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### Prioritization of the most important common attractions in the development of sport tourism of Iran's Northern Provinces

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#### ABSTRACT

Identification and prioritization of available resources, is the first step in the development and management of tourism destinations sports. The purpose of study was prioritization of the sport tourism attractions in developing sport tourism in Iranian Northern provinces Therefore 112 subjects (20 sport management experts, 92 chairman, assistants and experts of universities, administrations of physical education, cultural heritage and municipalities of three provinces) were selected as the sample and answered to the questionnaire designed by the researcher. The face and content validities of the this questionnaire confirmed by experts and in a guide survey Cronbach's alpha coefficient for its reliability calculated, a =0/92. For analyzing data, Kruska Wallis, u- man- whitney, Touki and ANOVAs tests was used Collected in a significant level  $\alpha \leq 0/05$ . Findings showed that Attraction of the sport competitions and events, water sports, travelling in hills and nature tourism, mountain climbing and caving ,travelling in forest, warm water and nature therapy, beach sport, hunting, and winter sports, respectively have the most importance in developing sport tourism in studied provinces. According to research findings are suggested that authorities of the respective organizations have more attention to hold sport events for attracting more sport tourist and sport administrators in collaboration with other relevant departments do the more investment on sports attractions such as the beach sport and hiking.

**Key words:** Tourism, sport tourism, sport Attractions

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#### INTRODUCTION

Sport is one of the most important tourist activities during the tour; moreover, sightseeing and travelling are accompanied with different types of sports. Tourist is a person travelling abroad at least one night and at most one year without the intention of working or earning money [27]. In addition, sport tourist is a temporary visitor who stays at a minimum of 24 hours in the sport venue, and his primary purpose is to participate in a sport event while there are likely to be further attractions as well [36]. Once tourism and sport were considered as two separate categories, yet today the relation between these two categories is widely understood. "Sport and tourism have common goals. Building shared understanding among different cultures, lifestyles and traditions, promoting peace and friendship among nations, encouraging and motivating individuals to do recreational activities in order to escape daily life pressures [22]. Frankly said Today sport tourism has globally changed into a socioeconomic phenomenon beyond an industry. This industry has achieved a position as a multidimensional phenomenon in communities more than ever before. The majority of countries has gained a lot of advantages and benefits by enormous investment and has employed it as a great source to enhance the economic, social and political status [17] to increase employment, income and to improve the substructures [29], reputation and to create new brands [26]. IOC and UNWTO reported that tendency to sport has increased in recent years. These news sources offer solid evidence which shows travels with the intention of sport tourism, sport events holding and its growth have aroused the interest of many countries and authorities [28]. As a result, tourist destination marketers concentrate on the improvement of sport tourism and

sport events hosting as an important strategy to improve tourist spots [38]. Studies show that sport tourism is the most important growing sector of tourism industry. So that it has been considered as a multibillion dollar business by making 4.5 trillion dollars for tourism industry and world tour [15]. In order to improve the sport tourism in our country different components have been taken into account such as the analysis of crucial factors in sport tourism, presenting a strategic planning model [2], designing marketing model of Iran sport tourism [14], analysis of marketing mixes in sport tourism [6], recognition of traditional and efficient sport events in promoting sport tourism [8], creating websites and appropriate communication systems for marketing, adopting sport tourism disciplines in all levels at universities, researching, probing and printing sport tourism magazines, holding international conferences and meetings, training expert manpower, political and juridical support management and coordination, developing the substructures and spots, improving the international relationship and breaking tensions [12]. Among all these components, one of the most important factors which is likely to develop the sport tourism in our country is to recognize the sport tourism facilities [4]. Analysis and evaluation of facilities and resources are indicative of improving and managing the sport tourist destinations. Different destinations have their own particular features and facilities to promote the sport tourism and draw the tourist [18]. Hinch and Higgam noted that sport tourism success primarily depends on the facilities of tourist destination and how they are unique and distinctive in proportion to other destinations [41]. The administrator of Canada sport tourism association noted that one of the four levels of promoting sport tourism in Canada is to develop and recognize the sport tourism capacity and claimed that this model is comprehensive and universal, and it can be utilized in each area if the budget is planned [40]. Moeinfard in his research stated that recognition of sport tourism facilities and capacities is an important factor in sport tourism and a fundamental component in achieving the hosting of international sport events [12]. As a result, today the sport officials seek to make the focused courses localized and specialized. Some countries regarding their existing talents and potentials have adopted some sport centers for one or a few particular sport fields such as Korea in Martial arts specially Taekwondo, Austria and Switzerland are hosts of winter sports like sky and hockey because of their suitable climate for these kinds of sports and Japan. These countries have been able to draw a number of sport tourists to their own countries as a result they earn large income annually [19]. Turkey also devised 2023 strategy in 2007 and by investing in sport tourism facilities especially in coastal city, Antalya, has drawn 700 teams in 2003 and 1200 teams in 2007 from all over the world even Iran and in 2007 earned 6 million dollars [27]. Moreover, Qatar by a strategic plan and investment in developing sport tourism could get the hosting of 2022 world cup championship, so it can make its own country known in all over the world and earn a huge income. Researches show sports which are regarded as a tradition of a country can attract great number of tourists for example China draws many tourists because of Kong fu. In addition, researches demonstrate that the popular sport teams draw spectators in each match for instance in England League matches, in the match between Manchester United and Aldetraford, between 4000 to 6000 international tourists attend this sport event [25]. Based on proved studies, Iran is one of the first ten countries in terms of tourist attraction; moreover, in terms of biological diversity and natural attractions has the fifth world ranking [7]. Plus, the long-term and indirect benefits include the growth and improvement in the economic and social substructure of countries. [30] According to the studies conducted in this regard, the most important factors which are likely to attract the active sport tourists and improve the sport tourism in each country. There are the spectacular natural scenery including national parks, wildlife, beaches, mountainous centers, and other attractions such as decent weather condition, having 4 seasons, aquatic therapy centers like hot springs. In Iran 3 northern provinces ( Mazandaran, Gilan, Golestan) are 104377, 140423, 23756 kilometers square respectively and have natural and virgin land, beaches and mountains to attract a plenty of sport tourists and can be appropriate destinations for recreational purposes. Furthermore, their particular geographical features and natural tourist attractions such as natural parks, wild life, beaches, mountainous centers and other attractions like decent weather condition and aquatic therapy centers, flat plains, rivers, lagoons, and high water level dams and thousands of attractions are such factors which can have profound effects on the improvement of sport tourism [4]. Nature based sports such as swimming, boating, surfing, diving, skiing, horse riding; rock climbing, mountain climbing, caving (spelunking) and traditional and local sports draw a lot of tourists toward natural areas. Today people require recreational activities in nature because of their mental and psychological needs, so by a calculated plan, we can make most of different areas potentials in order to take step to achieve economic goals and provide job opportunities for the country [6]. The major issue sport tourism industry faces is how to organize and administrate global activities. Bright prospect of this industry in our country depends on companies' organizational structures, capability of keeping up with the global competition, an urgent response to demands, and the ability to increase the profitability. One way by which the sport industry can be improved is to have a comprehensive plan in country [11]. Unfortunately, in Iran tourism and particularly sport tourism haven't been widely studied and its significance hasn't been fully grasped and recognized. Therefore, a wide research should be conducted in sport tourism. There are also further reasons showing the importance of research in sport tourism including: 1. The fast growth of sport tourism in

different aspects in the world. 2. The youth and people interest in sport and sport tourism. 3. The role of sport tourism in permanent and seasonal employment. As a result, the researcher intends to identify the most important attractions in the improvement of sport tourism in Iran Northern provinces (Mazandaran, Gilan, Golestan). It is hoped that the current research findings help the domestic planners and organizers of sport competitions and sport events. The research results can be applied in tourism industry and tour and travel agencies planning and managing the tour activities. Moreover, the identification of these factors is likely to make some sport tourism related organizations such as department of physical education, the tourism organization of municipalities and governors, the national Olympic committee and sport federations to collaborate in this field. This research results are likely to cause and shape a basic approach and plan to promote the sport tourism in Gilan and Golestan. Plus, this research can promote the competition of research and findings in sport tourism. Therefore, in order to accelerate this study the identification of areas with enormous potentials, investment and attraction of tourists in sport tourism are considered as important factors to improve this industry.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

Current research is research in humanities and it is in form of survey. The researcher's purpose is to explore the most important sport attractions in improvement of sport tourism in Iran's Northern provinces (Mazandaran, Gilan, Golestan). The research statistical population is 112 ( 20 faculties from the 3 provinces who are called sport management experts, 18 people including manager and vice presidents working in sport departments, cultural heritage and municipality of the three provinces and finally 74 physical education experts working in above centers) Regarding the limitation in choosing the research subjects and people having knowledge in research concept the whole statistical population have been selected according to accessibility(N=n). In current research due to the lack of a suitable questionnaire related to research subject, first the researchers analyzed the related references, articles, and books and explored the 8 major factors in improvement of sport tourism in the north of the country: 1. Beach sports 2. Winter sports 3. Caving and mountain climbing 4. Hot spring and aquatic therapy 5.hunting attractions 6. Hill climbing and hiking in nature 7.Jungle hiking attraction 8.Holding sport events. Then a 38 question questionnaire based on Likert Scale was designed and when the experts and specialists confirmed its validity, 35 questionnaires was finally designed for consultant research. During the research 30 completed questionnaires by subjects (27 experienced people in sport tourism and also 3 managers of cultural heritage, handicrafts and tourism organization) were done to assess their reliability. After the analysis the reliability was confirmed after reducing the questions to 31 and  $\alpha = 0.92$  was calculated. This questionnaire included 2 personal information sections and the main section of questions. In order to analyze the research data and assess the demographic characteristics and the importance rate of each attraction, descriptive statics (mean, median etc.) was applied. Kolmogorove-Smirnove test was used for normal distribution test of data and to analyze the research questions parametric and nonparametric tests were applied  $p \leq 0.05$ . (Kruskal Wallis, Yeoman Whiteny and Toky)

Research findings: Results show that 75% of participants in research are men and the majority of them are between 40 to 49. 69.5% of them have AA and BS/BA. Among all participants most of them (72%) were experts. The work experience of most of the participants was less than 5 years and was from Gilan province. Plus, physical education department had the most participants in this research. The results related to the most important sport attractions in improvement of sport tourism reveal that to the subjects competitions and sport events (  $\mu = 25.26$ ), aquatic beach sports ( $\mu = 15.97$ ), Hill climbing and hiking ( $\mu = 14.07$ ), mountain climbing and caving ( $\mu = 12.59$ ), jungle hiking ( $\mu = 12.14$ ), hot spring and nature therapy ( $\mu = 10.88$ ), hunting ( $\mu = 10.4$ ), winter sports ( $\mu = 7.16$ ) are the most important factors in improvement of sport tourism in mentioned provinces.

**Table 1: the capability of holding competitions and aquatic sports**

Statistic/ Variable	Sample volume	average	S D	Minimum	Maximum
Holding water sport competition	112	24.55	5.76	8	35
Winter sports	112	15.22	3.78	4	20
Mountain climbing & caving	112	7.72	3.21	3	15
Hot spring & nature therapy	122	12.88	3.68	7	20
Hunting	122	10.96	2.28	6	15
Hill climbing & nature hiking	122	10.16	3.13	3	15
Jungle hiking	122	13.94	3.26	5	20
	122	12.12	2.30	5	15

The table 1 illustrates that the capability of holding competitions and aquatic sports average are 24.55 and 15.22 the most important capabilities respectively and Winter sports and Hunting average 10.16 AND 7.72 are the least important capabilities in sequence in the improvement of sport tourism in the view of the people answering the questions.

**Table 2: the prioritization of sport capabilities in three Northern provinces**

Group	Variable	Average rank	Chi-Square	Df	sig
Gilan,	Holding water sport competition	25.26	13.91	7	0.019
	Winter sports	15.97			
Golestan	Mountain climbing & caving	7.16			
	Hot spring & nature therapy	12.59			
	Hunting	10.88			
Mazandaran	Hill climbing & nature hiking	10.04			
	Jungle hiking	14.07			
		12.14			

### CONCLUSION

To sum up, sport tourism is a multidimensional phenomenon that benefiting from it depends on the identification of ideal destinations and making most of them. Sport natural and cultural attractions are 3 major components of tourism and evaluation and analysis of natural sport capabilities and attractions of each area is an important step in promotion and management of sport destinations. Sport tourism gives us the opportunity to benefit from natural sport attractions; therefore, paying attention and investing in important attractions play an important role in attracting sport tourists. The research findings show that to the research subjects, the attractions related to the competition and sport events ( $\mu= 25.26$ ), aquatic and beach sports ( $\mu=15.97$ ), Hill climbing and Nature hiking ( $\mu=14.07$ ), Mountain climbing and Caving( $\mu= 12.59$ ), Jungle hiking ( $\mu= 12.14$ ), Hot spring and nature therapy ( $\mu= 10.88$ ), Hunting ( $\mu=10.04$ ), and winter sports ( $\mu=7.16$ ) are the most important factors in improvement of sport tourism in studied provinces. Sport tourism facilities and attractions that most of them are natural attractions of 3 provinces Mazandaran, Gilan, Golestan have been stated in this research, and to the subject's view point each of these attractions has been prioritized. Regardless of the competition and sport events, the other attractions are in the category of natural attractions. There are numerous natural attractions in these 3 provinces and are one of their strengths. The importance of natural sport attraction in improvement of sport tourism in Hinch and Higam (2006), Gipson (2005), Adabifiroozjah (2006) Zaitoonli, Hither and et al have been confirmed. Yet in terms of order or prioritization of these factors, there are some differences among researchers. The difference in prioritization is likely related to the difference in potentials, cultures of the studied areas. Undoubtedly, the potentials of different areas make the people engage in a certain activity. For instance, the existence of high and snow covered mountain in an area inspires people to climb the mountain and the existence of beaches in another area encourages people to aquatic sports and the sky resorts or areas such as Shemshak and Dizin in sky resorts gravitate people of these areas to winter sports. Culture differences in different parts of the country are the most important factors which encourage people to do a certain activity while in another area people are averse to it. In current research the competitions and sport event attractions are the top priority. As a result, more attention should be paid on having team in high levels and holding competitions in these provinces which can be one of the factors to attract the tourists. Moreover, the importance of famous teams and sport events has one of the major attractions in improvement of sport tourism in Zaitooli (2007). Abasi (2010) Karkon (2011) Swart and Bob (2007) Solberg and Preuss (2007) have been confirmed. In this term Golestan, Gilan, Mazandaran have a lot of capabilities such as traditional sports including Horse riding and local sports such as Kabadi and Alishwristling. The significance of capabilities and facilities of tourism destinations has been considered as an important component in being a host country based on Moeinfard research (2006)Westerback and et al (2001), and the significance of planning and recognizing the capabilities and facilities of sport tourism based on Yat research (2006) Moeinfard (2008) and significance of identifying the strength, weaknesses, opportunities and designing sport tourism strategy based on Esfahani research (2008)and designing tourism improvement 2023 in 2007 in Turkey and sport tourism planning model in 2006 in Canada and strategy of China and Qatar have been all confirmed. Miranda and Andosa (2005) in a sport tourism study in Spain found out that among all natural attractions in the country, aquatic sports (36.89%) Hill climbing and walking (31.85%) are the most important areas in attracting the sport tourists. Moreover, they noted that natural attractions factor (78.3%) is the most imperative one in attracting the sport tourists to Spain. Gilan, Mazandaran, and Golestan are full of natural aquatic, beach, mountain etc. attractions. Beach sports, Hill climbing and Nature hiking are important due to three factors:

1. Having a vast area in the North of Iran about 1000km coastal line the Caspian Sea, the largest lake in the world attracts a lot of tourists in the summer. The coastal area between the Alborz Mountain and the southern beach of the Caspian Sea has the most spectacular scenery of Iran. There is a combination of the sea, mountain and jungle. This area has made it the most important visitor destination in Iran.

2. The wide variety of sport activities in this area, the activities such as swimming, scuba diving, boating, wind surfing, beach sports and canoeing and activities like walking, jogging, cycling, horse riding, Golf and other activities done on the slide hills and hills.

3. The seasonal phenomenon has little effect on these attractions. The conducted research in hill climbing, nature hiking and mountain climbing shows that the mountain and slide hills of this area are very suitable place for entertainment and recreational activities; therefore by an appropriate plan and investment we can benefit from them a lot [3, 35, 27, and 23].

The other attraction in rank order of 4 was mountain climbing. There are many countries which host the mountain climbers and the most important of them has high altitudes regionally. For instance, the countries such as Kazakhstan, Russia, China, India, Nepal, and Bhutan in Tibet plateau have 1000 Mounts higher than 6000 meters and 14 Mounts higher than 8000 meters. In Himalayas mountain range hosts numerous climbers annually [13,20]. Tibet has 2.5 million populations and as a high plateau hosts a great number of mountain climbing and nature hiking tourists (UNWTO/2001, page58) since 55% of Iran's land is mountainous, it hosts the local and foreign climbers annually. Therefore, just by an appropriate plan and improvement of substructures it can promote it profoundly. Among all provinces in the country, Mazandaran has more potential to draw the sport tourists. The other attraction in this research is jungle which exerts a fundamental role in attracting the tourists based on Anders and Miranda (2005), Deb (2000) Abdosalam (2000); however, in this research jungle is not considered as much important in the view point of its subjects and its place in rank order of 5. Yet it should be still considered important in attracting the tourist and more attention should be paid to preserve it.

Hot spring and nature therapy are regarded major attraction but in this research it doesn't correspond to the conducted research. (Zahra Kazemi.2007, Holding /2007) Mineral water is an interesting phenomenon which is important in terms of medicine and tourism. Mineral water resources are likely to attract plenty of tourists and gain a great deal of income. Hot springs are produced in some parts of land which have tectonic, morphological and magmatic conditions. In Iran there are numerous hot springs where there are different kinds of gases such as H<sub>2</sub>O, Carbon dioxide and radium. The therapeutic uses include: When a person is exposed to a hot spring bath. It can sedate their nervous system and the body's metabolism is stimulated. The circulation of blood and cell oxygenation increased. The north of Iran is not known for its hot spring and it is because of lack of suitable advertisement, inaccessibility, not sufficient facilities near hot springs and not identifying the benefits of hot springs.

Hunting attraction has been a field in which lots of research has been conducted; however, in this research it has a very low rank. There are more than 100 large hunting grounds in Iran. Some of them such as Jajrood preserve have world fame. The species which can be hunted in this hunting ground include: ram, wild goat, deer, gazelle, hog, rabbit, and goat, gray partridge, and Caspian snow cock, see-see partridge, pheasant, francolin, Hubrh, goose and duck. You can fish in fifty lakes and ponds in Iran. Some of Iran Rivers include Tigris salmon, large scaled bars etc. Today holding hunting tour is a popular way to benefit from ecotourism resources, but in Iran they have nevermade most of it. Unfortunately, none of the travel agencies have held even one hunting tour. Lack of an appropriate plan in tourism organization and unaffordable hunting permit are likely to cause tourist not to choose Iran as a destination. In winter sport attractions, the results of current research contradict Kosasi research. In Kosasi research (2005) winter sport attraction was the top priority while our research due to some reasons was completely different.

1. Climate change and a decline in snowing which has reduced the ski season and winter sports in the north of the country while in European countries the snowing is more and longer.

2. Not recognizing the winter sport resources and facilities in the north of the country.

3. Not having adequate ski pistes and facilities.

4. Difficulty in accessing the ski pistes in winter.

According to the research, the capabilities and attractions of the three above provinces are suitable for improvement of tourism because of great variety. Plus, the attractions and capabilities are not affected by season and in all seasons the sport activities are provided. Sport tourism is a fundamental approach in development of three world countries; therefore, if developing countries take steps to design particular strategy to improve it and provide the necessary

facilities to hold Olympics and competitions in the country. The identification of effective factors in sport tourism is likely to help the organizers to tackle the problems and improve this field. The most successful countries are those ones which have thought globally but taken down to action locally.

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