

Geographical Research in Bozdağlar (Izmir): Geographical Determinations about What Needs to be Done at the Point of Development of Special Interest Tourism¹

Bozdağlar'da (İzmir) Coğrafi Araştırmalar: Özel İlgi Turizminin Geliştirilmesi Noktasında Yapılması Gerekenlere Dair Coğrafi Tespitler

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Highlights:

- The study deals with the Bozdağ Mountains, located within the geographical borders of the Aegean Region, which hold a significant potential, especially in terms of tourism geography.
- It examines special interest tourism within the context of geographical studies, specifically in Bozdağlar.
- The study identifies the shortcomings and necessary actions to initiate special interest tourism in Bozdağlar, situated between İzmir and Manisa provinces.
- This study aims to fill an important gap for local and regional tourism geography.

Abstract: Representing one of the important tourism and recreation centers of the Aegean Region, Bozdağlar is notable for its relevance to tourism geography and constitutes one of the important research topics due to its natural and human geography features. This study was designed to conduct preliminary research on Special Interest Tourism (SIT) in Bozdağlar, in the hinterland of İzmir. The aim is to reveal the importance of sustainable tourism criteria and propose a road map for the initiation and future of Special Interest Tourism. The primary data for the research were obtained from a field study conducted in Bozdağlar, and the secondary data were gathered from scientific sources and İzmir province tourism plans. The methodology of the study is "mixed method" based on geographical area examination, SWOT analysis, and comparison. Findings indicate that although Bozdağlar has rich natural and cultural attractions and opportunities, the tourism services are quite lacking and face significant threats. In this context, current tourism in the region cannot meet most of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council's Destination Criteria (GSTC-D). As a result, activating the development potential for Special Interest Tourism in Bozdağlar will only be possible by creating a regional tourism plan and applying the GSTC-D Criteria.

Keywords: Tourism Potential, Sustainability, Criteria, Plannig, Bozdağlar.

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Öne Çıkanlar:

- Çalışma Ege Bölgesi'nin coğrafi sınırları içerisinde yer alan ve özellikle turizm coğrafyası bakımından önemli bir potansiyeli bünyesinde barındıran Bozdağları konu edinmektedir.
- Makale Coğrafya bilim alanının sınırları içerisinde yer alan özel ilgi turizmini Bozdağlar özelinde ele almaktadır.
- İzmir ve Manisa illeri arasında yer alan Bozdağlar'da özel ilgi turizminin başlatılması noktasında tespit edilen eksiklikleri ve yapılması gerekenler üzerinde durulmaktadır.
- Çalışma, yerel ve bölgesel turizm coğrafyası için önemli bir boşluğu doldurmaktadır.

Öz: Ege Bölgesi'nin önemli turizm ve rekreasyon merkezlerinden birini temsil eden Bozdağlar, sahip olduğu doğal ve beşeri coğrafya özellikleri neticesinde turizm coğrafyasının ilgi alanına girmekte ve önemli araştırma konularından birini teşkil etmektedir. Bu çalışma, İzmir hinterlandındaki Bozdağlar'da Özel İlgi Turizmi (ÖİT) hakkında bir ön araştırma yapmak üzere tasarlanmıştır. Amaç, Özel İlgi Turizmi'nin başlaması ve geleceği için sürdürülebilir turizm kriterlerinin önemini ortaya koymak ve bir yol haritası önermektir. Araştırmanın birincil verileri Bozdağlar'da yapılan alan çalışmasından, ikincil verileri ise bilimsel kaynaklar ile İzmir ili turizm planlarından elde edilmiştir. Çalışmanın yöntemi coğrafi alan incelemesi, SWOT analizi ve karşılaştırmaya dayanan "karma yöntem"dir. Bulgulara göre Bozdağlar, zengin doğal ve kültürel çekiciliklere ve fırsatlara sahip olmasına rağmen turizm hizmetleri oldukça eksik ve tehditler oldukça yoğundur. Bu bağlamda bölgede mevcut turizm Küresel Sürdürülebilir Turizm Konseyi'nin Destinasyon Kriterlerinin (GSTC-D) çoğunu karşılayamamaktadır. Sonuç olarak Bozdağlar'daki Özel İlgi Turizminin gelişme potansiyelini harekete geçirmek ancak bölgesel turizm planının yapılması ve GSTC-D Kriterlerinin uygulanmasıyla mümkün olabilecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Turizm potansiyeli, Sürdürülebilirlik, Kriterler, Planlama, Bozdağlar.

Genişletilmiş Özet: Ege Bölgesi'nin idari sınırları içerisinde yer alan İzmir ve Manisa illerinin arasında yer alan ve turizm coğrafyası için önemli bir destinasyon merkezi olan Bozdağlar, bugüne kadar birçok bilimsel disiplin tarafından araştırılmıştır. Bu çalışma özelinde Bozdağlar turizm coğrafyası perspektifiyle ele alınmış ve yine turizm coğrafyasının alt başlıklarından ve araştırma konularından birini teşkil eden özel ilgi turizminin, Bozdağlar lokasyona uygunluğu tespit edilmeye çalışılmıştır. Günümüz turizm coğrafyası alt başlıklarının önemli bir dalını oluşturan özel ilgi turizminin Bozdağlar'da başlatılabilmesi için yapılması gerekenlerin belirlenmesi ve sürdürülebilir ilkelerin önemini altının çizildiği çalışma, coğrafyanın önemli araştırma süreçlerinden arazi çalışmaları (alan / saha araştırmaları)'nın kullanılmasıyla ana şeklini almıştır. Bu yöntemin yanında literatür taraması, içerik ve doküman analizi ile Swot analizinden de faydalanılmıştır. Özetle araştırma karşılaştırmaya dayalı karma yöntemle tamamlanmıştır. Araştırma sonucunda Bozdağların kalıcı turizm coğrafyası için önemli bir potansiyele sahip kırsal bir alan olduğu, doğal ve kültürel çekim noktasında turizm faaliyetleri için birtakım avantajlara sahip olmasına rağmen söz konusu durumlardan istenilen düzeyde faydalanılmadığı tespit edilmiştir. Bozdağlar'da turizm faaliyetlerinin bugüne kadar gelişmemesi, Bozdağlar'ın turizme kazandırılması noktasında ne yerel ne de bölgesel düzeyde hazırlanmış politika ve/veya stratejilerin olmaması yörenin Bozdağlar'ın turizm faaliyetlerine yeterince dahil olamamasını net bir şekilde açıklamaktadır. Araştırma konusunu teşkil eden özel ilgi turizminin, iklim ve coğrafi konum olarak elverişli bir bölgede bulunan Bozdağlar'da gelişmemesi, Bozdağlar'a söz konusu alanda önem ve değer verilmediğini gün gibi ortaya çıkarmaktadır. Araştırma sahasında özel ilgi turizminin gelişebilmesi ve sürdürülebilir ilkeler çerçevesinde varlığını devam ettirebilmesi için kamu kurum ve kuruluşları, sivil toplum örgütleri ile yerel halkın ilgili konuda ve bölgeye özgü hazırlanacak olan plan ve projelere etkin bir şekilde katılımı sayesinde gerçekleşme imkânı bulacaktır. Tüm bunlar neticesinde Bozdağlar'ın hem ülkemizin hem Ege Bölgesi'nin önemli ve sosyo-ekonomik-sosyo-kültürel gelişim ve değişim değeri yüksek illerinin arasında yer alması, uygun coğrafi şartlara sahip olması, önemli ulaşım güzergahlarına yakın konumda yer alması, misafirperver bir yerel halka ev sahipliği yapması gibi etkenler Bozdağlar'ın özel ilgi turizmi konusunda büyük bir potansiyele sahip olduğunu ve eğer ilgili mercilerin doğru ve etkin bir karar, gelişim ve yönetim fonksiyonlarını devreye almaları neticesinde de söz konusu pozitif süreçlerin yaşanacağını göstermektedir. Tüm süreçlerin / yeniliklerin vuku bulabilmesi için Bozdağlar'a ait bütüncül ve sürdürülebilir bir yaklaşım ve entegre turizm planının tesis edilmesine ihtiyaç vardır. Bu plan Bozdağlar'a yapılacak olan turizm konulu yatırımların rasyonel ilkeler çerçevesinde toplanmasına, yörede turizmin on iki aya yayılmasına, turizmin mekânsal dağılımının

genişlemesine ve çeşitlenmesine imkân verecektir. Tüm bu pozitif ve egemen süreçlerin yanında farkındalık durumunun da gelişmesi gerekmektedir. Yörenin sahip olduğu değerlerin farkında varılması, hazırlanacak olan planlarda farklı bilimsel disiplinlerin görüş, öneri, düşünce ve isteklerine yer verilmesi, yerel halkın düşünce ve görüşlerinin göz ardı edilmemesi, uluslararası alanda ilgili konuda gerçekleştirilmiş olan gelişim süreçlerinin/planlarının tüm detayları ile irdelenmesi, uygun olanların karşılaştırma yöntemiyle coğrafi uygunluk analizlerinin yapılması, yörede hızlı bir değişim ve gelişim periyodunun başlamasını ve tüm sürecin rasyonel, katılımcı ve çevreye duyarlı bir şekilde ilerlemesini sağlayacaktır. Herşeye rağmen ortaya çıkacak olan sorunların çözüme kısa sürede kavuşturulması veya sorunların minimize edilerek optimum düzeyde anlayış / kabul geliştirilmesi, sürecin tüm paydaşlarla bütün detayları ile paylaşılması neticesinde olacağının altını çizmekte büyük fayda olduğu aşikardır.

1. Introduction

Sustainable tourism is a positive approach and branch of tourism that aims to reduce or optimize the tension and friction caused by complex interactions between the tourism sector, visitors, the environment, and the host communities. It involves ensuring that both physical and human resources can be preserved and transferred to future generations while maintaining their quality. This approach aims to make the positive and negative axis developments in the tourism phenomenon are sustainable in the long term and to help maintain the areas in which they operate wherever possible (Lane *et al.* 2022). The twelve aims for an agenda for sustainable tourism are: “economic viability, local prosperity, employment quality, social equity, visitor fulfillment, local control, community well-being, cultural richness, physical integrity, biological diversity, resource efficiency, environmental purity” (UNEP and WTO, 2005). Since the 1980s, when opinions against mass tourism began to emerge, Special Interest Tourism (SIT) has taken its place alongside alternative tourism and sustainable tourism approaches. SIT is an umbrella term, that encompasses a broad range of themes. As a niche form of tourism, it attracts specific tourists with passionate interests, as well as serendipitous tourists with minimal interest; thus, both carrying different expectations and meanings regarding their existential authenticity. Rittichainuwat has included the following types of tourism within this umbrella concept: *Film tourism, food tourism, medical tourism, shopping tourism, dark tourism and ghost tourism* (Rittichainuwat, 2018). Depending on the motivations of tourists, these types can further expand to include adventure tourism, sports tourism, experiential tourism, transformative tourism, festival tourism, and more.

The sustainable tourism destination criteria used in this study were developed by “The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC)”. The GSTC is an independent, non-profit organization legally registered in the United States, representing a diverse and global membership that includes national and state governments, leading travel companies, hotels, tour operators, NGOs, individuals, and communities. The GSTC is known for its “GSTC Criteria”, which define and manage global standards for sustainable travel and tourism to achieve best practices in sustainable tourism. There are two sets: Destination Criteria for public policy makers and destination managers (GSTC-D) and Industry Criteria for Hotels and tour operators (GSTC-I). They represent the result of a worldwide effort to develop a common language for ensuring and realizing sustainability in tourism. These criteria are organized four items/main headings: (A) Sustainable management; (B) Socio-economic impacts; (C) Cultural impacts; and (D) Environmental impacts. Although GSTC-D is related to the place and not to an institution, most of the criteria can nevertheless be taken up by and implemented through a destination management organization, which is responsible for a coordinated approach to sustainable tourism within the destination. The existence of such an organization constitutes a central requirement of the GSTC-D (URL 1; GSTC, 2019).

Bozdađlar is administratively located within the borders of two large provinces (İzmir and Manisa). The regional identity of Bozdađlar for these two provinces is limited to agriculture, rural settlements, and recreational activities. There is no vision, strategy and a plan for the development of tourism (İZKA, 2015; İzmir Vakfı, 2021; T.C. Orman ve Su İşleri Bakanlığı, 2013). The main reason for this is that coastal tourism is developed in İzmir, which has led to Bozdađlar not being considered as an alternative region for tourism. However, Bozdađlar is one of the strongest candidate regions for SIT. The purpose of this study is to draw attention to the fact that “Special Interest Tourism” should be developed in Bozdađlar according to sustainable destination criteria. To create awareness, the study involved field visits, an assessment of the regions’s potential, a SWOT analysis, and a comparison of the current situation with sustainable destination criteria.

2. Special Interest Tourism and GSTC Destination Criteria

Special interest tourism, unlike holidaymakers who are stuck in the known cycle of mass tourism and remain inactive and/or have limited mobility, is more active, more sensitive to nature, has a higher tolerance coefficient and has a structure more intertwined with society and social processes, as well as being more passive in some experiences. It can accommodate different interests that are distant from the local people and exhibit individual behavior (Tanrısevdi & Çavuş 2003). According to Uluçeçen from Kozak and Bahçe (2009), the 1990s, regarded as the post-modern era, mark the transition from alternative tourism to special interest tourism. During this period, a new tourist profile emerged, characterized by a desire to escape routine and make unique demands. Consequently, tourism demand shifted towards individual preferences rather than a mass demand (Uluçeçen 2011). Sometimes synonymous with SIT both concepts of “active tourism” and “alternative tourism” are used. Indeed, taking an active role by people in the cultural and physical environment they visit is located in the focus of SIT. When special interest tourists travel, they prioritize their personal motivations and desired activities over the appeal of the destination itself. Within the tourism interest cycle, there is a discernible shift towards a more adventurous tourist profile, coinciding with increased confidence and prosperity in tourists' travel experiences (Akıncı & Kasalak 2016). It can be argued that interest in special interest tourism will continue to grow during this process.

Individual motivation/perceptions, rather than the attraction power of the preferred destination, are effective in the special interest tourists' ability to carry out the travel activity in which they will be involved in the tourism process. In other words, tourism activities carried out in the destination are of great importance for special interest tourists. For this reason, individuals involved in special interest tourism determine the periods during which they can pursue their hobbies as holiday time. For example, those who want to ski are considering/planning to travel during the snowfall period, and those who will participate in bird watching are considering/planning to travel in the early spring and late autumn, which is the migration period of birds (Akıncı & Kasalak 2016).

SIT can prepare the ground for re-visits and thus the income from tourism in rural areas can be raised. However, SIT remains a niche market (Rittichainuwat 2018, 9). Initially, SIT organizations were thought to focus on customer groups considered to be homogeneous, such as adventure tourism, ecotourism, sports tourism and cultural tourism for tourists seeking the “difficult or specialized” end of the market and “serious leisure participants”. In addition, it is now clear that operators are diversifying their offerings to attract the broad market segment of the “soft” or “beginner” end of the spectrum and the intervening stages, either based on their own expertise in the area of special interest or their awareness of the growing latent and visible consumer demand (Trauer 2004). Among the strengths of SIT are investments in differentiated

products and services, which positively impact labor-intensive jobs and employment. Examples of weaknesses include the lack of collaboration among small businesses and the scarcity of management and marketing expertise. The distinctive hobbies and interests of tourists participating in SIT set them apart from other tourists. They typically possess moderate to high budgets, exhibit experience, demonstrate selectivity in their choice of resorts, expect personalized services, and prioritize quality and authenticity (Uluçeçen 2011). According to Sousa (2018), it is expected that future work can contribute to the development of empirical studies to test the relationships in process innovation and STI contexts. Thus, an empirical study will not only test the propositions but also bring a quantitative and qualitative perspective. Special interest tourism has not yet received sufficient attention in the Turkish tourism literature. It requires a detailed area and demand analysis. As studies and awareness regarding this subject increase in Turkey, tourism will become more prominent on the agenda.

Sustainability should be the main objective when developing SIT in any geographical location. Seen as a means of sustainable development, sustainable tourism should respect and protect the development of future opportunities, meet the needs of hosts, ensure the sustainability of biodiversity and life support systems and cultural integrity, and generate increased efforts to ensure that basic ecological processes meet economic needs for sustainable tourism products (Akıncı & Kasalak, 2016). In this context, sustainable tourism criteria present an important guide. The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) Criteria were created to provide a common understanding of sustainable tourism. GSTC-D represents the minimum level that any tourism destination should aim to achieve. The scope of GSTC-D is broad and the criteria are applicable to a wide range of destinations, whether urban, rural, mountain, coastal, or mixed. The criteria provide guidance on what should be done, but not on how to do it or whether the goal has been achieved. This qualification is implemented through access to performance indicators, relevant training materials and implementation tools, all of which are an essential complement to the GSTC Criteria. Some uses of GSTC-D include the following processes (GSTC, 2019): sustainability certification, guidelines for sustainable destinations, consumer awareness, government, non-government and private sector programs, media attention, tourism schools and universities, leadership, etc. The performance indicators expressed in this section were created to provide guidance in measuring compliance with the criteria, offering a suggested list of conditions, factors, evidence and actions to be sought in assessing compliance with the criteria at a destination. Application of the criteria will support a destination in contributing to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. The criteria consist of four sections, each with two or three subsections (see also 3.4, Table 2). Although it is not possible to find studies establishing relationships and making comparisons between SIT and GSTC-D using search engines like Google, there are numerous publications concerning sustainable tourism and destinations. Specifically, there is a noticeable increase in publications focusing on “sustainable destination management” (Gržinić, and Saftić, 2012; Doğan & Gümüş 2014; Erkol Bayram *et al.* 2018; İlban 2019; Dinç 2021; Akyol 2021; Erşahin & Türkmen 2023).

Turkey Tourism Promotion and Development Agency (TGA) has signed a cooperation agreement with the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC). The signing of the agreement is regarded as an exemplary step towards sustainability, as Turkey is the first government in the world to develop a mandatory national program with GSTC.

The Turkey Sustainable Tourism Industry Criteria (TR-I) were established to facilitate the sustainable development of the Turkish tourism sector and foster a shared understanding of Turkish tourism among all stakeholders. TR-I has been formulated for implementation within

accommodation facilities and tour operators. In this regard, TR-I incorporates globally recognized sustainable tourism criteria as well as criteria tailored to Turkey's social and cultural context. The first phase of the program became operational in 2023. The second phase will be carried out gradually in 2025. The program is planned to be completed by 2030, when all international standards will be met (URL 1; GSTC, 2019; TGA, 2023).

3. Findings

3.1. Description of Bozdağlar and the Current Situation of Tourism

Description of Bozdağlar: Bozdağlar and its surroundings, which form a very large geographical region, are located almost in the central part of the Aegean Region. Bozdağlar is a high plateau in western Türkiye, starting about 110 km east of the city of İzmir (Fig. 1). The area is 2361 square kilometers, the average elevation is 1000-1200 m., and the peak is 2159 meters. On the Bozdağlar massif, which looks like a high plateau with deep cuts, there are hills with elevations exceeding 2000 meters in some places. In the Bozdağlar mountains, there are hills such as Bozdağ Hill (2159 m.), Hacıalikaroglu Hill (2839 m.), Kumpınar Hill (2070 m.), Çatalsivri Hill (2133 m.) with an altitude of 2000 m. Bozdağlar is a geographical unit that is situated in the Mediterranean macroclimate area and therefore receives moderate rainfall. On the plateau, there are forests, mountain meadows, natural medicinal plants, a lake, small streams, wild animals, agricultural areas, pastures, areas with protected status and rural settlements (Koçman 1984, 105; Doğa Derneği 2018; Soykan 1994) (Fig. 1).

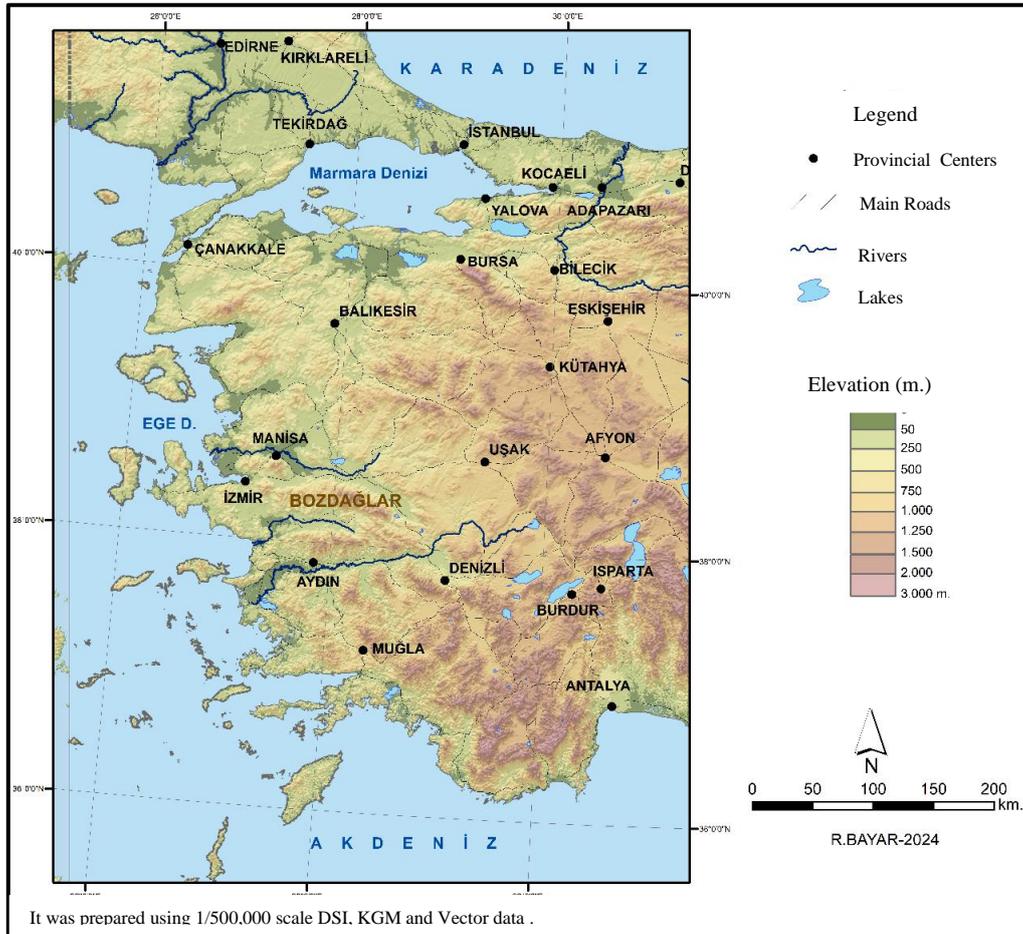


Fig. 1. Geographical Location of Bozdağlar in Western Anatolia and İzmir, (2024).

Service possibilities: Transportation from the immediate surroundings to the plateau is provided by two highway connections: Ödemiş district-Bozdağ town (28 km) from the south and Salihli district-Bozdağ town (25 km) from the north. There are also public transportation services to Bozdağ town. Rural settlements have no issues with electricity or drinking water supply. There are seasonal chalets around the Gölcük Lake and Gölcük Highland. For this reason, the summer population in the region significantly increases compared to winter. In this region, a seasonal settlement emerges between June and September, characterized by rural houses, food and beverage establishments, shopping venues, and accommodation units. Within this area, there are two small hotels and three guest houses, collectively providing approximately 170 beds for accommodation services (Ceylan 2016; Soykan 1994).

Local human potential and tourism demand: The inhabitants of Bozdağlar are hospitable and well-connected villagers who have preserved their traditions and ancient knowledge. The open social structure of the local population, particularly the women, and their favorable attitudes towards tourists represent significant humanitarian potential for hospitality ventures in the region. In interviews conducted with villagers during the Efeler Route project, all expressed willingness to participate in hostel operations (TC. İzmir Valiliği 2018). A significant portion of those who visit Bozdağlar are owners of country houses, while others are daily visitors, and a smaller fraction consists of overnight guests. The motivations of excursionists and tourists include activities such as walking, hiking, fishing, boating, cycling, horseback riding, paragliding, picnicking, dining, relaxation, and exploration, among others (Ceylan 2016). In this regard, Bozdağlar is sought after for recreational and sporting activities. The majority of visitors to Bozdağlar originate from the surrounding provinces and districts (İzmir: Kemalpaşa, Bayındır, Ödemiş, Kiraz *et al.* Manisa: Salihli, Turgutlu *et al.*). While ascents to Bozdağlar are possible throughout the whole year, the summer months experience the highest levels of activity. A recent development regarding Bozdağlar is the introduction of a hiking route named the "Efeler Route," scheduled to commence operation in 2023 (refer to section 3.2. Cultural attractions). This initiative has sparked increased interest in Bozdağlar, leading to the emergence of a new type of visitor: hikers. Individuals in this category visit either independently, in small groups, as part of travel agency tours, or through the organization of mountaineering clubs. The spring and autumn months are predominantly favored for hiking activities (URL 2).

The current state of tourism in the Bozdağlar can be summarized as follows:

- ✓ *Reason for choosing Bozdağlar:* Natural attractions, Birgi, and other villages.
- ✓ *Transportation:* Mostly private vehicle.
- ✓ *Accommodation and duration of stay and arrival time:* Mostly daily, short stay (1-2 days), weekends, short and long holidays, all seasons.
- ✓ *Market and demand:* Nearby environment, local visitors, families and young people, tours or individual arrivals, purpose: rest, sports activities, culture-belief, discovery, observation, shopping, etc.
- ✓ *Tourism/recreation type:* Rural tourism, outdoor recreational activities (passive/active)

3.2. Natural and Cultural Assets that Can Be a Source for Special Interest Tourism in Bozdağlar

Identifying tourism potential is critical for tourism planning and is an important driver of destination development (Yan *et al.* 2017). The attractiveness of tourism supply is the most basic concept that expresses tourism potential. In addition, the tourism experience needs to be more attractive than other tourist destinations if competitive advantages are to be increased while utilizing tourism potential (Puška *et al.* 2021). There are various approaches, methods and models

for determining tourism potential (Kutvan and Kutvan 2013; Mojic 2011; Puška *et al.* 2021; Răcășan *et al.* 2016; Rivero *et al.* 2016; Stojanov *et al.* 2013; Yan *et al.* 2017; Zimmer & Grassmann 1996). In this study, tourism supply potential is briefly defined and interpreted through SWOT analysis.

Natural attractions: Protected natural attractions are of great importance in terms of uncovering the tourism potential of any geographical location. In protected areas, special attention should be paid to the type of tourism infrastructure. Here, the infrastructure should include eco-resorts or eco-hotels with important eco-certificates for ecological commercial activities and activities within the destination, restaurants with organically produced food, ecological traffic communication vehicles, a sufficient number of educational facilities and visitor and information centers. Heritage within the geographical fabric, contains an important potential for tourism success such as scientific research, ecotourism, schools in nature and educational tourism (Stojanovic *et al.* 2024, 4-6).

The geomorphology of the Bozdağlar was shaped by erosion-accumulation processes due to tectonic movements. Karst landforms and canyon valleys cover a large area on the plateau. The highest point of the mass rising between the Gediz and Küçük Menderes basins is 2159 m. On the northern edge of the Bozdağlar range, descending to the Gediz River Plain, the "Tmoloschutt-Bozdağ reservoirs", more than 10 kilometers wide and hundreds of meters thick, lie along the axis of the mountainous mass. In the south, again along the axis of the Bozdağlar, is the Küçük Menderes River Plain (Koçman 1984: 57-58). The region is home to many plant species specific to the Mediterranean, as well as some plant species belonging to the European-Siberian plant geography (maquis, red pine, larch, oak, chestnut, etc.) along with various endemic plants. Wildlife is very rich (birds of prey, reptiles, mammals, butterfly species, etc.). There are four places with protection status in Bozdağlar: (i) Ovacık Village Chestnut Natural Monument (Bayındır); (ii) Anatolian Chestnut Natural Monument (Ödemiş); (iii) Bayındır Ovacık Wildlife Development Area; (iv) Gölcük Lake (It was declared a "Sensitive Area to be Strictly Protected" by the Presidential Decree in 2021). In the area where the Ovacık Village Anatolian Chestnut Natural Monument is situated, there are natural chestnut communities, as well as a 500-year-old monumental chestnut tree. Additionally, the region features maquis habitats where kermes oak (*Quercus coccifera*) predominates, along with forests of red pine (*Pinus brutia*) and black pine (*Pinus nigra*). High alpine meadows extend above the tree line in this area. Bayındır Ovacık Wildlife Development Area; 57,889 decares of land located in Bayındır district was declared as Wildlife Development Area in 2006. Target type is roe (URL 3; URL 4). In the central part of the plateau, there is Gölcük Lake (81 ha) at 1050 m. The lake is situated within the largest of the groove-shaped, alluvial-based depressions at an elevation of 1000 meters on the Bozdağ Plateau. Gölcük Lake is categorized as an alluvial barrier lake, with an average depth of 5 meters. The Gölcük Basin receives an average annual rainfall exceeding 1000 millimeters. The number of snowy days is between 5-13 days. During the summer months, irrigated agriculture is carried out around the lake and water is provided from the lake for irrigation. During this period, the water depth drops to 3-4 meters. Since domestic and agricultural waste around the lake reaches the lake through various means, the lake water is contaminated. As a result of ongoing sedimentation, Gölcük is gradually filling up, and the process of shallowing persists. These issues have a detrimental impact on the delicate ecological equilibrium of the lake (Doğa Derneği 2018; Soykan 1994; Vardar & Altınar 2003), (Fig. 2). These data indicate a significant potential for various forms of nature-based tourism and recreational activities (such as ecotourism, green tourism, route tourism, hiking tourism, camping-caravan tourism, *etc.*) in Bozdağlar. Consequently, there are numerous unique attractions capable of catering to the needs of special interest tourism tourists.



Fig. 2. Gölcük Lake in Bozdağlar
Source: URL 5, 2022; URL 6, 2021

Cultural attractions: The socio-cultural factors of the tourism destination directly contribute to the development of forms of cultural tourism, which can significantly contribute to the attractiveness of the tourism destination. The following should be considered as important socio-cultural factors for the development of tourism: language, culture, indigenous products, gastronomic specialties, cultural and historical monuments, cultural objects, art, traditions and festivals, costumes, treatment of guests and other elements. By correctly evaluating the natural and socio-cultural values of the tourism destination, important results can be achieved in the development of various forms of tourism that will have a sustainable character (Stojanovic *et al.* 2024).

Ceylan (2016) states, based on many sources and documents, that the Salihli-Sart-Bozdağ-Gölcük-Birgi-Ödemiş highway constitutes one of the important routes in historical periods. In another study, it is mentioned that the depressions extending north-south in the Bozdağlar region were utilized as mountain passes, particularly for transportation between Ephesus and Sardes. Additionally, there are significant historical settlements in close proximity, including Sardes, Hypaepa, Coloe, and Birgi (Vardar & Altiner 2003). The recent historical significance of Bozdağlar is also noteworthy. During the Ottoman period, Gölcük and Bozdağlar related to Birgi, Sart, Manisa, Alaşehir, Kula, and Uşak, among others. It is known that the region experienced a significant increase in population during the summer months due to the arrival of nomadic groups from various locations. Undoubtedly, the most esteemed visitors to the plateaus were the *şehzades* who served as governors in the Manisa sanjak. The *şehzades* came to Bozdağlar with a large elite group for two or three months almost every year (Ceylan 2016). One of the most important local cultural values of the region is the "Efeler culture". In common terminology, "Efe" refers to a leader and the armed units formed under the leadership of efe are called "gangs". The activities of efeler were seen in the immediate region of Western Anatolia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During the War of Independence, efe gangs fought alongside the armies of the Grand National Assembly against Greek occupation forces and played a crucial role in liberating the region from occupation. The "Efeler Route" Project, completed in 2023, is a cultural walking route designed to encompass the villages and historical sites associated with the "efeler" and local insurgent groups in the Küçük Menderes Basin. The route commences from Kavaklıdere village in Bornova, traverses predominantly through Bozdağlar (16 out of the total 27 destination points are located in Bozdağlar), extends east and southward, crossing the Aydın Mountains, and concludes at Şirince village and the House of Virgin Mary, covering a distance of approximately 500 kilometers (TC. İzmir Valiliği 2018; URL 2) (Fig 3).



Fig. 4. Birgi Town in the Southeast of Bozdağlar
Source: URL 8, 2022

Bozdağlar rural culture is characterized by rural architecture (Birgi stone houses *etc.*), agricultural products (potatoes, tomatoes, beans, grapes, olives, cherries, walnuts, chestnuts, dairy products *etc.*), local culinary traditions and hospitable people. The largest settlements in the higher parts of the plateau (1000 m) are the Gölcük and Bozdağ neighborhoods (1329 and 531 inhabitants). Most of the rural settlements are concentrated below 1000 m on the northern and southern edges of the plateau (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Distribution of the Primary Rural Settlements in the Bozdağlar
Source: Doğa Derneği, 2018

Dadbey village (Günlüce/Ödemiş), established upon the remnants of Hypaipa, is a significant ancient city of antiquity. Hypaipa thrived economically due to its strategic location along a vital route linking Ephesus and Sardis. The structure in Dadbey, formerly utilized for olive processing,

remains inactive today. Another instance of industrial heritage in Dadbey includes pottery workshops. Presently, pottery production is conducted solely by a single artisan (Pullukçuğlu Yapucu 2023). Another village, Nazarköy, situated to the northwest of Bozdağlar, is renowned for its production of eye bead handicrafts, a form of glass processing art. Artisans in the village utilize furnaces (workshops) to melt and shape discarded glass pieces, crafting various souvenirs. Women play a predominant role in the design of these souvenirs. Nazarköy boasts a total of five traditional glass furnaces, where approximately 20 individuals are employed (Özar 2019). All of these cultural values of Bozdağlar prove that there is a sufficient supply potential in the region for cultural tourism, religious tourism, agrotourism and experiential tourism, especially rural tourism. Undoubtedly, tourists with special interests will find many interesting places and topics.

3.3. Using SWOT Analysis to Determine Bozdağlar Suitability for SIT

In order for special interest tourism to flourish in the region, it is essential to assess both the suitability of the region for this type of tourism and its supply potential. SWOT analysis can be used for this purpose. SWOT analysis evaluates the tourism potential and aids managers in determining which indicators will be beneficial in monitoring trends and progress towards achieving the destination's tourism objectives (World Tourism Organization, 2004). SWOT analyses for tourism have been conducted for various entities such as countries, regions, cities, villages, and tourism types including coastal areas, mountains, villages, and more (Cangül & Ezenel 2018; Ercan *et al.* 2017; Kara 2016; Karakaş *et al.* 2015; Kızılaslan & Ünal, 2014; Meriç & Bozkurt 2017; Polat *et al.* 2014; Şarkaya İçellioğlu 2014; Yasak & Oğan 2019; Akıncı & Kasalak 2016, *etc.*). In order to develop Special Interest Tourism (SIT) in Bozdağlar, conducting a SWOT analysis can provide essential insights and basic information (Table 1).

Table 1. SWOT Analysis Conducted to Access Basic Data for SIT in Bozdağlar

S	W	O	T
Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Geographical location: Proximity to Izmir	Remaining administratively within the borders of two provinces	High demand potential in the neighborhood	Rural outward migration from the region
Being surrounded by two river basins from the north and south and an elevation of two thousand meters	Absence of an integrated spatial plan	Presence of university youth in the neighbourhood	The emergence of hybrid (mixed) landscapes with outsiders settling in the region
Two-way land transportation from north and south	Pollution and shrinkage of the lake water	Presence of nearby district centers and ruins	Disruption of the homogeneous structure of rural culture with outsiders coming to the region
Water resources, endemic plants, monumental trees, forest, spectacular landscape	Lack of participation and governance awareness	Crop richness of agricultural basins in the north and south	Lack of interest in the region in national and regional plans
Capacity for snow in winter	Inactive ski resort	Global tourism developments and	Absence of a regional authority for tourism

		growing interest in the mountains	
Efeler Route passing through Bozdağlar	The new opening of Efeler Route is not yet widely known	Nature and cultural walks garner global attention. all over the world	Absence of regional tourism plan
Rural settlements, local culture, agricultural products, cultural landscape	Less diversification in the economy	Development potential of rural tourism and agrotourism	Agricultural activities are under risk due to internal and external factors
Important cultural places to visit in Bozdağlar and its surroundings	Cultural visiting places are not in high demand	High competitiveness of religious tourism and cultural tourism	High interest in coastal tourism
Hospitable rural community open to innovation	Limited accommodation capacity, land transportation only	Being little known, little used arouses curiosity for the tourist	Failure to take measures against climate change in the region
Suitable locations for subtypes of SIT	Aging of the rural population and lack of tourism awareness	Increasing efforts to bring rural areas into tourism in Türkiye	Competition from regions around İzmir with similar rural attractions

According to the SWOT analysis data, numerous strengths have been identified that are poised to facilitate the development of Special Interest Tourism (SIT) in Bozdağlar. Additionally, weaknesses in protection, service infrastructure, and governance have been identified. External opportunities present significant advantages that could position the region as a target for SIT, while threats indicate serious external risks.

It is not enough to determine the suitability of Bozdağlar for SIT only through SWOT analysis. This analysis provides a brief general evaluation of the tourism potential. Further research is also needed. It is possible to determine these with three groups of questions:

(i) (i) Which special places in Bozdağlar are suitable for the development of SIT activities? What special places are needed in Bozdağlar?

(ii) What are the expectations of SIT tourists from Bozdağlar? or What are their motivations that will direct them to Bozdağlar?

(iii) What are the desire, knowledge and skill levels of Bozdağlar rural people in organizing spaces for SITs and creating special activities for tourists?

Answering these questions falls outside the purview of this article. As previously mentioned, the objective is to underscore the significance of employing sustainable tourism criteria in the advancement of SIT in Bozdağlar. Therefore, in order to obtain answers to these three questions, it is envisaged to undertake a subsequent study utilizing field research-based qualitative methods, particularly verbal interviews, as the second phase of this article.

3.4. Comparison of Current Tourism in Bozdağlar with GSTC-D Criteria and Implications for SIT

The Global Sustainable Tourism Council Destination Criteria (GSTC-D) serves as a fundamental guide for destinations aspiring to achieve sustainability. Criteria delineate what ought to be accomplished, yet they do not ascertain the method of implementation or verify the attainment of objectives. Consequently, "Performance Indicators" have been devised to complement the criteria (Travel Forever GSTC 2013).

Mountains in the world are privileged geographical units with their heights, slopes, challenges, opportunities and societies. Natural risks, lack of services and conflicts leave populations relatively poor (Nations Unies 2022; World Tourism Organization 2004). For these reasons, tourism in the mountains has been made one of the main tools of rural development. Bozdağlar is a high plateau in terms of its formation and at the same time a large mountainous area. Development of SIT and other types of tourism for rural development in Bozdağlar should be done in accordance with GSTC-D Criteria. With this approach, the existing tourism in the region was initially juxtaposed with the GSTC-D Criteria (GSTC 2019). This comparison revealed comprehensive deficiencies in sustainability, indicating that when the development of SIT is prioritized, shortcomings in sustainability will become apparent (Table 2).

Table 2. Comparison of Current Tourism in Bozdağlar with GSTC-D Criteria and Implications for SIT

GSTC-D Criteria	Current situation in Bozdağlar
SECTION A: SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT	
A(a) Management structure and framework	
A1 Destination management responsibility	none
A2 Destination management strategy and action plan	none
A3 Monitoring and reporting	none
A(b) Stakeholder engagement	
A4 Enterprise engagement and sustainability standards	none
A5 Resident engagement and feedback	none
A6 Visitor engagement and feedback	none
A7 Promotion and information	none
A(c) Managing pressure and change	
A8 Managing visitor volumes and activities	none
A9 Planning regulations and development control	none
A10 Climate change adaptation	none
A11 Risk and crisis management	none
SECTION B: SOCIO-ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY	
B(a) Delivering local economic benefits	
B1 Measuring the economic contribution of tourism	none
B2 Decent work and career opportunities	partially
B3 Supporting local entrepreneurs and fair trade	partially
B(b) Social wellbeing and impacts	
B4 Support for community	partially
B5 Preventing exploitation and discrimination	sufficient
B6 Property and user rights	partially
B7 Safety and security	sufficient
B8 Access for all	partially
SECTION C: CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY	
C(a) Protecting cultural heritage	
C1 Protection of cultural assets	partially
C2 Cultural artefacts	sufficient
C3 Intangible heritage	sufficient
C4 Traditional access	sufficient
C5 Intellectual property	partially
C(b) Visiting cultural sites	

C6 Visitor management at cultural sites	none
C7 Site interpretation	partially
SECTION D: Environmental sustainability	
D(a) Conservation of natural heritage	
D1 Protection of sensitive environments	partially
D2 Visitor management at natural sites	none
D3 Wildlife interaction	partially
D4 Species exploitation and animal welfare	partially
D(b) Resource management	
D5 Energy conservation	none
D6 Water stewardship	partially
D7 Water quality	sufficient
D(c) Management of waste and emissions	
D8 Wastewater	partially
D9 Solid waste	none
D10 GHG emissions and climate change mitigation	none
D11 Low-impact transportation	none
D12 Light and noise pollution	none

Source: GSTC, 2019

The most significant finding from the table is that Bozdağlar falls short in meeting the majority of the GSTC-D criteria. However, the region exhibits partial sustainability with regard to criteria related to social welfare and cultural heritage protection. Consequently, despite the considerable potential and strengths that Bozdağlar possesses for SIT, it is imperative for the region to fulfill the majority of the GSTC-D criteria in order to establish sustainable tourism

3.5. Preliminary Views on the Development of SIT in Bozdağlar

Bozdağlar, endowed with its natural and cultural treasures, stands as one of the mountainous regions in Izmir ripe for the development of Special Interest Tourism (SIT). Upon meeting the GSTC-D Criteria for SIT in Bozdağlar, the following functions of sustainable tourism in mountainous regions (Euromontana 2011) will be realized:

- ✓ Long-term income and employment and fair distribution of income to rural people.
- ✓ Protection and promotion of natural and cultural heritage.
- ✓ Training local people and tourism operators.
- ✓ Establishing cooperation between local actors, stakeholders and tourists (gouvernance).

The establishment of these functions in Bozdağlar signifies the facilitation of both socio-economic development and the promotion of Special Interest Tourism (SIT) for rural settlements in the hinterland of Izmir, which rely primarily on agriculture as their sole source of income and experience rural migration. Therefore, the following suggestions can be proposed to enable these key functions to commence and ensure sustainability in the region: (Table 3):

Table 3. Basic Strategies for the Development of SIT in Bozdağlar in Compliance with GSTC-D Criteria

Basic strategies	Things to do
Creating special interest venues and activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Selecting places with a special identity, brand value and suitable for experiences and discoveries ✓ Select priority action themes ✓ Pilot projects must be implemented

Training, participation and organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Guest house management training should be given to rural people ✓ Establishment of exemplary and pioneering businesses should be encouraged ✓ Non-governmental organizations should be established, collective intelligence should be developed, common interest communities should be created, entrepreneurship should be taught ✓ A cooperation network should be established between the public sector, local government, non-governmental organizations, actors, stakeholders and the private sector, and governance should be implemented
The market research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Researching the typology of special interest tourists ✓ Promotion and marketing with up-to-date technologies
Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Inventory of natural and cultural resources should be made ✓ Identify supply, demand, competition and market potential ✓ Priority areas and thematic villages should be selected ✓ Focus on quality to ensure added value ✓ Create development strategies

If we need to include further additions to this table, it will be imperative to undertake all of the above when implementing Special Interest Tourism (SIT) aligned with the GSTC-D Criteria in Bozdağlar. Equally crucial and challenging as the inception stage is its management. Therefore, it is essential to progress towards the objective by establishing one of the destination management models (García *et al.* 2012; Pike 2009; Akyol 2021; Dinç 2021; Presenza *et al.* 2005; Çoban & Yıldız 2019; Baloğlu & McCleary, *etc.*) for Bozdağlar or a mixed model suitable for the region.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Bozdağlar is a high plateau with a geomorphological structure showing mountain characteristics and a rural region in terms of population, settlement and economic activities. Although Bozdağlar's natural and cultural attractions offer advantages for the development of various types of tourism, current tourism is very weak, with recreational activities and day visits in the foreground. Why hasn't tourism developed in Bozdağlar until now? This is primarily due to the absence of a vision, policy, or strategy for tourism development in Bozdağlar, neither in national nor regional plans. Only in regional plans, a current situation analysis was conducted, and the tourism potential was mentioned (İzmir Büyükşehir Belediyesi 2016; İZKA, 2015; İzmir Vakfı 2021).

The most basic and effective answer to the question of why Bozdağlar has not developed at the desired/expected level in terms of tourism, especially special interest tourism, despite being located in a favorable region and climate, is that both public institutions and organizations, non-governmental organizations and private sector representatives need to provide the Bozdağlar with the necessary resources. It is clear as day that it does not attach importance and value at a level and effectively. For effective tourism planning, it is necessary to prepare transparent, rational and applicable plans and projects that involve local people and that all processes are transparent. The fact that the Bozdağ Mountains are among the provinces of our country with high socio-economic

development values, such as Manisa and Izmir, and that they have suitable geographical features indicate that they will develop in special interest tourism.

The primary reason for this lack of interest is that Bozdağlar is not perceived as an alternative destination for coastal tourism in Izmir. Another contributing factor to the absence of innovations such as tourism in the agricultural and rural settlement structure of Bozdağlar is the novelty of integrating agriculture and rural settlements into tourism in Turkey. However, new institutional structures (Agriculture and Rural Development Support Institution, Development Agencies, etc.) have started to support tourism in rural areas.

In this study, the aim is to develop Special Interest Tourism (SIT) integrated with the GSTC-D Criteria for Bozdağlar. The rationale behind why SIT can be pursued is as follows: SIT encompasses various types of tourism, including rural tourism, agritourism, ecotourism, adventure tourism, health and wellness tourism, camping-caravan tourism, hiking tourism, experiential tourism, cultural tourism, among others, and each of these types of tourism can find suitable spaces within Bozdağlar. The development of SIT in compliance with the GSTC-D in Bozdağlar will yield the following benefits:

- ✓ New branches of activity will emerge in the local economy;
- ✓ Income and employment will increase; local products will gain added value by turning them into touristic products;
- ✓ The quality of life of rural people will improve;
- ✓ Outward migration will slow down;
- ✓ Awareness of protecting natural resources and rural culture will increase;
- ✓ Participation and governance will be introduced;
- ✓ Local governments will increase their service capacities;
- ✓ Sensitivity to current developments such as climate change,
- ✓ Digitalization, green economy, circular economy will increase;
- ✓ Tourists will get satisfaction from their holidays in terms of experience, transformation, health, etc. with new contemporary tourism approaches.

The realization of all these innovations and initiatives depends on the preparation of an integrated tourism plan in Bozdağlar. This plan will ensure that investments are rational and sustainable and will contribute to the spatial distribution, diversification and twelve-month tourism vision of İzmir tourism. In addition, more research should be conducted on the region and the subject, and university-based interdisciplinary projects (geography, history, architecture, economy, tourism, marketing, promotion, etc.) should be carried out. In addition to all these, the tourism potential of Bozdağlar should be realized. Positive accelerated change and development in tourism activities can only be achieved by being aware.

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