



Identifying income-generating factors for the development of horse tourism in Khuzestan Province

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Abstract

Background and Objective: Economic development of horse tourism in Khuzestan, relying on the purebred Arabian breed, is a strategic solution to move beyond the oil economy, create rural employment, and improve provincial infrastructure. This approach, by creating a value chain and attracting foreign exchange earnings, turns Khuzestan into an international hub for sports and commercial tourism. In this regard, the present study was conducted with the aim of Identifying income-generating factors for the development of horse tourism in Khuzestan Province.

Methodology: The present study is organized in two phases: qualitative (identification of indicators through interviews) and quantitative (weighting using the SIWEC method). The aim of this approach was to extract and accurately rank the factors affecting the research topic, relying on the knowledge of experts in the field of tourism and equestrianism in Khuzestan province. The process of selecting participants in different sections was also carried out based on purposeful and judgmental sampling to ensure the richness of specialized data.

Results and Findings: The research findings show that the development of horse tourism in Khuzestan requires a logical hierarchy in which investment and finance, with priority given to banking facilities, act as the cornerstone and most vital economic driver. Secondly, specialized infrastructure and border trade, with an emphasis on modern transportation and global registration of native breeds, provide the necessary physical and diplomatic platforms for a revenue leap. Finally, job creation and event prosperity are secondary outcomes that will only be achieved if the macro strategy changes from traditional approaches to establishing investment security and export-oriented development.

Keywords: Sports tourism, sports development, purebred Arabian horse, SIWEC method, Khuzestan province.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction

Today, the tourism industry is recognized as one of the largest and most productive financial activities in the world, which is referred to as the “invisible economy”. This dynamic sector, by allocating a significant share of GDP and total international employment, acts as a vital driver for sustainable development, foreign exchange and poverty alleviation, beyond simple recreation. The flourishing of this industry provides an efficient means to achieve all-round economic growth by stimulating local markets and strengthening the service supply chain. Along this trend, from the intersection of the tourism industry and sports, a new and strategic field called sports tourism has emerged, which has profound direct and indirect economic impacts on societies by creating numerous job opportunities and paving the way for the development of large-scale infrastructure.

Under this category of tourism, the horse industry and equestrian complexes have emerged as a strategic field and a driver of development, especially in rural areas. Relying on activities such as specialized breeding, breeding, and holding national and international competitions, this industry establishes an inextricable link between recreational dimensions and cultural identity, and due to its nature-oriented nature, it provides an ideal platform for investment in vast lands. Equestrian tourism has become a “power-driven” sector by creating a complete value chain that extends from veterinary services and farriery to equipment production and hotel management. Holding events such as beauty festivals and horse racing competitions has brought significant foreign exchange by attracting sponsors and spectators with high purchasing power, and has established the position of this industry as a luxury and income-generating economic activity. Despite the great potential and the four-season climate of Iran, this industry is still among the emerging areas that require careful analysis and coherent policymaking. In the meantime, identifying and systematically analyzing the economic factors that generate income in Khuzestan Province, as the historical origin of the Arabian horse, is more than a management choice, it is a strategic necessity to diversify the local economy and overcome dependence on oil revenues. Khuzestan Province, with its exclusive competitive advantage, can become a strategic hub for horse tourism in West Asia by activating the latent capacities in rural and nomadic communities and establishing a link between living heritage and sports diplomacy. Explaining the income-generating components in this region, from national auctions to international competitions, will not only contribute to the equitable redistribution of wealth and the improvement of welfare infrastructure, but will also pave the way for transforming this cultural capital into a sustainable national wealth and economic prosperity based on the region's ecology.

Methodology

This research, using a mixed (qualitative-quantitative) approach and an applied nature, seeks to systematically analyze the income-generating economic components in the development of horse tourism in Khuzestan Province. In its first phase, a comprehensive framework consisting of 7 macro-indices and 42 sub-indices was extracted through an in-depth review of the subject literature and approval by a panel of experts. The statistical population of this study includes 50 elites and experts in the fields of tourism and equestrianism who have been selected through purposive sampling to accurately weight and prioritize the indicators through structured questionnaires based on the Likert scale and using the methodological innovation of the SIWEC technique in the Excel software environment.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study, which were analyzed using the SIWEC multi-criteria decision-making method, show that the “Investment and Finance (IF)” index with a weight of 0.1620 is recognized as the most critical economic driver in the development of horse tourism in Khuzestan province. The results of data normalization and applying the standard deviation of respondents indicate that without creating sustainable financing structures, other development pillars will face serious challenges; so that the “Infrastructure (I)” and “Trade and Border Exchanges (T)” indices with a similar weight of 0.1507 are ranked second in importance. This prioritization indicates that the strategic location of Khuzestan and the potential of indigenous breeds can only lead to foreign exchange productivity and attraction of foreign traders if international quarantine centers and specialized accommodation complexes are in place. In the micro-analysis of sub-indices, “Bank facilities and low-interest loans (IF2)” has ranked first among all factors, which indicates the urgent need of stakeholders for liquidity to launch this industry. After that, the sub-indices “Investment in multi-purpose complexes (IF1)” and “Specialized transportation network (I2)” are in the next ranks. The findings also show that “World Register of Indigenous Races (T3)” and “Silami tourism (T5)” have high potential for foreign exchange through sports diplomacy. Overall, the obtained prioritization pattern proves that Khuzestan’s economic leap strategy in this area should be based on the focus of “investment facilitation” and “specialized infrastructure development” so that subsequent layers such as employment and event economy are activated.

Conclusion

The results of the study show that for the economic prosperity of horse tourism in Khuzestan Province, there is a logical hierarchy of revenue-generating drivers, at the top of which, financial facilities and bank incentives act as the driving force of the entire system. The prioritization of the sub-indices reflects the fact that the modernization of the horse industry and its transformation into a tourism hub requires, first of all, continuous capital injection into multipurpose projects and breeding. In the next order, the creation of specialized infrastructure such as transportation networks and themed accommodations, along with the exploitation of cross-border trade capacities and the global registration of indigenous breeds, act as the main catalysts for attracting foreign tourists and investors. While components such as branding, event economy, and skilled employment are placed in the next ranks, this arrangement indicates a structural continuity; So that the sustainability of income generation in the racing sector and ancillary industries directly depends on the strength of the financial and infrastructural foundations. Overall, the results of this research emphasize that the province's macro strategy should move away from traditional approaches and move towards horse-centric economic diplomacy and the creation of export clusters so that the potential of Khuzestan's thoroughbreds can be transformed into sustainable wealth.

Declarations

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- Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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