

Ecotourism; a catalyst for rural development in East Azarbaijan Province



Maragheh
● maragheh.ac.ir

Iranica Desk

The development and expansion of ecotourism, particularly as village-based tourism, stands out as a highly effective strategy for revitalizing identity-oriented tourism in the country. This approach not only introduces local cultures from various regions but also promotes their economic growth. Ecotourism, defined as “tourism based on the traditional lifestyles of small rural areas,” embodies a deep respect for the culture and history of communities that have thrived in specific ecosystems for generations, adhering to the customs and traditions of their ancestors. Investments in this sector can significantly bolster the culture, arts, and customs of diverse ethnic groups and regions across the nation, according to IRNA.

Global context and economic impact

Globally, ecotourism is vital for attracting both domestic and international tourists, with significant investments made in countries such as Turkey, Egypt, Russia, and various European and American nations. These investments not only benefit small rural areas but also contribute substantially to the overall economy by generating valuable foreign currency revenue, according to IRNA.

A hub for ecotourism

East Azarbaijan Province, endowed with extensive ecotourism potential and over 2,700 inhabited villages, is recognized as a key area for ecotourism. By nurturing this form of tourism, the province can emerge as a central hub within the country, maximizing its benefits from this income-generating industry, IRNA wrote.

Recent developments

With its diverse climate, numerous visitor-friendly villages, rich historical sites, unique rural products, and a wide variety of agricultural offerings, East Azarbaijan Province has made significant, albeit modest, strides in ecotourism in recent years. If cultural initiatives and investments persist, the province holds the potential to become a veritable paradise for ecotourism in Iran.

The East Azarbaijan Province's Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts, and Tourism Organization — the main authority responsible for the promotion of ecotourism — has implemented extensive and varied programs aimed at this sector. Despite being in its infancy, the industry continues to grow, buoyed by a warm reception from both domestic and foreign tourists, indicating a bright future ahead.

Focus on investment in rural areas

Alireza Bayramzadeh, deputy head of the East Azarbaijan Province's Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicraft Organization for tourism affairs, emphasized that ecotourism is a central focus of the province's tourism development strategy. He noted that, given the region's geo-

graphical and climatic advantages, prioritizing investments in rural areas could transform ecotourism into a primary driver of economic growth for the region and potentially at the national level.

Standardization and training initiatives

Bayramzadeh highlighted that with over 2,700 habitable villages spread across 21 cities, a favorable four-season climate, an abundance of historical sites, and breathtaking natural landscapes, East Azarbaijan is poised as one of the most promising provinces for the development of ecotourism. He announced plans for a new program aimed at enhancing the image of ecotourism units in East Azarbaijan compared to previous years. This initiative will entail a more focused and meticulous approach towards standardizing these units over the coming years.

Challenges and opportunities

Rahim Hosseini, the head of East Azarbaijan Province's Ecotourism Association, emphasized that this province, with its scenic villages and unique historical landmarks, stands out as a premier destination in the field of ecotourism. He emphasized that prioritizing this emerging industry should be a key focus for relevant support organizations, as modern tourists increasingly prefer ecotourism. Hosseini noted that East Azarbaijan Province has been a pioneer in the country's ecotourism sector, which has experienced significant growth in recent years. Despite facing some challenges, ecotourism is gradually becoming a central focus of the province's tourism strategy.

Regional comparisons

One of the main challenges, he mentioned, is that stakeholders in this field are highly motivated and eager to improve ecotourism indicators. Hosseini pointed out that cities like Kerman, Shiraz, and Yazd have successfully leveraged local culture, customs, and traditions as valuable resources and attractions. He expressed hope that this important focus would be prioritized in the agendas of his colleagues and the province's Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Organization.

Unique appeal of ecotourism

Hosseini described ecotourism as one of the most important branches of the tourism industry, often regarded as the cleanest industry in the world. He acknowledged that inter-departmental inconsistencies and the nascent nature of this industry present challenges that must be addressed through collective effort and cooperation among executive and service organizations. He defined ecotourism as an experience that engages visitors with traditional and untouched rural and nomadic environments. As a result, ecotourism accommodations offer a unique setting that differs from other tourism experiences, leaving a lasting impression on visitors for years to come.

Current status of ecotourism accommodations

Hosseini noted that approximately 10% of the ecotourism accommodations in East Azarbaijan Province are currently inactive for various reasons. He stated that about 60% of these units are located in Kaleybar, while the remainder are active in Osku, Varzaqan, Maragheh, Khoda Afarin, and other counties.

Growth in ecotourism units

Ahmad Hamzehzadeh, the director general of East Azarbaijan Province's Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts, and Tourism Organization, announced that there are currently 240 ecotourism units in the province. He highlighted that this sector has seen significant growth due to the area's unique natural beauty and architecture, as well as its attractive villages. He noted that the number of ecotourism accommodations has surged from just three units four years ago to 240 today.

He pointed out that these statistics reflect a rising interest in the ecotourism potential of East Azarbaijan Province, driven by its favorable climatic conditions, the presence of all four seasons, and unique cultural and social characteristics. He emphasized the importance of reviving rural culture and traditions through the growth of ecotourism, viewing “identity creation” as a vital benefit with extensive social, cultural, and historical implications for various regions of the country.

Strategic focus on rural ecotourism

He asserted that the future of the tourism industry in Iran and East Azarbaijan Province should focus on rural ecotourism. To this end, cultural heritage authorities must seriously consider how to utilize rural capacities to develop nature-based and ecotourism accommodations to promote tourism across the counties.

According to Hamzehzadeh, Kaleybar, Maragheh, Varzaqan, Ahar, and Osku counties have the highest number of ecotourism units, which will contribute to the overall development of the tourism industry throughout the region. He stated that for foreign tourists, the key motivation for visiting Iran lies not in modern entertainment and shopping but in experiencing the authentic lives of the local people and staying in rural areas with pristine nature. To meet the needs of tourists, provincial executive agencies must prioritize infrastructure development, particularly in information technology, road construction, and urban development, focusing on villages with ecotourism accommodations. Additionally, there should be a structured program in place to preserve the natural beauty of these areas and the local rural architecture. Hamzehzadeh reaffirmed the commitment of the provincial cultural heritage organization to promote rural tourism and ecotourism, adding that the number of ecotourism accommodations is expected to increase significantly in the near future. He also pointed out that this type of tourism is economically viable for travel agencies due to its low accommodation costs.



Kaleybar
● otaghak.com



Varzaqan
● tripman.ir



Osku
● daghchilar.com