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Title:

The use of historical heritage as a factor in sustainable tourism development: the case study of Akbarieh Garden, a UNESCO world heritage site in Birjand

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Abstract:

The research explores the role of historical heritage in bolstering sustainable tourism, with a keen focus on Akbarieh Garden, a renowned UNESCO world heritage site situated in Birjand, Iran. Historical heritage sites often present a unique intersection between the preservation of cultural legacy and the promotion of local economies through tourism. Sustainable tourism emphasizes the balance between environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects, ensuring that these attractions remain preserved for future generations while still benefiting present-day communities.

Akbarieh Garden, which serves as a case study for this research, was inscribed as one of the nine Persian Gardens to be UNESCO world heritage site in 2011. It attracts thousands of domestic and international visitors, with its intricate architectural designs, unique landscape, and profound historical significance. Persian gardens are considered as important part of culture in Iranian plateau and the design of the gardens is varied based on the different climate, even though the principle of building gardens were the same.

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews with local stakeholders, and quantitative data from visitor surveys. This dual methodology unveiled insights into visitors' motivations, experiences, and perspectives, as well as the strategies employed by the local community and administrators in preserving the site.

Findings indicate that Akbarieh Garden has been instrumental in driving tourism in Birjand. Considering the environmental issues that threaten the Birjand region with problems such as desertification, lack of water, strong seasonal winds and dust, the site of the Akbariyeh Garden Museum in Birjand, as a UNESCO World Heritage Site is an important factor that creates identity and stability in the region.

Archeological data show that the site of the Akbariya Garden Museum in Birjand, with an area of 45,000 square meters, had very significant trans-regional connections with the Indus Valley

region and Afghanistan on one side and Turkmenistan on the other side in the third millennium BC. Therefore, this area can be considered as an active commercial and economic area if commercial routes and transportation roads are reconstructed.

However, alongside the evident economic benefits, there have been challenges, particularly pertaining to environmental sustainability and maintaining the authenticity of the site. Visitors were found to appreciate the site's historical and cultural essence but voiced concerns about infrastructural strain. Local stakeholders, on the other hand, highlighted the vital role of conservation efforts in ensuring the site's longevity and preserving its original allure.

The article underscores the importance of a holistic approach in leveraging historical heritage for sustainable tourism. While economic gains from tourist inflow are undeniably crucial, it's equally imperative to address environmental and socio-cultural concerns. As demonstrated by the case of Akbarieh Garden, it's possible to achieve a harmonious blend of preservation and promotion, provided stakeholders are aligned in their vision and strategies. The site of Birjand Akbariyeh Garden Museum is able to attract thousands of foreign and domestic tourists if the necessary infrastructure is created. Also, this site Museum can provide the necessary dynamism for the production and export of cultural works in the field of handicrafts due to the many cultural antiques discovered there.

This research contributes to the broader discourse on sustainable tourism and offers practical implications for other historical heritage sites aiming to balance tourism with preservation.

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