

# Communities struggle as wetlands dry in Iran

Iranica Desk

Wetlands — the lungs of the Earth and the backbone of the country’s nature-based tourism — are disappearing one by one under the shadow of neglect and mismanagement. From Sarab Niloufar (Niloufar Wetland) in Kermanshah to Gavkhouni Wetland in Isfahan Province, from Hamun Lake to Bakhtegan Lake, the scars of drought and poor planning are evident everywhere. With each wetland that vanishes, a piece of tourism, local livelihood, and people’s hope is lost. Journalist Hamid Almasinia wrote, “Not so long ago, Iran’s wetlands and springs were popular destinations for both domestic and foreign tourists — places for boating, birdwatching, photography, and experiencing the serenity of nature,” as cited by chtn.ir. Niloufar Wetland in Kermanshah, once celebrated for its blue water lilies, symbolized beauty and life. Today, however, it serves as a stark reminder of dryness and neglect — the same fate that befell Gavkhouni, Lake Urmia, Bakhtegan Lake, and Hur al-Azim Wetland, and now looms over other wetlands across the country. Iran — a land whose wetlands once shimmered like mirrors reflecting the sky — now faces a severe desiccation crisis. Wetland tourism has yet to secure its rightful place within the country’s major tourism policies. This oversight has not only resulted in the loss of natural attractions but also left Iran trailing behind regional competitors in nature-based tourism. Community-based and cultural tourism once flourished alongside nature, providing employment opportunities for local residents. Today, many of these



Niloufar Wetland  
● pinorest.com



Gavkhouni Wetland  
● IRNA



Hamun Lake  
● kojara.com



Bakhtegan Lake  
● IRNA

wetlands exist only as names on a map, their once-blue waters replaced by cracks in the parched earth. The drying of wetlands is not merely an environmental catastrophe; it is also a devastating blow to Iran’s nature-driven tourism sector. Wetland tourism, a vital branch of ecotourism, nurtures a direct balance between humans and their environment. With the loss of wetlands, this bal-

ance collapses: eco-lodges close, tourists stop visiting rural areas, and local communities that once thrived on tourism now face stagnation and despair. Environmental experts warn that the primary cause of this crisis is not climate change alone, but misguided water management policies — excessive dam construction, unsustainable groundwater extraction, and the neglect of wetlands’ water rights.

The result has been the gradual destruction of aquatic ecosystems, the loss of habitats for migratory birds, and the collapse of livelihood chains for local communities. In many regions, indigenous communities that once depended on water-based tourism, boating, fishing, and handicrafts now struggle with unemployment, migration, and poverty. The drying of a wetland is, in es-

sence, the drying of life itself — a bitter reality that now threatens the very face of Iran’s natural tourism. For example, countries such as the Netherlands, Japan, and India have successfully implemented wetland-based tourism projects that generate significant income through educational tours, recreational visits, and eco-friendly accommodations. In these nations, wetlands are val-

ued as opportunities rather than threats. Yet in Iran, this potential remains overlooked, and each year, a portion of the nation’s natural heritage disappears under the shadow of neglect. Beyond economic consequences, the loss of wetlands carries profound social impacts. Villages that once thrived near wetlands are now facing waves of migration due to declining tourism. Local handicrafts, previously sold to visitors, no longer have buyers, and traditional festivals and water-related rituals — once integral to community identity — are gradually fading into oblivion. While other countries reap billions of dollars from wetland restoration and sustainable tourism, Iran still lacks a coherent and serious plan to protect its water-based resources. Experts warn that unless there is a national commitment to wetland restoration, the country may soon witness the total collapse of aquatic tourism — and by then, a return to the past will no longer be possible. “If we fail to act today, in the near future not only will nature tourism but even the very concept of ‘eco-based tourism’ in Iran lose its meaning. The drying of wetlands is not just the death of ecosystems — it marks the end of a way of life, the end of community-driven tourism, and the severing of the Iranian people’s bond with water.” Now is the moment for decisive action. Wetlands must be recognized not merely as sources of water, but as living cultural, touristic, and environmental heritage. Protecting them means safeguarding tourism, sustaining local livelihoods, and preserving a vital part of Iran’s natural identity — an identity that, once lost, no rainfall will ever restore.

## Shiraz’s Haft Tanan Garden blends architecture, art, legend

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Haft Tanan Garden (Bagh-e Haft Tanan) is one of the oldest and most significant historical sites in Shiraz, Fars Province, located at the foothills of Chehel Maqam Mountain, just north of the Hafez Mausoleum. This serene and ancient garden, whose origins trace back to centuries before the Zand era, gained much of its current structure and charm during the reign of Karim Khan Zand, the founder of the Zand dynasty in the 18th century. In ancient times, the people of Shiraz would visit this sacred site to pray for rain, offer worship, and seek blessings. The name

“Haft Tanan” literally means seven bodies or seven persons, referring to the seven wise and pious men whose graves rest within the garden. Out of respect for their spiritual status, Karim Khan Zand placed large, uninscribed stone slabs over their tombs, signifying reverence without revealing their identities. The architectural design of the main building in Haft Tanan Garden is both simple and elegant. The roof is supported by two massive monolithic stone pillars, giving the structure a sense of grandeur and strength. Inside, the stucco-decorated walls are adorned with five vivid paintings depicting various ceremonial and spiritual scenes, each rep-

resenting a different aspect of life, faith, and mysticism during the Zand period. These paintings are considered masterpieces

of 18th-century Persian art, reflecting the aesthetic values and cultural depth of that era. During the mid-20th century,

specifically in 1957–1958 CE, the complex underwent extensive restoration under the supervision of Mohammad Baqer Jahan Miri, a distinguished artist and painter from Shiraz. Thanks to his efforts, many of the original artistic and architectural features were preserved and revived. Today, the site functions not only as a historical monument but also as a museum of ancient stonework. The stones displayed here, dating from the 9th to the 17th centuries CE, are beautifully engraved with various scripts and calligraphic styles, offering valuable insight into the evolution of Persian art and epigraphy. At the heart of the garden lies

a large rectangular pool, which was once filled with the pure waters of Roknabad Stream — a source long celebrated in Persian poetry and known for its clarity and coolness. The reflection of the surrounding cypress trees and the historical mansion in the still water adds to the mystical ambiance of the garden. Today, Haft Tanan Garden stands as a tranquil and spiritually charged destination, drawing both history enthusiasts and art lovers alike. It beautifully encapsulates the harmony of nature, spirituality, and Persian architectural artistry, serving as a timeless reminder of Shiraz’s rich cultural heritage.



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