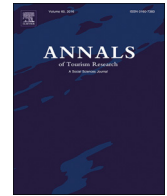




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## Research note

## Tourism and justice: Rethinking the role of governments

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## Introduction

Jenkins and Henry (1982) published a paper in *Annals of Tourism Research* that called for a stronger government intervention in tourism development in developing countries until the private sector became more experienced and confident. Now in 2020, such active involvement of government bodies is evident in many developing countries such as Iran. Although the governments argue that such an approach will benefit residents and improve their well-being, it raises the issue of ‘monopolies of thought’ (Illich, 1972) or ‘monopolies of power’ (Velicu, 2019) in decision-making. In many cases, social justice focusing on the distributive dimension of justice might be used as an excuse for such an approach. But the questions are, who is recognised and how are they involved in the decisions made? We may need to refocus by moving beyond the narrow definition of social justice and reconsider procedural justice. Bowles, MacPhail & Tetreault (2019, p.161), argue that procedural justice “must involve decision-making processes in which local citizens are able to obtain sufficient information to make a decision on a project, have the ability to express their opinions, and have their voices heard on an equal footing”. Even in those cases where community perceptions have a minimum impact on the success of the program, it is not ethical to exclude them from the decision-making process (Mutanga, Vengesayi, Muboko, & Gandiwa, 2015).

In the cases where residents have minimum involvement and influence on the matters that affect their own livelihood, governments and scholars continue to argue about the types of development. The ongoing argument might be between “those who believe conservation threatens community livelihoods and traditional practices, and those who believe conservation is essential to protect nonhuman species from the impact of human development” (Shoreman-Ouimet & Kopnina, 2015, p.320). Different perspectives of either justice for all nonhuman species (ecological justice) or justice among people (social justice) can create conflicts in development programs such as tourism. The idea that social justice should come before ecological justice may be supported by the argument that most conservation and environmental practices have been developed by experts in those western countries where cultural practice and economic development might be very different to that of developing countries (Shoreman-Ouimet & Kopnina, 2015). It might be the reason that, to better incorporate local values in social justice, a shift from a liberal vision of distributive justice to performative justice is suggested (Jamal, 2019; Jamal & Hales, 2016).

To support the idea of ecological justice, there is increasing support for animal rights and conservation of species that cannot speak for themselves. Some may argue that the same ethical considerations applicable to humans ought to be applied to nonhuman

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animals. Such movements have resulted in ideas such as ‘The Half Earth’ proposal (Wilson, 2016) which aims to allocate 50% of each region to biodiversity conservation. Similarly, in tourism, Sheppard and Fennell (2019) suggest that the animals should be considered as stakeholders. However, despite strict conservation enforced by the government authorities, it is not surprising to see that many protected areas have failed to protect the nonhuman species and have even led to increased poaching and habitat destruction (Romanach, Lindsey, & Woodroffe, 2010). Since the governments of many developing countries are encouraging tourism development by utilising their natural and cultural assets, it is important to understand the issue of justice for both the human and nonhuman species.

## Research context and methodology

The establishment of the Centre of Hunting and the legislation of the first Protection Bill in 1956 represent the first efforts for biodiversity conservation in Iran (Darvishsefat, Khosravi, & Borzui, 2008). Currently, 282 protected areas are classified into four groups—National Parks, National Natural Monuments, Wildlife Refuges and Protected Areas—managed by the Department of Environment (DOE, 2020). Despite the recent expansion of protected areas in Iran, biodiversity conservation has suffered from a lack of political interest and rapid human population growth (Jowkar, Ostrowski, Tahbaz, & Zahler, 2016). On the other hand, the Department of Tourism, a government body responsible for tourism development, is actively encouraging tourism development in rural areas to help diversify local economies and alleviate poverty. Usually a tourism plan is prepared by the Department of Tourism after an initial study and then private investors are invited to implement the plan. Though protected areas are not usually included in the tourism development plans, as many of the destinations are close to biodiversity rich areas, fragile environments are targeted as the main attraction for tourism development.

This study selected a rural destination in the early stages of development in Yazd province in central Iran, adjacent to Shirkuh protected area. Shirkuh protected area with an area of 51,000 ha is home to 70% of the flora in the province (YCHTO, 2020). Due to the strong tourism potential (natural attractions), the destination has been targeted by the Iranian government for the implementation of its tourism development plan. The author initially spent four months in the field in 2011–12, with further visits to the destination up to 2017 to observe the impacts over a 6-year period. Interviews were also conducted with questions focused on perceptions of tourism and conservation. Eighteen community members (10 male and 8 female) who identified themselves as farmer ( $n = 12$ ), herder ( $n = 4$ ), and shopkeeper ( $n = 2$ ) were interviewed. In addition, two interviews were conducted with key government officials suggested by the head of the departments (Department of Tourism and Department of Environment). Official documents regarding the proposed tourism development plan and conservation projects were also reviewed.

## Result and discussion

The representative from the Department of Tourism explained the tourism plan as an approach to enhance economic development in the region. The evidence from interviews also indicates that even small-scale tourism provided revenue to enhance local community livelihoods. However, observation showed that using natural attractions such as landscape and wildlife to promote tourism in such a fragile environment has resulted in many negative impacts such as habitat destruction and water pollution. The findings revealed that the tourism plan was developed without the consultation of the Department of Environment and the community. The Department of Tourism does not seem to agree with the strict conservation regulations delaying the development plans around the protected areas (Table 1). The representative from the department also believed there would not be disagreement from the community as the proposed tourism development would provide benefits to the community.

It may not be surprising to see that the Department of Environment has not been successful in achieving its conservation goals, as when it comes to the development programs, the department is a weak player with insufficient power to engage with other government bodies to protect biodiversity. For example, the representative from the department expressed his concern about an army road construction project in the protected area. The findings indicated that the lack of sufficient funding and rangers made it impossible for the department to effectively protect the biodiversity. It was also observed that the rangers were complaining about the lack of proper training and low salary. Further, the data shows that limited law enforcement capacity has resulted in increased rates of human-wildlife conflict and illegal activities such as poaching in the protected area.

While the governmental bodies complain about the lack of collaboration between the two bodies (Table 1), local communities have no say about the proposed development plan and their future. A similar problem has been documented in some other developed countries such as Canada (Lovelock, 2001) and developing countries such as Malaysia (Islam et al., 2017). Government is responsible for both economic development and the protection of the environment, yet priority is usually given to economic development of the communities who have no power in decision-making. Government may call it a ‘just’ process as they say it will benefit the community. However, such ‘justice’ is defined by and based on the interest of the government which is the stronger stockholder. Decisions made without recognising communities, their values and participation in the process do not fulfil the criteria of justice (Jamal, 2019).

The collected evidence for this study including in-depth interviews, observations, reports and plans demonstrates the strong intention of government bodies to achieve community development and conservation of the environment. Regrettably, so far, they have failed to set up the conditions for social and ecological justice. The negative impacts of conservation on communities can give rise to the question of justice of conservation (Bredin, Lescureux, & Linnell, 2018). On the other hand, tourism planners are mainly concerned with destination development and community livelihoods which may undermine the value of justice for the environment. As tourism development may involve the environment and resources used by the communities, there is a need for a holistic approach to develop a practical proposal to consider both justice for humans and for the environment, to ensure the long-term sustainability of

**Table 1**  
Key quotes from the interviews.

Theme	Quotes
Different goals	Department of Environment: 'We know it (strict rules) may not be the best strategy but with the limited resources, it is the only way we can save the species.' Department of Tourism: 'Tourism development can contribute to community development in the region by creating jobs and improving local people's well-being.' Community member: 'people have a very close relationship with the natural environment, it is part of our identity. ...but we also need jobs!'
Lack of involvement in decision making	Department of Environment: 'We have not been consulted or involved in the feasibility study for the tourism development.' Department of Tourism: 'It is not very easy to work with other organisations to plan and implement tourism in the region.' Community member: "We have never been informed about the proposed plan, neither had the opportunity to have our say!"
Lack of collaboration and empowerment	Department of Environment: 'There has never been sufficient funds available for hiring enough number of rangers to patrol the area; it has made it impossible to effectively protect the area...further tourism development can even make the situation worse.' Department of Tourism: 'Protected area rules and regulations can significantly delay the implementation of the tourism development project.' Community member: 'I don't know! We would love to play a part in both conservation and tourism development but not sure how?'
Resource use and community wellbeing	Department of Environment: 'We do still have many problems in the area, some local people use the income they earn from tourism to damage the environment. Yes, there is now less local people-park conflicts after tourism but more environmental problems.' Department of Tourism: 'Everyone knows some of these regions may never attract the expected number of tourists but at least the tourism development plan and government funding will bring infrastructure to the region and local people.' Community member: 'Many tourists are interested in seeing and staying in old houses, tourism can bring money and jobs to the community. It may even stop people from migrating to cities.'

tourism.

## Conclusion

Identifying the significant issue of justice for both communities and the natural environment, this research note reports on key issues associated with using natural resources for tourism development. In the current situation, Iran's protected areas are unable to cope with tourism development and recreation activities. The lack of coordination between government bodies and the lack of community involvement in decision-making have resulted in ineffective protected area management and escalating issues concerning resource use in tourism. A process of recognition and procedural justice is required to avoid destructive conflicts among stakeholders. We also need to rethink! The time has come to move forward and encourage governments to take a more passive role by empowering local communities and involving them in the decision-making process for implementation of just and sustainable tourism.

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