

Economic, environmental impacts of wetland tourism



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Wetland tourism is a form of ecotourism focused on visiting wetland areas with an emphasis on environmental conservation, education, and sustainable development. Wetlands, as ecosystems rich in biodiversity, are not only habitats for migratory birds and aquatic life but also have high potential for attracting nature-loving tourists due to their unique landscapes. Azadeh Abedinzadeh, involved in tourism affairs, wrote in a note: Wetland tourism, unlike mass tourism, is conducted with small, planned groups to minimize harm to the environment and maximize benefits for local communities. The Hara forest in Sohili village is part of the Khor Khoran Wetland of Qeshm, one of the most beautiful and valuable wetlands in Iran, which is protected as a biosphere reserve by UNESCO, chtn.ir wrote.

This forest, with its unique mangrove ecosystem, is home to dozens of species of migratory and indigenous birds, aquatic life, and marine creatures. A distinctive feature of this area is its saline water and continuous tidal movements, which make it possible to navigate among the intricate roots of the mangrove trees. Animal species in the Hara forest include birds like flamingos, herons, pelicans, egrets, spoonbills, and Siberian migratory birds. Additionally, aquatic creatures like wetland fish, palm crabs, and native shrimp live in this region. The vegetation is primarily composed of mangrove trees, which have the ability to purify seawater. The Sohili village, leveraging its unique location adjacent to the Hara forest, has the potential to become a hub for wetland tourism in southern Iran. However,

the key point is the implementation of responsible tourism at the Sohili tourism dock, where visits are conducted in groups of 6 to 10 people with local guides. This method offers multiple benefits, including reducing environmental pressure by preventing noise pollution and habitat destruction for birds and controlling the number of visitors to maintain ecological balance.

Wetland tourism has been able to generate income for the local community through job creation, including local guides, boatmen, and handicraft vendors, as well as boosting eco-lodges and local seafood restaurants. This type of tourism also contributes to indirect education, raising awareness and sensitizing tourists by familiarizing them with the importance of mangrove forests in water purification, biodiversity conservation, and promoting a

culture of beach clean-up and waste reduction.

With proper planning, wetland tourism can bring about increasingly positive transformations in Sohili village, including the quantitative and qualitative development of tourist facilities that provide visitors with welfare and accommodation services.

The village council, in collaboration with the tourism department of the Qeshm Free Zone, has decided to attract nature-loving tourists and researchers by constructing birdwatching shelters with minimal interference in nature and establishing nature interpretation centers to familiarize visitors with the Hara ecosystem. This initiative aims to create value by organizing birdwatching and wildlife photography tours and fostering collaboration with universities for environmental research.

Cultural significance of Chaleshtar Castle

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The Chaleshtar Castle in Shahrekord symbolizes the fusion of Iranian-European architecture and stone carving art, according to the deputy head of the provincial Cultural Heritage, Handicraft, and Tourism Organization. Qodratollah Valizadeh-Kaji noted that the castle comprises two separate buildings from the Qajar era, constructed in 1905 on an 8,000-square-meter plot, with a built area of 3,000 square meters, chtn.ir wrote. He elaborated, "The architecture of Chaleshtar Castle represents a blend of styles from the Qajar period, combined with European architectural influences, featuring 40 standing stone columns and bas-reliefs crafted through

intricate stone carving." He mentioned that, according to the elder residents of Chaleshtar, there were once 22 circular towers with four gates facing each direction, as evidenced by existing documentation and aerial photographs. He reminded that the castle originally boasted a grand entrance and gates, many of which have since been lost. Currently, the surviving remnants are at risk due to ongoing urban development. The official described the castle's tower and walls as constructed from brick and adobe, standing six meters tall and three meters wide, with origins that may trace back to the Safavid period. Valizadeh-Kaji noted, "The rooms of Chaleshtar Castle are adorned

with designs in the London painting style, which blends Iranian and European artistic traditions. This style peaked during the Qajar period and features motifs of flowers and vases, as well as narratives such as the legend of Layla and Majnun, the tale of Bahram Gur, and Islamic motifs like the story of Joseph and Zuleikha, often accompanied by inscriptions of Quranic verses." He highlighted that the stone bases within the castle underground display designs of plants, grape clusters, abstract trees, winged angels, and intricate vases. He added, "Chaleshtar Castle is embellished with turquoise blue and white tiles, while the inner ceilings exhibit frames and windows for the various rooms and doors, all crafted and deco-

rated with geometric woodwork sourced from walnut trees." Valizadeh-Kaji pointed out that six museums currently operate within the historical and cultural complex of Chaleshtar Castle. He further mentioned that numerous valuable cultural and historical works, including the Grand Mosque, Sotoudeh House, Azadeh House, the castle's grand entrance, the Painting Room, the Anthropology Museum, the Stone Museum, and the Bathhouse Museum of Chaleshtar, have been officially registered as national heritage sites in Iran. Lastly, the official emphasized that the historical and cultural complex of Chaleshtar Castle is recognized as a national heritage site, dating back to the Qajar era.

