

# Harnessing ecotourism for sustainable development in Semnan Province



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## Iranica Desk

Cultural promotion among local communities and tourists is essential for the advancement of ecotourism, a cornerstone of contemporary tourism development. Mohammad Jahanshahi, Secretary of the National Ecotourism Working Group of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts, emphasized this viewpoint during a recent meeting in Semnan Province. He pointed out that Semnan is endowed with diverse resources that position it as a potential model for the effective and responsible application of ecotourism throughout the country, as reported by IRNA.

Jahanshahi drew attention to the availability of skilled professionals in the ecotourism sector, both from the public and private spheres, alongside Semnan's rich environmental diversity and its protected areas that harbor endangered species such as the Asiatic cheetah and the Iranian wild ass. This unique combination could position Semnan as a national exemplar in the sustainable development of green tourism. He further noted that Semnan's proximity to Tehran, the capital and largest urban center in Iran, presents a unique opportunity to attract tourists, particularly in the ecotourism sector. However, he stressed the importance

of involving local communities in fostering sustainable tourism development. Collaboration between public entities and local residents is crucial to ensure the safeguarding of natural attractions while also leveraging the economic benefits and employment opportunities that tourism can facilitate.

Jahanshahi remarked that despite the successful initiatives implemented since the rise of modern ecotourism, there remains a critical need to bolster cultural awareness among local communities and nature tourists alike. He cautioned that poor management of nature tourism could lead to detrimental outcomes, asserting that while the promotion of ecotourism is a collective responsibility, certain activities — such as the use of off-road vehicles, livestock grazing, crop cultivation, and plowing — can hinder this progress and require direct policy intervention. Additionally, he noted that public sensitivity and advocacy are pivotal factors capable of advancing goals within ecotourism development. He highlighted Qaleh Bala village as a standout example of successful ecotourism in Semnan Province, advocating that the lessons learned from this success should be shared and communicated effectively throughout other regions in the country.

Bahman Akhlaqi, the head of



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the Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Organization of Semnan Province, participated in the discussion, highlighting that the sustainability of ecotourism hinges on achieving a balance between the utilization of attractions and their preservation. He pointed out that modern tourists are increasingly gravitating toward ecotourism, which, while beneficial, presents certain threats to the local environment. It is essential to mitigate these threats through a careful equilibrium between allowing tourists to enjoy natural sites while also ensuring their protection. Akhlaqi emphasized the need for the establishment of the ecotour-

ism working group, an initiative that has emerged after many years of efforts on both national and provincial scales. This group is designed to foster cooperation among various executive agencies to ensure that green tourism development goes hand-in-hand with the preservation and protection of natural resources. Given Semnan Province's diverse climatic and environmental characteristics — ranging from forests and mineral springs to deserts, plains, and mountains — the region has become a notable destination for ecotourism, attracting both domestic and international visitors. Consequently, establishing regulations

governing the managed presence of tourists is paramount.

To foster a sense of responsibility among tourists, it is crucial to enhance their awareness regarding their roles and responsibilities towards nature and the preservation of natural attractions. Effective educational methods should be employed to inform ecotourists of their obligations with respect to natural sites.

Moreover, local communities and non-governmental organizations can play a pivotal role in environmental protection and the preservation of natural attractions, underscoring the importance of grassroots participation in sustainable tourism efforts.

The selection of Semnan as Iran's sole representative in the "Union of Cities along the Silk Road" presents a significant opportunity for economic transformation and the enhancement of global trade relations, positively impacting the city, province, and nation. To realize this vision and capitalize on this invaluable opportunity, it is crucial to allocate appropriate national and provincial funding, implement coordinated planning, and foster a strong commitment and collaboration among various stakeholders.

Semnan Province boasts an impressive array of 983 nationally registered historical, natural, and cultural sites, presenting a diverse landscape that encom-

passes lush forests, vast deserts, and towering mountains—all of which offer a stunning array of natural attractions for visitors. An ongoing challenge is facilitating easy access for tourists to these sites with minimal travel distance, thereby positioning Semnan as an appealing destination for nature enthusiasts.

Geographically, Semnan Province is strategically situated, bordered by North Khorasan, Golestan, and Mazandaran provinces to the north; South Khorasan and Isfahan provinces to the south; Razavi Khorasan Province to the east; and Tehran and Qom provinces to the west. This advantageous location makes Semnan a viable stop on travel itineraries for those seeking to explore Iran's rich cultural and natural heritage.

With over 1,833 identified historical, cultural, natural, and spiritual sites — of which 983 are registered as national heritage sites — Semnan Province also features 69 tourism villages, complemented by one designated tourism area. The diversity of these attractions positions Semnan as a burgeoning leader in Iran's ecotourism landscape, where a concerted commitment to sustainable practices can enrich both the local economy and the preservation of its extraordinary natural and cultural heritage.

## Vibrant Fuman Bazaar, a tapestry of culture and business

The local markets of Gilan Province beautifully reflect the lifestyle and customs of the region's people. Within these bustling bazaars, visitors are greeted by colorful displays and a variety of souvenirs, including fresh vegetables and fruits. These markets, which have stood the test of time without major changes, immerse you in the lively world of sellers of all ages, each striving to showcase their goods.

The local bazaar is intricately tied to the lives of many residents. Here, some vendors provide local agricultural products to their fellow community members, while others fulfill their shopping needs. Women are often seen selling their husbands' products, donning worn yet vibrant clothing and speaking with warm accents, enticing customers to consider their items.

Fuman Bazaar, in particular, stands out as one of the most diverse and colorful markets in the country, drawing both tourists and locals alike.



As dawn breaks, sellers arrive at the marketplace to lay out their mats. The early birds secure the best spots, but most vendors maintain a belief that their daily bread is provided by a higher power. Weekly markets are an

ideal setting for stocking up on necessities; here, the prices are generally lower, and the quality of goods tends to be superior to other sales venues. These markets also play a vital role in stabilizing prices and pre-

venting disproportionate price increases, though this benefit may not apply to every market. Additionally, they serve as social hubs where friends and acquaintances gather, as shopping at weekly markets is a common practice.

In Fuman's Tuesday market, beyond rice and tea, one can find unique offerings such as mat-weaving and pottery products. Notably, Fuman cookies have gained popularity, making them standout items in the

market. Harvesting tools, hand-made knives from Masouleh, rugs, felt, and livestock products from Shulam and Gesht-e Rudkhan village also contribute to the rich tapestry of goods available at this vibrant marketplace.