

Host attitudes toward tourism: A study of Sareyn Municipality and local community partnerships in therapeutic tourism

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Abstract

This study investigates residents' perceptions of tourism development in a small tourist destination in northwest Iran named Sareyn. This city is famous for its thermal springs and therapeutic tourism. Tourism in this destination is managed by the municipality and local community with limited intervention by the National Tourism Organization. The study's findings show that even though local people strongly support current and further tourism development, they feel ambivalent about the impacts of tourism. It is concluded that strengthening the cooperation with the National Tourism Organization and taking advantage of a tourism expert's assistance are required to ensure the sustainability of tourism development.

Keywords: tourism development, public sector, tourism attitudes, impacts of tourism, thermal (spa) tourism, Sareyn (Iran)

Introduction

Tourism is a multidimensional, multifaceted activity which touches many lives and many different economic activities (Cooper, Fletcher, Fyall, Gilbert & Wanhill, 2008). Tourism may create substantial economic benefits for host countries through contributions to government revenues and the generation of employment and business opportunities (Andereck, Valentine, Knopf & Vogt, 2005). However, tourism should be managed in a sustainable way to benefit present and future generations. There is evidence that residents of the countries that attract tourists hold diverse opinions about development in their regions. Understanding the level of satisfaction, the needs, and the expectations of the local community is an essential factor for the success of any form of tourism development (Jennings, 2001). Therefore, researchers should identify a set of guiding principles for a sustainable approach, which should be formulated in accordance with the way that indigenous people live in each area and the extent to which they are employed in tourism (Caneday & Zeiger, 1991). In addition, Henderson (2002) has expressed the need for further research on Muslim views about the impacts of tourism. Due to the lack of a proper tourism policy/planning and management framework in developing countries, it seems that the negative impacts of tourism may be more prominent than its advantages (Mason, 2003).

The present research was carried out in Sareyn, a small tourist town situated in northwest Iran. It is inhabited by 5250 people (Iran National Census, 2012). The Sabalan region is a prominent destination in Iran for skiing, mountain climbing, walking, and rock climbing (SadegMoganlo, 2004). Above all, Sareyn is famous for its therapeutic tourism thanks to its twelve thermal springs (rich in silicate minerals, chloral and bicarbonate waters) as well as its pleasant cool climate, particularly in spring and summer. In terms of heritage, Sareyn has a historic hill, named Anahita, whose history dates back to 1000 BC. It is registered as number 1976 in the list of National Cultural and Natural Heritage sites (SadegMoganlo, 2004). However, because of profitability of therapeutic tourism itself, the historical sites inside and

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around Sareyn didn't get enough attention and are not explored or maintained for cultural heritage tourism proposes. After the Iranian Tourism Organization (ITO) opened the Sablan Hydrotherapy Complex and Laleh a four-star hotel in 1997, Sareyn grew from a tiny village to a tourist destination, with a larger supply of accommodation than any other regions in the country could claim (Author's personal observations; Nazarian, Zalnzhad & Mirzanzhad, 2015). According to the author's observations and her interviews with hotel managers, local tourism non-governmental organizations (NGOs), local business owners, and community leaders, high demand from tourists in the peak season and high profitability during this period for the tourism businesses is leading to the development of more accommodation by local enterprises. At present Sareyn owns 167 accommodation units (including hotels, hotel apartments, inns, and government guesthouses), 350 home stays, and several camping sites. Most of the properties are constructed in a modern style, without considering local and traditional architecture, and is owned and managed mainly by locals. Sareyn's stock of accommodation is fully occupied in the summers, semi-occupied in the springs and falls and completely closed during the rest of the year due to the seasonal nature of the tourism. Low occupancy rates in about seven months of the year lead to surcharging by increasing room rental prices during the high season, in order to maintain the establishment. Sareyn has very limited trained local tour guides, and only one travel agency which was just opened in May 2016. According to the local official census, the number of tourist arrivals per day ranges between 4,000 and 100,000 people during the peak season (mainly from May to the end of September), adding up to nearly 7 million annual arrivals, which is a high number compared to the local population. Most tourists visit this region for health, water therapy treatment (wellness) and relaxation. The rapid growth of regional development, seasonality, the high degree of involvement of the local community, and the key role of the municipal authorities in tourism planning and management are the main characteristics of Sareyn tourism development. The effect of tourism development on the communities in Sareyn remains little known due to insufficient research in this area. For this reason, Sareyn offers an interesting research opportunity, since it is a small community with a hugely seasonal and disproportionate tourism industry where very limited research has been conducted.

This paper presents the findings of a survey on local communities in a region famous for its thermal springs and therapeutic tourism. The term 'therapeutic thermal tourism' refers to the search for healing and wellness by exploiting mineral springs. Therapeutic tourism is a kind of health tourism, and is a new and emerging international business, which is gradually increasing in importance (Lee & Spisto, 2007). Therapeutic tourism is distinguished by its high average length of stay, greater than for any other type of tourism, its low dependence on seasons and its impact on local economies (Alen, Fraiz & Rufin, 2006). The general increase in leisure time and prosperity, together with the ageing of the population and changes in lifestyle (with greater interest in sports, a healthy diet, and nature) explain the quick growth of this kind of tourism, somewhere between a leisure time activity and health care (Alen et al., 2006). The present study examines residents' perceptions of and reactions to tourism development and the impacts of tourism in a place where the local community is mainly responsible for the management of tourism whereas the coordination and collaboration from the municipality and the role of public sector tourism agencies are marginal. This study also tries to assess whether the responses to individual statements may vary according to demographic variables such as birthplace, occupation in a tourism-related sector, and length of local residency. The research addresses these two main questions:

1. *What are the residents' perceptions of tourism devolvement in the case study?*

2. *Do the perceptions of tourism vary among respondents, given their variables of birthplace, tourism-related occupation, and length of residency?*

Literature review

Tourism development and public sector

Tourism is one of the strongest drivers of world trade and prosperity; it acts as an engine for development through the economic earnings and creation of direct and indirect employment (UNWTO & SNV, 2010). The process of tourism development evolved through time with modifications and the emergence of appropriate measures for statistical, legislative, and operational purposes. All elements of tourism development are interlinked and, therefore, tourism development cannot be treated as a concept isolated from other tourism related activities (Page, Brunt, Busby & Connell, 2001).

Local and national governments usually have an essential influence over tourism industry by funding tourism projects and providing numerous services, including infrastructure, transportation, security, and marketing (Jeffries, 2007). The contribution of the tourism industry to the economic and social development of a nation explains such government support. In protecting the industry's interests, public sector intervention is necessary to ensure that the associated benefits of tourism are maximized and any potential problems are minimized for the benefit of the economy, society, and the environment. However, the effectiveness and suitability of some governmental intervention measures should be reconsidered and linked more closely to the strategic objectives of tourism development (MaškarinRibarić&Ribarić, 2013).

A few studies investigated residents' expectations and attitudes toward the public sector in tourism development and planning (Liu, Sheldon & Var, 1987; Allen, Long, Perdue & Kieselbach, 1988; Perdue, Long & Allen, 1990; Ryan & Montgomery, 1994; Madrigal, 1995; Andriotis, 2002; Ishikawa & Fukushige, 2007; Zamani-Farahani & Musa, 2008).

Madrigal (1995) examined residents' attitudes toward the role of local government in tourism by classifying residents on their similar perceptions of the impact of tourism. The results show that the groups differ. The degree of Cretan residents' satisfaction with public sector governance is examined by Andriotis (2002). This study indicates that some residents recognize the significant role played by the public sector in tourism development, mainly in promotion, environmental protection, and the provision of infrastructure and financial aid for the tourism industry. However, the rest of residents blame the public sector for the lack of organization, irresponsible acts, bureaucracy, irrelevant tourism policy, high taxation, insufficient funding, and a lack of infrastructure provision. According to Tosun (2000), the developing world lacks experience in the collaborative development activities of the public sector and private sector and its experience in tourism is negligible. A study conducted by Zamani-Farahani & Musa (2008) shows that, even though local people strongly support tourism development, their opinions regarding tourism policy, management and marketing and local community involvement are not equally favorable. Ishikawa and Fukushige (2007) investigated the effect of regional tourism development when handled by municipal authorities and highlight a number of significant features. The results show that local communities expect their municipality to take the initiative in implementing or financing tourist development policies. The consequences of tourism are localized and can vary considerably according to the form that it takes and the situations in which it occurs (Wall & Mathieson, 2006). The relatively limited number of studies of regional tourist development

handled by municipalities (Ishikawa & Fukushige, 2007) also emphasizes the need for further research in this area.

Local community attitudes

It is evident that residents' opinions about tourism are varied and determined by multiple factors and may differ from one country to another, in view of the enormous variety of populations. The number of researchers who have explored the effects of tourism in Muslim communities is still limited, mainly because of socio-cultural and political barriers. Residents' attitudes toward tourism development and its impact provide a significant input to identifying the strategic and managerial priorities of tourism (Deery, Jago & Fredline, 2012). An understanding of the local population's perception of public sector efficiencies or deficiencies in tourism is essential, because it provides insight into the preferences and interests of the local people served. It may also suggest improvements and changes that should be adopted in future policies and plans in order to achieve successful development, marketing, and operation of existing and future programs and projects, tourism planning and policy (Haley, Snaith & Miller, 2005). Such understanding is essential for tourist development and its successful operation and sustainability.

Consequently, in order to successfully develop the marketing and operation of existing and future programs and projects, tourism planning and policy must consider the attitudes of residents toward the impact of tourism (Haley et al., 2005). Similarly, Tosun (2006) states that community members should play an important role in the strategy and action plan of tourism development.

Community participation in tourism

The literature suggests that involving local communities in tourism decision-making and strengthening their ability to act are important factors for sustainability (Ribot, 2004; Muganda, Sirima & Marwa Ezra, 2013). Sustainable development is the core objective of community participation (Johannesen & Skonhøft, 2005), and it is an important factor in creating better management of the negative impacts of tourism development (Li, 2004). According to Choia and Murraya (2010), three major components of sustainable tourism, namely, long-term planning, full community participation, and environmental sustainability within tourism, are critically related to the local support for tourism and to the positive and negative impacts of tourism. Thus local community involvement in tourism activities is linked to local support for tourism development.

Involvement in the tourism decision-making process and employment are two important factors influencing community participation opportunities (Chok, Macbeth & Warren, 2007; Zhao & Ritchie, 2007). Both are necessary to maximize the socio-economic benefits of tourism for the local community. Tosun's model highlights spontaneous community participation (2006), ceding full managerial responsibility and authority to the host community. At the same time, community involvement in tourism largely depends on the economic, policy and socio-cultural characteristics of community.

The findings of a study carried out by Scheyvens (2007) reveals that in developing countries community participation via employment opportunities, such as operating small scale businesses, and working for the tourism industry, can affect the development of tourism products and services, crafts and cultural values. However, involvement in the approach to tourism decision-making is rarely found in developing countries (Li, 2005; Michael, Mgonja & Backman, 2013).

According to Cole (2006) and Manyara and Jones (2007), as cited in Michael, Mgonja and Backman (2013), some factors may constrain the ability of communities to fully control their participation in tourism development. These include skills, knowledge, elitism, empowerment and involvement, lack of ownership, capital, resources, leakage of revenue, partnerships, access to tourists, transparency in benefit sharing, and the lack of an appropriate policy framework to support community participation. Nevertheless effectiveness of these factors depends on various conditions and situations.

Impacts of tourism

Local residents' reactions toward tourism have been extensively analyzed in the literature. Planners and managers have recognized the importance of local communities' views toward tourism development to ensure sustainability. Hence, it is not surprising that research on residents' attitudes to the impact of tourism continues to be a topic of considerable interest (Mason & Cheyne, 2000; Teye, Sonmez & Sirakaya, 2002; Uriely, Yonay & Simchai, 2002; Haley et al., 2005; Perez & Nadal, 2005; Cooper et al., 2005; Jago, Fredline & Deery, 2006; Wall & Mathieson, 2006; Andereck & Nyaupane, 2011; Deery, Jago & Fredline, 2012; EsmailZaei & EsmailZaei, 2013). Evidence suggests that residents of countries tend to agree that tourism has both positive and negative impacts (Andereck et al., 2005; Haley et al., 2005; Perez & Nadal, 2005; Wall & Mathieson, 2006; Amuquandoh, 2010) and they may have ambivalent attitudes toward tourism (Hernandez, Cohen & Garcia, 1996). As the various forms of impact from tourism have a significant effect on tourism planning and development, management and marketing (Reisinger & Turner, 2003), its positive and negative effects should both be examined to better understand the host community's attitudes to tourism (Gursoy & Rutherford, 2004).

Socio-demographic characteristics

The socio-demographic profile of the residents inevitably plays a role in influencing tourism perception (Andriotis, 2004; Kuvan & Akan, 2005; Wang, Pfister & Morais, 2006). Numerous studies demonstrate that residents who are employed by the industry, or indicate a higher level of dependence on or benefit from it, have more positive attitudes toward tourism (Andereck et al., 2005; Haley et al., 2005; Kuvan & Akan, 2005; Azimi, 2007). Birthplace also can influence the attitude to tourism development (Harrill & Potts, 2003; Sdrali & Chazapi, 2007; Shin, 2010). Research has also explored the relationships between length of residency and tourism attitude (Martínez-García & Raya, 2008; Wang & Pfister, 2008). Nonetheless, other factors such as political crises can also have an impact on the tourism industry (Neumayer, 2004; Hall, 2010). On the other hand some previous research proposes that value orientations may be more helpful in understanding attitudes than sociodemographic variables (Deng, Walker & Swinnerton, 2006).

Methodology

Sareyn, a traditional small town, has received little scholarly attention regarding its attitudes toward tourism. Hence, residents were shown to be somehow unfamiliar with the survey procedures and the author faced a number of obstacles, including culturally-based challenges. Given the importance role of tourism in the area of research, the Mayor of Sareyn, appointed a few municipal employees and a local NGO supported the researcher to execute a successful survey.

A quantitative approach was used as the main research method. However, it is evident that it is not always possible to obtain information from respondents in such a conservative society by fully structured or formal methods. Hence, as a supplementary method the researcher also

used semi-structured personal interviews with officials and members of the public (i.e. local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) related to tourism, hotel managers, policemen, local business owners, community leaders). Prior to the main data collection, a pilot test involving 30 respondents was conducted in Sareyn. The comments and suggestions from the pilot test were used to further refine the questionnaire before the collection of the data.

The primary source of data was obtained through a structured questionnaire. The first section was designed to assess the residents' general opinions concerning the characteristics of tourism development. The major content of the statements in this section was derived from previously published research (Davis, Allen & Cosenza, 1988; Kavallinis & Pizam, 1994; Lankford, 1994; Faulkner & Tideswell, 1997; Ryan, Scotland & Montgomery, 1998; Allen, Andereck & Vogt, 2000; Baum & Lundtrop, 2001; Andriotis, 2002 & 2005; Jurowski & Gurosy, 2004; Haley et al., 2005), with some modifications to suit the study environment (Table 2).

In the second section, respondents were asked about their attitudes toward diverse aspects of the impact of tourism in their region. The content of the statements in this section was largely derived from relevant previously published research (Andereck & Vogt, 2000; Jones, Jurowski & Uysal, 2000; Mason & Cheyne, 2000; Upchurch & Teivane, 2000; Teye et al., 2002; Tosun, 2002; Andriotis, 2002; Besculides, Lee & McCormick, 2002; Grunewald, 2002; Mason, 2003; Beerli & Martin, 2004; Jurowski & Gurosy, 2004; Gursoy & Rutherford, 2004; Andereck et al., 2005; Haley et al., 2005).

The number of statements and the measurement scales available to measure positive and negative impacts were refined and modified to suit the context of this study and the local culture (Table 3). A 5-point Likert type scale (from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5)) was used to measure the constructs. In the next section, socio-demographic data were included: age, marital status, place of birth, and period of residence, education, income and occupation. The questionnaire was designed in Persian (Farsi) and later translated into the English language using the back-to-back translation method. The study sample comprised the people who lived around the tourist area, mainly those near the hydrotherapy complex of the mineral thermal spring.

Because of the small size of Sareyn, and in order to minimize statistical errors, complete households living nearest to the therapeutic hydro-complex (the tourist area) were selected by the researcher. The sample population in this study included permanent residents who were at least 18 years old and who lived within the township. Recognizing that the seasonality of residence might influence the responses; only permanent residents in the community were considered (Andriotis, 2002). The sample was selected on the basis of their willingness to participate. The researcher was accompanied by local research assistants, who were familiar with the local dialect (Azari) and whose presence helped the researcher by reducing communication difficulties and inspiring trust and confidence amongst the respondents. The respondents were more willing to answer when communication was face-to-face. Data collection was carried out when the low season had started and local communities had enough time and opportunity to take part in the research. Around 400 questionnaires were distributed. The questionnaires were self-administered and the respondents were given a few days to complete them, independently (Gursoy & Rutherford, 2004; Adapa & Rindfleish, 2007). The completed questionnaires were scrutinized on the spot. However, some questionnaires were left incomplete, lost, or with unusable answers. Finally 250 useable questionnaires were collected during seven-week period.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences was used for the purposes of data management and analysis. The correlation technique was used in order to explore the association between the variables and to validate the instrument. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to assess the internal consistency of the data and with values of 0.716 for attitudes towards tourism developments and 0.805 for attitudes towards tourism impacts were deemed acceptable (Kent, 2015), indicating that the measurement scales were reliable and appropriate for further data analysis.

Results

The profiles of the respondents are presented in Table 1. Most of the respondents were male, young and married. Around 64% of them were born within the research areas. In terms of employment, over half (56.4%) of the respondents stated that they had jobs related to tourism. For many of respondents the income question was a personal and sensitive issue and their responses were ambiguous. Therefore any relevant relational tests may not reflect the reality.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of respondents in Sareyn

Demographic variable	Frequency	%	Demographic variable	Frequency	%
Gender			Education		
Male	172	68.8	No formal education	3	1.2
Female	78	31.2	Primary school	15	6.0
Age			High school	72	28.8
18-27	68	27.2	Diploma	74	29.6
28-37	63	25.2	Matriculation	21	8.4
38-47	46	18.4	Junior College Diploma	27	10.8
48-57	28	11.2	Bachelor Degree	35	14.0
58-67	26	10.4	Master's Degree and above	3	1.2
Marital Status			Birth Place		
Married	158	63.2	At area of research	160	64.0
Widowed or divorced	3	1.2	Village/city nearby	65	26.0
Single	89	35.6	Same province	4	1.6
Length of residency			Another province	21	8.4
Less than 5 year	19	7.6	Job related to Tourism		
5-10 years	26	10.4	Yes	141	56.4
11-20 years	41	16.4	No	109	43.6
21 years or more	164	65.6			

As shown in Table 2, most of the respondents were in favor of the current tourism development and wished it to continue. Local people were well informed about their active role and involvement in the planning and management of tourism. They believed that tourism is a major contributing factor to the development of the region and tourism makes them more satisfied to live there. Still, the respondents did not believe that tourism has been well

promoted during the off-season and that tourism marketing and advertising have been well managed. They slightly disagreed with such statements as “public tourism authorities plan and manage well”; “rules and regulations for tourism do not need to be revised frequently”; and “there is regular consultation with local people by the authorities in the tourist development process”. However, a fairly large percentage was neutral about these statements. About 38.4% of the respondents did not agree that political tension with the West affected tourism development, while 31.6 % could not decide. About 55.2% of the respondents generally had no strong preference about the tourists’ religion.

Table 2. Attitudes towards tourism developments in Sareyn

Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
Tourism Development Level		
The public sector gives a lot of attention to promote tourism in this area.	3.1	1.26808
Tourism public authorities plan and manage well tourism development in my community.	2.6	1.08087
Tourism is well promoted during off-season.	2.5	1.29310
Tourism destination marketing and advertising, manage well in this area.	2.5	1.24556
In this area, the tourism rules and regulations do not need to be revised frequently.	2.5	1.28704
Tourism is a major contributing factor to the development of this area.	4.3	1.08075
Tourism development makes local people more satisfied with their living in this area.	4.1	.90493
Local Community’s Role		
Most people I know are in favor of tourism development.	4.5	.81693
The host community is actively involved in tourism planning and management.	3.8	1.09324
Public authorities always consult local people in tourism development process in this region.	2.3	1.17607
Further tourism development in this region would always be supported by local people.	4.4	.90766
Political and Religious Factors		
The political tension with the West does not affect the tourism development in my area.	2.9	1.19466
Religion is not against tourism development.	3.7	1.32581
Religion has a great influence in regularity of the tourism development in this area.	3.5	1.10929
I prefer only Muslim tourists in this area.	2.5	1.26761

The attitudes of the respondents towards the impacts of tourism illustrated that respondents strongly agreed that tourism creates market opportunities for local products as well as job opportunities for local people. Tourism is also believed to raise the standard of living. However, about 73 % of the respondents stated that tourism increases the price of land and real estate costs in the region. They agreed to a limited extent that the cost of living increases because of tourism. They strongly agreed that tourism improves the image of the community; provides better recreational opportunities for local residents; stimulates cultural exchange; and encourages a variety of cultural activities among the local residents. They also marginally agreed that tourism does not contribute to an increase in crime; helps to preserve cultural identity; and does not affect the religious practices of local people. However, a considerable percentage was neutral about these statements. The respondents' attitudes to environmental impacts were not so positive. Only 51.6% of the respondents agreed that tourism does not disrupt the peace and tranquility of the area. Furthermore, they did not react favorably to the littering and crowding conditions in their region (Table 3).

Further enquiries during the semi-structured interviews were conducted with a random selection of local people. Some of the key local tourism players (i.e. local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) related to tourism, hotel managers, policemen, local businesses, community leaders) confirmed the positive effects of tourism development on the local community. The interviews with local people revealed that Sareyn is a very safe area, with a very low percentage of crime and few social problems. However, tourism was considered a cause of some inflation in property prices. The cost of living and negative environmental impacts have gone up and respondents wanted the government to take some action to control prices. Respondents believed that more attention should be given to the further development of tourism in the area. They would have liked better infrastructure and facilities in the region, including higher educational institutions, better health and sanitation facilities and a well-equipped hospital.

Some of the respondents also expressed the view that tourism services could be improved by setting up a permanent tourist information center, providing tourist signboards, and improved hotel/room reservation services. Other suggestions included the employment of qualified officials, improved advertising, the development of a tourism census, and tackling the seasonality of tourism, better use of the thermal springs as a resource and following examples of tourism development in other countries. They also pointed out the need to improve the tourism management system and investment opportunities. Some hotel managers and owners were also concerned about the future of their investment and how they could manage their bank loans given the seasonality of tourism and low rate of room occupancy during the low season. Furthermore, the local communities were not in favor of political and religious interference in tourism development in their area.

Additional analysis has been conducted to probe whether birthplace, occupation in tourism, and length of residency influenced the responses. An independent sample T-test was applied to compare the attitudes toward tourism development characteristics for those with tourism-related jobs and those without. The results showed, there was significant difference in scores for those working in tourism (Mean = 48.43, SD = 6.73) and those who did not have a job related to tourism (Mean = 50.17, SD = 6.75; $t(248) = -2.03$, $p = 0.043$). The result demonstrated that the people who did not have jobs related to tourism were more concerned about the characteristics of tourism development in their area.

Table 3. Attitudes towards tourism impacts in Sareyn

Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
Economic impacts		
Tourism industry increases the living standard of the community.	4.2	.87687
Tourism development creates a market opportunity for the local products (i.e. handicrafts, foods).	4.4	.84425
Tourism creates better job opportunities for local people.	4.3	.88289
Tourism has stimulated local infrastructure development.	4.0	.88838
The cost of land and real estates in the region does not increase because of tourism.	2.1	1.22690
Tourism does not increase the cost of living in my region.	2.9	1.26328
Socio-Cultural impacts		
Tourism development provides a better recreational opportunity for local residents.	4.2	.96273
Tourism development improves the positive image of the community.	4.3	.88050
Tourism encourages a variety of cultural activities among local residents.	3.9	.92619
Tourism does not contribute to the increase of crimes in this area.	3.3	1.29558
Tourism stimulates cultural exchange.	4.0	.91821
Tourism helps to preserve the cultural identity of my community.	3.8	.97065
Tourism development does not affect the religious practice of local people.	3.5	1.16150
Environmental impacts		
Littering does not get worse in this region because of tourism.	2.8	1.27655
Tourism does not disrupt the peace and tranquility of this area in overall.	3.4	1.19259
The area becomes too crowded with tourists.	3.6	1.12099

The findings about the impact of tourism was also significant, indicating that there was a relationship between it and the type of job held by the respondent (Mean = 59.59, SD = 7.83) for those with a job related to tourism and (Mean = 57.65, SD = 6.30; $t(248) = 2.17$, $p = 0.031$) for those without a job related to tourism. The results of statistical analysis (ANOVA) also indicated that place of birth and length of residency made no significant difference to the attitudes toward tourism development characteristics and its impacts.

Discussion and conclusion

Referring to Doxey's foundational Irridex model, the results showed that the strong positive attitudes to current and future tourism development are connected to the belief that tourism is a major contributing factor to the development of the region, and offers opportunities to generate economic growth and earn income. Furthermore, because tourism in Sareyn is generally managed/operated by the local community, residents view tourism more favorably when they perceive themselves capable of influencing outcomes related to development (Cooke, 1982). Faulkner and Tideswell (1997) state that destinations at an early stage of tourism development might be expected to elicit more positive community response. The findings of this study resemble the results of Allen et al. (1988), who found that tourism is often considered beneficial and tends to cause positive perceptions in areas which are at the early stage of their tourism development.

Sareyn evolved from a small and unknown village to a nationally famous destination thanks to therapeutic tourism. Therefore, tourism is also favored because of its important role in improving public awareness of a region and its image. Although the local community believed that the public sector (municipality) gives a good deal of attention to promoting tourism in this area, residents stated that the public tourism authorities do not plan and manage tourism development well and that marketing and promotion efforts have not been carefully handled. The promotion during the low season, for example, is poor (Zamani-Farahani & Musa, 2008). Inadequate selection of top-level managers and key authority figures in tourism (Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010) may be among the reasons. In the long term the lack of expertise and competence in tourism-related matters may negatively influence the effectiveness and efficiency of the development approach. The results of the semi-structured interviews with the local community also indicated that respondents are well informed about tourism. They suggest that Sareyn needs to improve its infrastructure, level regional inequalities, engage in tourism planning, and install an appropriate tourism managing system, if the region is to be able to host tourists throughout the year. The Sareyn spa centers need better facilities and maintenance and they should be managed under medical authorities with a well-stocked hospital. To meet customers' demands, health spa establishments need to know exactly what kind of services customers expect, and what their subsequent evaluation is (Alen et al., 2006).

The respondents stated that tourism rules and regulations need to be revised, perhaps because of the heavy interference of religion and political factors as well as the inefficiency of bureaucratic rules and procedures, which together may constrain the progress of tourist development in this region. In the same way, most of the respondents were indifferent to the tourists' religion. A large proportion of the respondents did not agree with the statement that political tension with the West affects tourism development. Since most of the tourists in Sareyn are domestic, tourism has not faced any damage from political crises, but tourism in Iran has generally been negatively affected by political crises during the past few decades (Zamani-Farahani, 2009).

The attitudes of the local community toward the economic impact of tourism are somehow ambiguous. People agreed that tourism stimulates the development of local infrastructure, creates a market opportunity for local products and increases job opportunities, leading to a better standard of living. The positive perceptions of its economic impact are also supported by other studies conducted in Iran (Aref et al., 2009; Azimi, 2007; Fouladiyan, 2008) which state that tourism development has contributed to increased employment opportunities, and income. At the same time, respondents believed that tourism is the cause of increased prices

for land and real estate and also to the cost of living; this view is consistent with the work of Haralambopoulos & Pizam (1996), Korca (1996) and Aref et al.(2009).

Nonetheless, local perceptions of the socio-cultural impacts were very positive. This research discovered that tourism has brought an improvement to the image of the region (Hashimoto, 2002; Kim & Patrick, 2005), and added to the recreational and cultural activities. Like previous findings this study demonstrates that tourism development stimulates a cultural exchange and the preservation of the community's identity (Dyer et al., 2003; Kim & Patrick, 2005; Perez & Nadal, 2005). This finding confirms previous research which found support for the cultural benefits of tourism (Besculides et al., 2002; Gursoy & Rutherford, 2004). Like the studies of Snaith and Haley (1999), Azimi (2007) and Alhasanat (2008), this research has found that most of the residents in Sareyn did not attribute social costs to tourism and they agreed that this industry did not affect crime rates. The respondents also indicated that tourism does not affect their religious duties. This finding is similar to a previous observation made by Sharpley (1994). However, it contradicts Khan (1997), who notes that tourism development led to the disruption of religion.

Concerning the environmental impact, overcrowding during the high season, the lack of sufficient facilities and poor management may lead to negative perceptions of the environmental impacts in terms of overcrowding and littering. Similar findings were found in studies by and Puczko & Ratz (2000) and Mbaiwa (2003). It is expected that Sareyn is likely to be environmentally degraded in the near future, if the officials do not take action to solve this problem. As a result, it should be suggested that Sareyn would invest more on regional planning.

A more positive community response is obviously to be expected when a destination is at an early stage of tourism development, with mostly local tourists, and also when the local community is involved in tourism (Butler, 2006 a & b). In this study, however, the findings show in some cases the respondents' present negative and ambivalent attitudes to tourism.

The findings also demonstrated that socio-demographic variables such as birthplace and length of residency appear not to play a significant role in explaining attitudes toward tourism in area of research. Contrariwise, having a job related to tourism is a factor that has been proved to have a significant effect on the attitude of a respondent. As a result, the residents who are employed by the industry have a more favorable impression of the impacts of tourism. They tend to welcome its economic and socio-cultural aspects more than others do. Conversely, they are also well aware of the negative impacts of tourism, in particular those regarding the environment and the increase in cost of land and living. The results of this study indicate that place of birth and lengths of residency make no statistically significant difference in the scores for the impact of tourism.

As noted above, tourism in this area has primarily been managed by the local community under the municipality, with limited intervention from Iran's Tourism Organization. However, community participation is multidimensional and is not limited to increasing the availability of accommodation and traditional hotel bookings, without knowing what else to do (Tosun & Timothy, 2001). Although encouraging local communities to be involved in tourism development is a sustainable matter (Tosun, 2000), in developing countries this aim could not be achieved without support from the public sector tourism bodies and expert assistance. Local communities in such countries also need to set up an education and training program and consultancy services in the technical, legal and operational fields by tourism experts in the public and private sectors. The top-level managers and key authority figures

selected for tourism development must possess appropriate technical, human, and conceptual skills and have the right personal qualities (Dessler, 1998).

At present, Sareyn is affected by seasonality and it is primarily visited by domestic tourists. Baum and Lundtrop (2001) have found a parallel relationship between seasonal destination and the specialization of tourism products. Travelers seek new and different holiday experiences (Ross, 2001). Designing new/mixed products with appropriate marketing/advertising is one approach to minimizing the effect of seasonality in Sareyn. Developing innovative products and combining therapeutic tourism with other tourism experiences including ecotourism, sports/winter sports (ski) tourism, heritage tourism, cultural and recreational tourism could be considered in a new approach for raising the numbers of domestic and international tourists during the year. The role of marketing as a tool to encourage sustainable tourism development is well recognized (Dinan & Sargeant, 2000). Being located in a Muslim country and surrounded by Muslim countries gives Sareyn an advantage in attracting Muslim tourists from the region, in particular from the Middle Eastern and Central Asian/Caucasian regions. Residents of countries in the Persian Gulf and Saudi Arabia are interested in finding greenery and pleasant weather in a holiday region (Seddon & Khoja, 2003).

This study has implications mainly for tourism public policy makers, planners, managers, and tourism investors as well as the local community particularly in developing countries. As mentioned previously local communities in such countries also need to establish an educational and training program and consultancy services in the technical, legal and operation fields by tourism experts from the public and private sector. According to Alen et al. (2006), therapeutic tourism is recognized as a factor to cause longer average stays and attract tourists who are indifferent to the season. However, Sareyn has not been affected by these expectations. The absence of proper planning and development principles; inadequate private sector experience, a lack of expert' assistance and marketing strategy, are among the main factors that prevent tourism in Sareyn in progress to a sustainable future. This industry could properly develop, in a sustainable way, if cooperation and partnership between the private sector, the local community, public sector and tourism experts could be achieved.

It is important to mention that the limitations of the present study are due to socio-culturally based obstacles, which have restricted the ultimate sample size. It should also be noted that, because this is a convenience sample, it may not be generalizable to a larger population in different environment. Finally, research and evaluation also should be considered in such a society as an important element of the tourism process. It is suggested to conduct continuously similar research at different stages, to evaluate the process and identify the differences in attitudes of tourism among local communities.

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