

Original Article

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Analyzing the impacts of tourism on sustainable regional development: a case study of the Kavirat District, Aran va Bidgol County, Iran

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Abstract

Tourism, as a tool for regional development, can lead to unsustainable consequences in the absence of integrated planning, particularly in desert areas. This study analyzes the impacts of tourism on sustainable regional development across economic, socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions in the Kavirat district of Aran va Bidgol county. This applied research is descriptive-analytical with a quantitative approach. The statistical population comprised 11,745 residents of the Kavirat district. Using G*Power, the sample size was estimated at 260 individuals, selected via simple random sampling. Data were collected using a researcher-made questionnaire and analyzed in SPSS through T-tests, Pearson correlation, and the Friedman test. The findings showed that residents' average perceptions of tourism impacts in the economic (3.00), socio-cultural (2.93), and environmental (3.01) dimensions were close to the moderate level, showing no significant difference from the reference value (3). Although the economic dimension had a higher relative priority, this difference was not statistically significant. Furthermore, positive and significant relationships were observed among all sustainable development dimensions, while no significant differences existed between male and female perspectives. Overall, the results indicated that tourism in its current state has failed to play an effective role in achieving sustainable regional development, and its impacts remain limited from the local community's perspective. This highlights the necessity of transitioning to planned and participatory models tailored to the specific capacities of desert regions.

Keywords

Kavirat district
Sustainable regional development
Tourism
Tourism impacts

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, tourism has emerged as a key driver of economic growth, job creation, and social interaction on a global scale, accounting for more than 10% of global GDP (Baloch et al., 2023). However, the experience of many tourist destinations indicates that unbalanced and unplanned tourism development, particularly in areas with sensitive environmental capacities, can lead to pressure on natural resources, the weakening of local identities, and a decline in the long-term sustainability of regions (Yar & Yasouri, 2023; Wu et al., 2021). Therefore, the focus of contemporary policies and research has shifted from “tourism growth” to “sustainable tourism” and its role in achieving sustainable regional development.

Sustainable regional development is a concept that emphasizes striking a balance among economic growth, social cohesion, and environmental protection within a specific geographical territory. Within this framework, tourism can act both as an opportunity for economic diversification and improving the quality of life, and, in the absence of integrated management, as a factor exacerbating inequalities and environmental degradation (Shakib et al., 2025). This dichotomy is particularly pronounced in small, less-developed regions with fragile ecosystems.

Kavirat district of Aran va Bidgol county, as one of the desert areas of Isfahan province, is a prominent example of such sensitive regions. Despite possessing unique attractions such as the historical Karshahi Castle, the Siazgeh Desert, and the Shah Abbasi Caravanserai of Abuzeidabad, this district faces limitations, including an arid climate, water scarcity, weak tourism infrastructure, and a limited reliance on sustainable activities in the local economy. In recent years, the relative increase in tourist arrivals to this region, without coherent planning and a precise assessment of the consequences, raises the fundamental question of whether tourism has been able to play an effective role in achieving sustainable regional development.

A review of the research literature reveals that the majority of previous studies have examined the impacts of tourism on sustainable development in metropolitan areas, coastal cities, or established tourist destinations, while small, desert, and lesser-known regions (which often possess high potential alongside environmental vulnerability) have received less attention. Furthermore, no research was identified at the domestic level that specifically and empirically

investigates the impacts of tourism on sustainable regional development in the Kavirat district of Aran va Bidgol county from the perspective of the local community.

Accordingly, the main problem of the current research is “to what extent and in what dimensions (economic, socio-cultural, and environmental) has tourism contributed to the realization of sustainable regional development in the Kavirat district of Aran va Bidgol county?” Relying on the Triple Bottom Line framework and utilizing field data derived from residents’ perceptions, this study aims to provide a realistic and measurable picture of tourism consequences in this region. The results of this study can provide a scientific basis for decision-making by local policymakers and planners to steer tourism towards sustainability in similar desert regions.

2. Theoretical framework

In the regional development literature, tourism is posited as a significant tool for stimulating economic growth, enhancing social capital, and improving the quality of life in less-developed regions. However, the experience of many tourist destinations indicates that, in the absence of proper management, tourism development can entail negative economic, social, and environmental consequences, and even threaten the long-term sustainability of the destination. Hence, in contemporary regional planning approaches, tourism is considered not merely an economic activity, but rather an integral component of the sustainable regional development system that must strike a balance among economic growth, environmental protection, and social welfare (Agarwal et al., 2024; Ku & Samsurijan, 2025).

To analyze this complex interaction, the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) model, introduced by Elkington, is regarded as one of the most widely utilized theoretical frameworks in sustainable development studies. This model is founded on the premise that sustainability can only be achieved if economic, social, and environmental performances are addressed simultaneously and in a balanced manner (Elkington, 1997). In tourism studies, this framework enables the analysis of the multidimensional impacts of tourism; such that economic benefits like increased income and employment, alongside socio-cultural consequences such as identity changes and host community satisfaction, as well as environmental pressures arising from resource consumption and waste generation, are

examined concurrently (Chen & Kamarudin, 2024; Nica et al., 2025). From this perspective, the TBL model serves not only as a tool for categorizing tourism impacts but also as an analytical framework for understanding the mechanisms through which tourism affects various dimensions of sustainable regional development.

The importance of adopting this approach becomes increasingly evident in areas with high environmental sensitivities, such as arid and desert regions. In such areas, limited natural resources and fragile ecosystems dictate that tourism development, regardless of environmental capacities, exerts excessive pressure on water, land, and natural heritage. Simultaneously, tourism can provide opportunities for diversifying the local economy, creating employment, and strengthening the cultural identity of host communities. Therefore, analyzing the impacts of tourism in desert regions necessitates a theoretical

framework capable of examining the interaction among economic, socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions simultaneously and coherently (Guo & Liu, 2024; Caro Carretero & Monroy Rodríguez, 2025; Zhang et al., 2025).

Accordingly, relying on the Triple Bottom Line model, the current study considers tourism as the independent variable whose effects on sustainable regional development are explicated not directly, but through economic, socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions acting as mediating mechanisms. On this basis, the conceptual model of the research is derived directly from the theoretical logic of the TBL framework, elucidating the relationships among regional tourism, the three dimensions of sustainability, and sustainable regional development in desert regions, with a specific emphasis on the Kavirat district of Aran va Bidgol county.

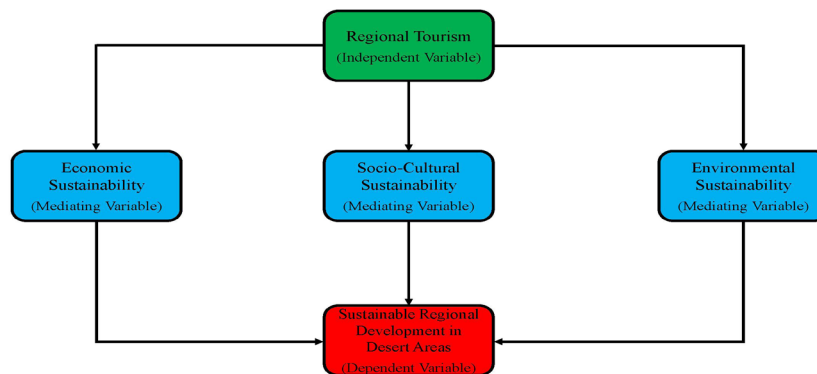


Figure 1. Conceptual model of the research

In this model, regional tourism is considered the independent variable, and its impact on sustainable regional development is explained through the three economic, socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions of sustainability as mediating variables. This framework has been formulated with due consideration to the environmental sensitivities and resource constraints inherent in desert regions.

3. Literature review

Studies related to the impacts of tourism on sustainable development indicate that this phenomenon, depending on spatial conditions, planning type, and scale of analysis, can have different and sometimes contradictory consequences. Therefore, previous research has not merely focused on the presence or absence of tourism impacts, but rather emphasized how these impacts are distributed and sustained in

various spatial contexts. Accordingly, the literature review of the current research is conducted with an analytical and comparative approach within the framework of the dimensions of the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) model of sustainability.

In the economic dimension, a significant portion of studies show that tourism development can strengthen the local economy through job creation, income generation, and infrastructure improvement (Mohammed et al., 2023; Agius & Briguglio, 2024; Shakib et al., 2025; Ahmadi & Bahjati, 2025; Karimi et al., 2024). Conversely, some studies indicate that the economic benefits of tourism are unsustainable and unequally distributed if there is a focus on limited markets, seasonal demand, or weak local infrastructure (Zmami & Ben-Salha, 2024; Hosseinnezhad Devin et al., 2025). These contradictory results indicate that the spatial context and local capacities play a determining

role in realizing the economic outcomes of tourism, an issue that gains greater importance in less-developed desert regions, including Kavirat District.

In the socio-cultural dimension, research findings emphasize the dual nature of tourism impacts. Some studies have considered tourism as a factor for strengthening local identity, increasing cultural interactions, and improving the quality of life of the host community (Ahmadi & Bahjati, 2025; Hosseinneshad Devin et al., 2025), whereas other research shows that uncontrolled tourism development can lead to the weakening of social cohesion, decreased resident satisfaction, and the emergence of local conflicts (Agius & Briguglio, 2024). This duality is particularly prominent in small, traditional, and less-developed regions that have limited social capacity to accommodate tourists, a situation that seems essential to examine in the desert sector.

The environmental dimension, as one of the most sensitive aspects of sustainable tourism, has been addressed in numerous studies. A portion of the research emphasizes the negative consequences of tourism, including the degradation of natural resources, increased pollution, and pressure on ecosystems (Baloch et al., 2023). In contrast, some studies show that tourism can help improve resource efficiency and reduce energy consumption and pollutant emissions if appropriate conservation and management policies are implemented (Zaghmout, 2024). However, generalizing these findings to arid and desert regions is cautious due to resource limitations and the fragility of ecosystems, necessitating case studies based on local conditions. Despite the expansion of studies on sustainable tourism, the majority of empirical research has focused on large destinations, urban areas, or coastal regions, and examining the impacts of tourism at local scales and in regions with sensitive ecosystems has received less attention. Particularly in Iran, research that has simultaneously examined the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions of tourism in desert regions within a coherent theoretical framework is limited. Therefore, the originality of the current research lies not in negating previous studies, but in employing the Triple Bottom Line model as an integrated analytical framework and focusing on the perceptions of residents at a regional scale, to elucidate the mechanism of tourism's impact on sustainable regional development in Kavirat district of Aran va Bidgol county.

4. Methodology

The current research is applied in terms of purpose and descriptive-analytical in nature, conducted using a quantitative approach. The analytical framework of the study is based on the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) model of sustainability, encompassing economic, socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions, which was utilized as the basis of the conceptual model for analyzing the impacts of tourism on sustainable regional development in desert regions.

The data collection tool was a researcher-made questionnaire, the items of which were extracted based on a review of theoretical literature and related empirical studies, and localized according to the conditions of the study area. The dimensions, items, and their extracted sources are presented in Table 1. The content validity of the instrument was confirmed by obtaining the opinions of five experts in the fields of tourism and regional planning. The reliability of the questionnaire was also examined using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, and the results were obtained as 0.805 for the economic dimension, 0.835 for the socio-cultural dimension, and 0.816 for the environmental dimension, indicating the acceptable reliability of the instrument.

The statistical population of the research consisted of the residents of Kavirat district of Aran va Bidgol county, totaling 11,745 individuals. The sample size was estimated at 260 individuals using statistical power analysis in G*Power software, considering a significance level of 0.05, a test power of 0.95, and a medium effect size. Sampling was conducted using a simple random sampling method.

Since the research variables were measured as summated scales (pseudo-interval) resulting from the aggregation of ordinal items, parametric statistical tests, including one-sample t-test, independent samples t-test, and Pearson correlation, were used for data analysis. Additionally, the non-parametric Friedman test was utilized to rank the three dimensions of sustainable development.

The normality of the distribution of variables was examined using skewness and kurtosis indices and the Shapiro-Wilk test. The skewness values of the variables ranged from -0.039 to 0.217, and the kurtosis values ranged from -0.705 to -0.501, all of which were within the acceptable range (± 2), indicating the approximate normal distribution of the data. Although the Shapiro-Wilk test was significant for some variables, given the relatively large sample size and the sensitivity of this

test in large samples, the approximate normality of the data was accepted, and the use of parametric tests was deemed justified. Data analysis was performed

using SPSS software. These tests were used to fulfill the research objectives and to test the relationships and differences predicted in the conceptual model.

Table 1. Dimensions and items measured in the research

Dimensions	Items	Sources
Economic	Creating job opportunities	Zmami & Ben-Salha, 2024; Zaghmout, 2024; Hosseinnezhad Devin et al., 2025; Ahmadi & Bahjati, 2025; Karimi et al., 2024; Mohammed et al., 2023; Agius & Briguglio, 2024
	Increasing local revenues	Hosseinnezhad Devin et al., 2025; Zaghmout, 2024; Ahmadi & Bahjati, 2025; Karimi et al., 2024; Mohammed et al., 2023; Agius & Briguglio, 2024
	Investing in city improvement	Hosseinnezhad Devin et al., 2025; Zmami & Ben-Salha, 2024
	Creating new local businesses	Hosseinnezhad Devin et al., 2025; Ahmadi & Bahjati, 2025
	Improving city infrastructure	Zmami & Ben-Salha, 2024; Hosseinnezhad Devin et al., 2025; Ahmadi & Bahjati, 2025
	Increasing living costs for residents	Karimi et al., 2024; Ahmadi & Bahjati, 2025
	Improving the city's public facilities	Hosseinnezhad Devin et al., 2025; Ahmadi & Bahjati, 2025
Socio-cultural	Strengthening local culture and identity	Karimi et al., 2024; Hosseinnezhad Devin et al., 2025
	Improving the residents' quality of life	Hosseinnezhad Devin et al., 2025; Ahmadi & Bahjati, 2025; Karimi et al., 2024; Agius & Briguglio, 2024
	Increasing social problems	Ahmadi & Bahjati, 2025; Hosseinnezhad Devin et al., 2025; Agius & Briguglio, 2024
	Preserving and restoring historical and cultural monuments	Ahmadi & Bahjati, 2025
	Changing local customs or lifestyle	Hosseinnezhad Devin et al., 2025
Environmental	Destruction of historical and ancient monuments	Ahmadi & Bahjati, 2025
	Increasing the importance of environmental protection	Hosseinnezhad Devin et al., 2025; Ahmadi & Bahjati, 2025
	Expanding urban green spaces	Hosseinnezhad Devin et al., 2025; Ahmadi & Bahjati, 2025
	Increasing air pollution	Baloch et al., 2023; Hosseinnezhad Devin et al., 2025; Mohammed et al., 2023
	Land use change	Hosseinnezhad Devin et al., 2025
	Destruction of natural resources	Baloch et al., 2023; Zmami & Ben-Salha, 2024; Zaghmout, 2024; Hosseinnezhad Devin et al., 2025
	Increasing waste production	Zaghmout, 2024; Hosseinnezhad Devin et al., 2025; Ahmadi & Bahjati, 2025
	Increasing traffic	Zaghmout, 2024; Hosseinnezhad Devin et al., 2025

4.1. Study area

Kavirat District is one of the districts of Aran va Bidgol County in Isfahan province. The center of this district is the city of Abuzeidabad, geographically located at approximate coordinates of 51 to 52 East longitude and 33 to 34 North latitude. This district is bounded by the Salt Lake and the Central Desert to the north,

Natanz and Kashan counties to the south, Ardestan County to the east, and the Central District of Aran va Bidgol to the west. In terms of natural and climatic characteristics, Kavirat District features a hot and dry desert climate, characterized by extreme diurnal temperature fluctuations and low atmospheric precipitation. Regarding vegetation and

geomorphological structure, this area encompasses sandy areas, sand dunes (including the Siazegh Desert), and drought-resistant vegetation such as Tamarisk (Gaz) and Haloxylon (Taagh). Based on the latest statistical data, the population of this district is 11,745 people, residing in the city of Abuzeidabad and its subordinate villages, including Fakhreh, Aliabad, Rijen,

Mohammadabad, Kaghazi, Yazdalan, Qasemabad, and Hosseinabad-e Kavir. The settlement pattern is mainly dispersed and influenced by natural conditions, water resources, and the spatial structure of the region. The spatial-physical structure of this region is a combination of traditional mud-brick architecture adapted to the desert climate and new constructions.

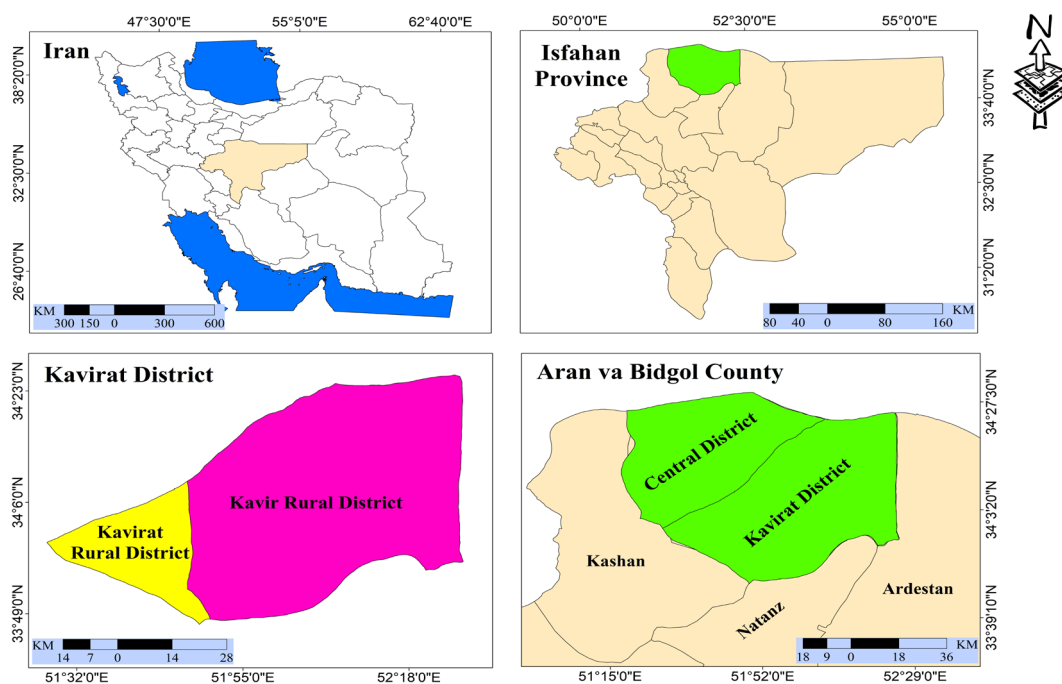


Figure 2. Geographical location of the Kavirat District, Aran va Bidgol County

5. Results

5.1. Descriptive findings of respondents

Descriptive findings indicated that the composition of respondents was diverse in terms of gender, age, marital status, occupation, and education. The majority of them were male, married, and in the age group of 31 to 40 years. Regarding occupation, homemakers and public sector employees had the highest share, and among educational levels, high school diploma and bachelor's degrees had higher frequencies. This demographic diversity enables the analysis of residents' perceptions regarding the impacts of tourism.

5.2. The impact of tourism on dimensions of sustainable regional development

To answer the main research question concerning the impact of tourism on sustainable regional development in the Kavirat district of Aran va Bidgol county, residents' perceptions were examined across three

dimensions: economic, socio-cultural, and environmental. The results showed that the mean scores of all three indicators are very close to the average level, and none of the dimensions of sustainable development, from the residents' perspective, shows a statistically or practically significant deviation from this level. This finding indicates that tourism in the study area has failed to create a distinct and sustainable impact on regional development, and residents' perceptions mostly point to a neutral or transitional state.

In the economic dimension, although some components, such as the increase in local revenues and the creation of job opportunities, received relatively more positive evaluations, the presence of components like weaknesses in improving infrastructure and public facilities has caused the overall effect of this dimension to remain at an average level (Table 2).

Table 2. One-sample t-test results for the economic dimension

Variable	Mean	p-value	Result
Creation of job opportunities	3.13	0.088	Above average
Increase in local revenues	3.83	0.001	Above average
Investment in city improvement	3.07	0.403	Above average
Creation of new local businesses	3.15	0.050	Above average
Improvement of city infrastructure	2.11	0.001	Below average
Increase in living costs for residents	3.62	0.001	Above average
Improvement of public city facilities	2.15	0.001	Below average
Total score of the economic indicator	3.00	0.860	Near average

In the socio-cultural dimension, the results suggested that tourism has failed to meaningfully strengthen the cultural identity, quality of life, and social cohesion. Conversely, the relatively higher perception of the

destruction of historical monuments indicates residents' concerns regarding the negative cultural consequences of tourism (Table 3).

Table 3. One-sample t-test results for the socio-cultural dimension

Variable	Mean	p-value	Result
Strengthening local culture and identity	2.55	0.001	Below average
Improving the residents' quality of life	2.61	0.001	Below average
Increase in social problems	2.93	0.462	Below average
Preservation and restoration of historical/cultural monuments	2.80	0.010	Below average
Changes in local customs or lifestyle	2.59	0.001	Below average
Destruction of historical and ancient buildings	4.13	0.001	Above average
Total score of the socio-cultural indicator	2.93	0.292	Below average

In the environmental dimension, the findings indicated that, while residents have experienced some negative consequences, such as increased pollution, waste generation, and pressure on natural resources, these

impacts have not been significant enough to cause a major deviation of the overall indicator from the average state (Table 4).

Table 4. One-sample t-test results for the environmental dimension

Variable	Mean	p-value	Result
Increasing the importance of environmental protection	2.56	0.001	Below average
Expansion of urban green spaces	2.18	0.001	Below average
Increase in air pollution	3.28	0.001	Above average
Land use change	2.93	0.387	Below average
Destruction of natural resources	3.90	0.001	Above average
Increase in waste generation	3.20	0.014	Above average
Increase in traffic	3.07	0.416	Above average
Total score of the environmental indicator	3.01	0.750	Above average

5.3. Comparison and prioritization of sustainable development dimensions

For a relative comparison of the three dimensions of sustainable development, the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental indicators were ranked using the Friedman test. The results indicated that despite the higher relative priority of the economic dimension compared to the other two dimensions,

this difference is not statistically significant. This suggests that from the residents' perspective, none of the sustainable development dimensions has been prominently affected by tourism, and the observed impacts are mostly scattered and inconsistent. Therefore, the results of this section should be interpreted as relative tendencies rather than definitive differences (Table 5).

Table 5. Friedman test results for ranking tourism dimensions

Rank	Dimensions	Mean Rank
1	Economic	2.06
2	Environmental	2.02
3	Socio-cultural	1.92

Significance level: 0.248 | Degrees of freedom: 2 | Chi-Square: 2.786

5.4. Relationships among tourism dimensions

Analysis of the relationships among tourism indicators revealed positive and significant correlations between the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions. These correlations indicate that changes in any of the tourism dimensions can simultaneously

affect other dimensions of sustainable development. In particular, the strong synergy between the socio-cultural and environmental dimensions shows that unsustainable interventions in one of these areas can create cascading consequences in other dimensions (Table 6).

Table 6. Pearson correlation coefficients among tourism dimensions

Dimensions	Economic	Socio-cultural	Environmental
Economic	1	0.681**	0.503**
Socio-cultural	0.681**	1	0.755**
Environmental	0.503**	0.755**	1

**p<0.01 (2-tailed)

5.5. Demographic differences

The results of comparing the views of women and men showed no significant difference in their perceptions of the impacts of tourism across any of the dimensions of sustainable development. This finding indicates relative homogeneity of views in the local community

and the absence of a gender gap in evaluating the consequences of tourism in the study area (Table 7). Thus, it can be concluded that the gender variable does not have a significant impact on residents' perceptions of tourism impacts, and the main analyses of the research can be interpreted independently of it.

Table 7. Descriptive statistics of dimensions by gender

Dimension	Gender	Frequency	Mean	Standard Deviation
Economic	Male	136	3.00	0.84
	Female	124	3.01	0.76
Socio-cultural	Male	136	2.99	0.98
	Female	124	2.86	0.95
Environmental	Male	136	3.02	0.88
	Female	124	3.00	0.83

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrated that tourism in the Kavirat district of Aran va Bidgol county, from the perspective of residents, has failed to act as an effective driver of sustainable regional development across economic, socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions, and its impacts have remained at a limited and relatively neutral level. This result, although seemingly unexpected at first glance given the region's tourism capacities and attractions, can be explained in light of the institutional and infrastructural conditions, as well as the way tourism is realized in the area, highlighting a significant analytical gap between "tourism potential" and the "experienced reality of development."

On the one hand, the results of this study are based on the residents' perceptions that do not reflect potential capacities, but rather express the tangible and everyday consequences of tourism in its current state. Accordingly, the lack of a significant impact from tourism can be attributed to structural and executive limitations, including the weakness of accommodation and service infrastructure, inadequate access to attractions, the absence of an integrated tourism management and planning system, and a pattern of tourist presence that is mainly seasonal, short-term, and dispersed. Such a tourism pattern, even if sustained, lacks the capacity to generate sustainable economic benefits, constructive social interactions, and manageable environmental consequences. As a result, it does not emerge in the local community's perception as a determining factor in regional development.

On the other hand, the observed significant relationships among the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development emphasize the interconnected and systemic nature of these dimensions and are consistent with the conceptual model of the research. This finding indicates that weak tourism performance in any single dimension can also undermine the function of other dimensions and hinder the formation of a sustainable development path. Within this framework, the research results align with the literature that emphasizes the necessity of integrated and context-based tourism management to achieve sustainable development. At the same time, its divergence from studies conducted in more developed tourism destinations highlights the critical importance of spatial conditions, the level of infrastructure

development, and the mode of tourism governance. The research concludes that the mere presence of tourists is not a sufficient condition for achieving sustainable regional development. In sensitive desert areas, such as the study area, it can even lead to neutral or unsustainable consequences without targeted planning. The research findings provide a clear warning for local policymakers and planners: tourism development can lead to sustainable economic, social, and environmental progress only if it is based on strengthening infrastructure, enhancing the quality of the tourist experience, ensuring active participation from the local community, and fostering coordination among various stakeholders. Thus, achieving sustainable development in desert areas will not simply rely on increasing the number of tourists. Instead, it requires a shift from dispersed and unmanaged tourism to planned and responsible patterns that align with the ecological and social capacities of the region.

Based on these findings, future policy should focus on upgrading infrastructure suitable for the desert environment, establishing integrated tourism management mechanisms, and enhancing the role and benefit of the local community within the tourism value chain. Furthermore, to complement existing evidence, conducting qualitative and longitudinal studies that delve deeper into the reasons behind residents' limited perceptions and examining the gradual evolution of tourism impacts over time appear necessary.

Authors' Contributions

The author's contribution is 100%.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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