such as 'culture', 'economy', and 'natural landscape' of the region. Secondly, the research team observed various people's behaviours and reflected them in the design project.

The main objective of this project is to cover the needs of four different types of tourists: medical tourism, recreation tourism, sports tourism, and ecotourism. The other objectives focused on finding relationship between tourism marketing and users' behaviour. The last objective was to improve the quality of nature by increasing green area close to the Lake. The result was to have a touristic complex, which the locals accepted and used. Such recognition is crucial, and it will significantly improve the quality of lives in the North West of Iran.

## 2.0 Literature Review

The Oxford Dictionary defines identity as "who or what sb/sth is the state of being the same". Identity gives us an idea of who we are and of how we relate to others and to the world in which we live (Woodward 1997, p.1). In the words of Passi (2002), "...'Identity' is a form of categorization, where boundaries are used to distinguish one area domain or social collective from others".

Identity or sense of belonging is as one of the basic needs of a human being in Maslow (1970) hierarchy. Being as one of the primary needs for individuals indicates the importance of identity in wellbeing and quality of life. Because of its dynamic characteristics, it is not possible to define identity precisely and, therefore, it is not possible to recommend proper identity for specific built-environment. As Lin (2002) states identity has multiple levels and it is changeable depending on various circumstances. Regarding to its dynamic nature, Hall sees identity as a "'production", which is never complete, always in the process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation' (Hall 1997). Correa also in a supportive statement in reply to the question what is identity says, "It is a process, and not a "found"

object. It may be likened to the trail left by civilization as it moves through history...". (Correa 1983)

Although all built-environment should respond to the needs for all, or various types of identity, regional identity recently has been at the centre of attention for architects and urban designers. Working through regional characteristics has been the main aim of designers, in a bit to increase awareness to the numerous problems of rapid industrialization and globalization affecting develop and developing countries.

In search for regional values, many architects have tried to learn from local cultures, traditional and vernacular architectures. For example, Lin (2002) speaks about "The shift of intellectual emphasis from modernity (homogenizing processes of cultural imperialism and Westernization) to post modernity (fragmented global, cultural transformation processes with great diversity, variety, and flexibility)". In view of that, regionalism has found highly positive implications. Passi (2002) believes "Like the word 'identity' in general, this phrase also has positive connotations. The positive association is partly because of the implicit assumption that a regional identity joins people and regions together; provides people with shared 'regional values' and 'self-confidence', and ultimately makes the region into a cultural economic medium in the struggle over resources and power, in the broader socio-spatial system".

## **2.1 Identity and Quality of life**

To create an environment, which advances the quality of life, it is necessary to be a concern with the way, local people live and interact with their buildings; moreover, this environment should be different from other places (Williamson & Radford & Bennetts 2003). The respect for the quality of life and peoples' well-being would be economically and highly beneficial since healthy and happy people are more likely to live a fulfilling life, allowing them to enjoy, also contributing to their community (Sassi 2006).

Through studying on the peoples' activities in a place and responding to their needs, it is possible to give such respect. Individuals' activities and needs, however, are essentially link with their culture. Then, to provide a better environment to live, it is necessary to mind cultural sustainability genuinely. In view of that, Williamson & Radford & Bennetts (2003) distinguished three images for sustainable architecture as natural, cultural, and technical images. According to them, to maintain cultural image of sustainability, local culture and buildings are notable for studying. Local people and expertise should be involved in the design process and aesthetics of design should reflect the local vernacular forms, materials, and construction methods.

Therefore, in maintaining a sustainable environment, identity is a core issue. The identifiable communities are healthy, democratic, and self-sufficient with a clear sense of identity and belonging (Williamson & Radford & Bennetts 2003). Creating such communities would lead people to live in cooperation with each other.

## **2.2 Regional Identity and sustainable tourism design**

In a sustainable built-environment, people's needs and identity should reflect in buildings' design. Creating such built-environment could be a sign to show a society's respect to its

inhabitants. In fact, environmental psychologists propose that not only the place's physical characteristics, but also the social activities housed by it and the cultural and personal links with the place are indispensable in the interactions between people and places (Bonnes & Secchiroli 1995). Puczko & Rätz (2000) in their research about sustainable tourism management discuss how the residents' and the tourists' perceptions of the physical impacts of tourism development affect the sustainability of tourism in the region.

Generating such associations between people and place, however, is necessary, for tourism development plans too. Hardy, Beeton & Pearson (2002) in a study about development of sustainable tourism, argue that sustainable tourism has traditionally given more attention to the environmental and economic development and while community involvement is more valuable. In a similar research, Amoamo (2007) also highlights the relationship between image and identity from one side and tourism from the other side.

The general misleading image from sustainable tourism is not to think of eco-tourism as the only sustainable image. Although eco-tourism is indispensable in preserving sustainability, other features of sustainability are also extremely beneficial. Sustainable tourism is, in fact, "style of nature-based encounter, which seeks to achieve host gain, some social enrichment both ways, and conservation of the cultural and natural heritage" (Riddell 2004).

Tourism has been a hugely decisive factor in economic growth of societies. In spite of its economic advantages, and because of its effects on urban services, accommodation, and architectural heritage, it might have some negative influence on host society too. For example, Erkus-Ozturk (2010), in her study about tourism development planning, in Antalya, realized that mass tourism development strategy has created socio-spatial segregation and environmentally less-sensitized tourism growth in this region. Consequently, although local people would provide services for tourists' basic needs and entertainment, there should be a significant consideration for touristic facilities separate from local facilities. In view of that, Riddell (2004) believes that 'Tourist attendance at cultural celebrations and religious events, and their use of local recreational facilities can degrade both the local people's facilities as well as the visitor's sense of welcome'.

It is worthy, however, to mention that since there are many decision makers for each tourism plan, responding to the people's need of sense of belonging in tourism development plans would not be an easy task. National planning policy controls Tourism. At the same time, non-governmental institutes, private sectors, local authorities, local people, and even tourists themselves are effective in planning tourism projects.

### **3.0 Methodology**

In the project, environmental behaviour research techniques, such as making observations and conducting interviews with local people used to ensure and maintain a sustainable design. To understand peoples' feelings, desires, and sense of belonging, making interviews is more helpful than using questionnaires for surveying. Questionnaires sometimes pose prescribed answers, while the results of interviews could express respondent's situation, feelings and intentions more profoundly (Zeisel, 1986). In making interviews, local people were free to describe their culture, traditions, customs, their preferred types of entertainment,

and the way they would like to spend their leisure times and so on. Totally fifty interviews were done by random selecting tourists who were in the region during one month time.

In parallel to conducting interviews, research team carried out observations too. They made observation based on weekly visits from the region during two months of summer time, which is the high season. By using 'Covert observational research' approach, the research team remained unknown and mixed with local people. Through observation of peoples' behaviour in nearby touristic city of 'Sharafkhaneh', the study tried to answer these questions: how do local people entertain? How do people spend money? How much do they spend on shopping? How much privacy do they need for comfortable use of different spaces? In addition, to confirm the accuracy of these observation results, the study used regional economic statistics too.

#### 4.0 Discussions on Sustainable tourism development of Eslami Island

Eslami Island is one of the largest islands in Urmia Lake region, which is at the north west of Iran. Urmia Lake is the largest lake inside of Iran and second largest salt-water lake in the world. Although the high amount of salt in this lake does not support animal and vegetable life, people with dermal and rheumatic deceases use the mud and water of the lake for remedy. Eslami Island is, in fact, a large peninsula in the lake, which does have inhabitants, natural greenery, and wild life. All these prospective, in addition to the other visual attractions, attract large groups of local and regional tourists to the Eslami Island every year (Fig 1).

In spite of all these touristic potential, there have been almost no touristic facilities. Therefore, the ministry of housing development and urbanism in Iran defined and funded the tourism development project for the island in 2004. This project aims to cover 1100 acres of land and provides general touristic services and activities, including restaurants, hotels, camping units, and some facilities such as an ecotourism research centre.

In the preliminary process of research, by studying the type of tourists who visit the Island and considering the potentials of site, the project focused on responding to the needs of four different types of tourisms: medical tourism, recreation tourism, sports tourism, and ecotourism (Fig 2).



Figure 1: Urmia Lake and location of Eslami Island in the lake  
Source: (Author, 2004)

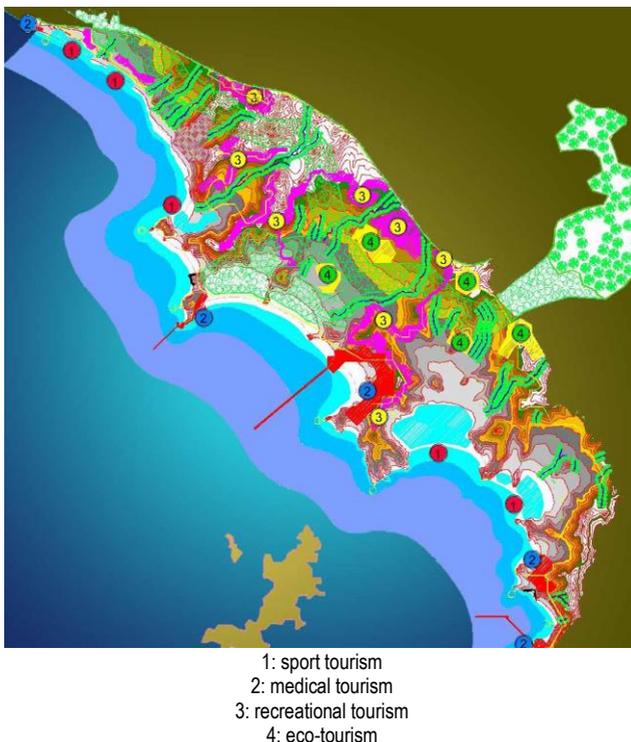


Figure 2: Location of four different types of tourism facilities

Most touristic development projects in Iran mainly contained villas, apartments, and temporary residents with the slightest attention to the other needs of tourists, local people, or even the site to fulfil economic needs. The design for Eslami Island, however, has addressed all these issues: respect for people, their needs, regional identity, and local culture. For example, local culture would not allow the women and men to use a common space for mud therapy. By the use of natural topography and existing watercourses, project provided two separate areas for medical tourism and mud therapy, which allows full privacy despite being close to each other (Fig3).

The research team by studying local people's behaviour during their entertaining trips understood that people get used to sitting on the ground instead of using tables and chairs. In addition, they would like to sit next to their cars to have a look over it. Moreover, people in this region used to do weekly or monthly shopping and they would carry all the things they might need during the trip. Therefore, it is necessary for them to be close to their cars.

Although People would like to sit nearer to each other, each family would like to have privacy. In this light, the project offered sitting-units consist of flat concrete slabs, which allow people to sit on the ground. The sitting area are placed next to each other and are

separated by short green walls, which will give enough privacy and at the same time allow a view of the car parking area. Because other parts of the site are lower than this area, people can enjoy the marvellous view not only of the parking but the greenery, watercourses, and the Lake (Fig 4).

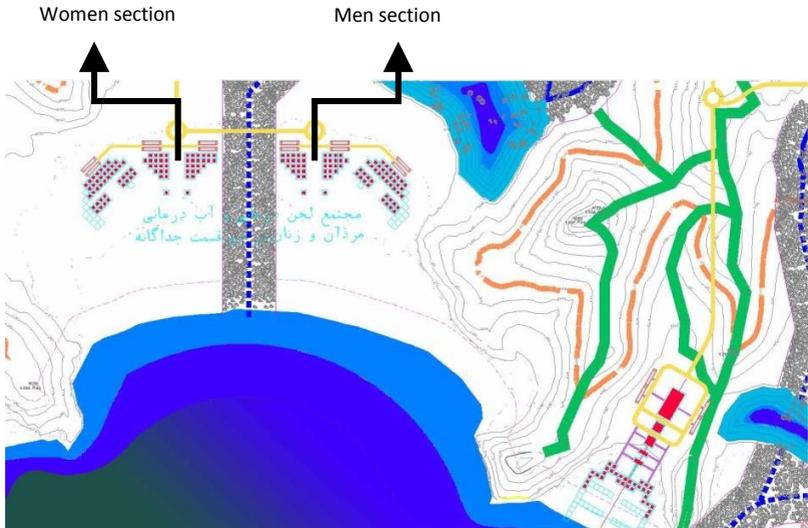


Figure 3: Separation of women and men parts by use of natural limitations for mud therapy  
Source: (Author, 2004)



Figure 4: Sitting areas provided by considering local culture  
Source: (Author, 2004)

The project, apart from respecting the regional identity and local culture, observed other features of sustainability, such as ecology, greenery, health, energy, and economic issues. For example to create a natural pond which attracted wild birds and gave beautiful scenery, all existing watercourses were collected at the centre of the site using natural slopping.(Fig 5).

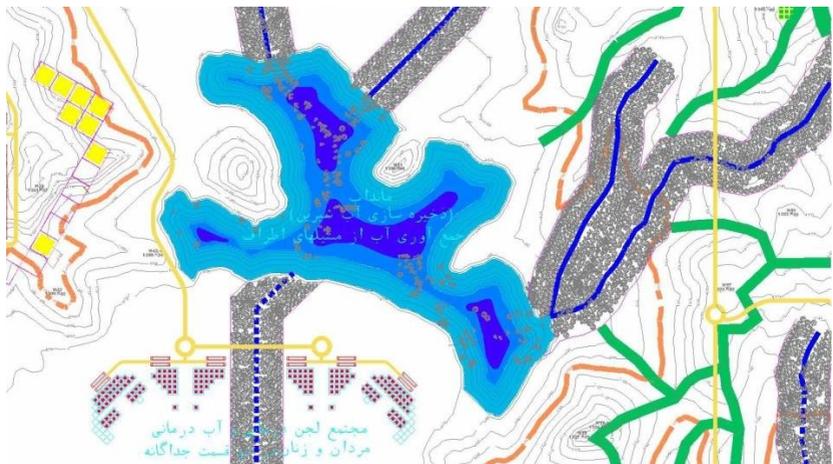


Figure 5: Using the natural watercourses to create natural pond  
Source: (Author, 2004)



Figure 6: Legibility of paths and ways inside the site  
Source: (Author, 2004)

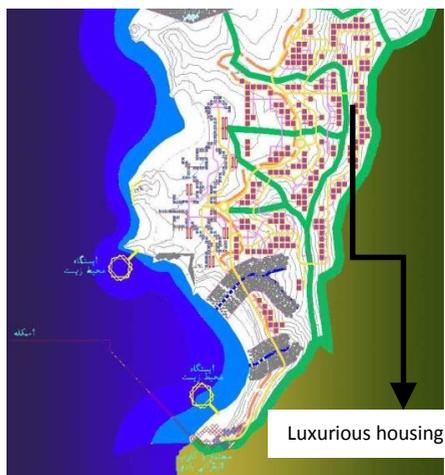


Figure 7: Luxurious housing units  
Source: (Author, 2004)

Legibility was a significant factor of the design, to enable tourists locate their position in the site. Security was another aspect that the project portrayed. Most of the routes and paths are visible from sitting units; therefore, people although having their privacy, had control over the general movement. Users of this touristic project have a variety of options once they enter the site, because they have the chance to explore, discover, and experiment (Fig 6).

One of the most effective factors of a tourism project is economic issues i.e. how this tourism development project is economically beneficial. Since the focus of design in this project was on sustainability issues, it was necessary to keep the land as much as possible untouched by manufactured constructions. At the same time, since residential units are increasing in Iran, it was necessary to do that too. The solution, which this project offered was that having many residential units spread all over the site, rather than offering few luxurious housing units. The study estimates these housing units will cover the expense of the project. A study on the culture of the region and people's behaviour has proven that these unique, luxurious housing units have high customer demand (Fig 7).

## 5.0 Conclusion

Very few practical works on tourism planning have focused on retaining regional identity and cultural sustainability in developing countries. Theoretical studies related to this issue have concluded that they are not practical enough. The design of the Eslami tourism development project has tried to respond to these theoretical, practical, and economic aspects.

Project has focused on both eco-tourist requirements and identity issues to offer a sustainable tourism design. During the design process by observing people and tourist's behaviour, it became clear that if a tourism design reflects local culture and identity, the number of users and visitors would increase intensely. Furthermore, the design has proven that a sustainable project can also be economically beneficial and profitable. Through such integration of theory and practice, it would be possible to develop the future of tourism industries in developing countries.

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