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THE IMPACTS OF ECOTOURISM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND ECONOMIC PROSPERITY IN THE KESROUAN-FTOUH REGION OF MOUNT LEBANON

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ABSTRACT

Ecotourism is considered as an activity that leads to a sustainable rural development especially due to its economic impacts. Creation of protected zones (national parks) is crucial in this type of tourism. The mountainous region of Ftouh Kesrouan has a great potential for ecotourism thanks to its richness in forests, natural landscape, endemic plants and wild life. It is, as well, characterized by cultural aspects that provide ecotourism a very important value. The general aim of this study is, to identify natural and cultural elements of Ftouh Kesrouan that are of importance for ecotourism, to evaluate the economic impact of this type of tourism on the study region based on tourism survey in Jeita Grotto and finally, to elaborate a policy leading to a sustainable rural development in Ftouh Kesrouan.

Keywords: *ecotourism, biodiversity, sustainable rural development, protected zone, Ftouh Kesrouan.*

RÉSUMÉ

Grâce à ses impacts économiques, l'écotourisme est considéré comme une

activité qui mène à un développement rural durable. La création de zones protégées (parcs nationaux) est un élément crucial dans ce type de tourisme. La région montagneuse du Ftouh Kesrouan possède un potentiel éco touristique important grâce à sa richesse en forêts, paysages naturels, plantes endémiques et vie sauvage. Elle est aussi caractérisée par des aspects culturels qui valorisent l'écotourisme. L'objectif de cette étude est d'identifier les éléments naturels et culturels du Ftouh Kesrouan ayant attiré à l'écotourisme, d'évaluer l'impact économique de ce type de tourisme sur la région étudiée se basant sur une étude du tourisme à la grotte de Jeita et finalement, d'élaborer une politique conduisant à un développement rural durable au Ftouh Kesrouan.

Mots-clés: *écotourisme, biodiversité, développement rural durable, zone protégée, Ftouh Kesrouan.*

INTRODUCTION

A recent USAID evaluation identified ecotourism as an enterprise with potential positive contributions to the conservation of endangered biological resources (USAID, 1995). Those include raising local awareness about the value of biological resources, increasing local participation in the benefits of biodiversity conservation, and generating revenues toward conservation of biologically rich areas. Ecotourism is seen as a mean to promote sustainable development, while at the same time, creating an economic justification for the preservation of natural resources.

Wildlife and its habitats in developing countries are becoming increasingly popular attractions for international tourism. If correctly planned and managed, this kind of tourism can significantly contribute to sustainable socio-economic development and environmental conservation. If uncontrolled, it would cause irreversible damage in these areas, which are the repositories of biological and cultural diversity in the planet as well as important sources of income and well being for all countries and many local communities.

The Lebanese Ftouh region of Kesrouan is a rural region with a varied ecotourism potential that promises a handsome economic boost for local communities. It stems from the area's richness in historical and archeological relics and from its varied and typical biodiversity, in addition to its wonderful landscape and nature sites. The aim of this study is to identify this potential and to record tourism possibilities and devise actions and management plan to safeguard and promote ecotourism in the study area.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

1. Study areas

Two study areas in the Mount-Lebanon province were selected: the Ftouh-Region of Kesrouan and the Jeita grotto. The first represents the area of the study; the second reflects the feasibility of an ecotouristic project in this region.

1.1. The Ftouh Region of Kesrouan

The Ftouh Region of Kesrouan was selected for being the most typical traditional rural area in Kesrouan and for having a high natural, cultural and archeological potential. This study area includes 14 villages and has the following characteristics:

- Its surface is around 4,593 ha.
- Its maximum altitude is about 1,330 m (Raachine), with a minimum of 500 m (Jdeitet Ghazir).
- Its population is around 13,874 inhabitants.

1.2. The Jeita Grotto site

Jeita Grotto is Lebanon's "miracle of nature". It constitutes a 9 km labyrinth of two levels: the lower river level and the upper grotto where impressively large mineral animal shapes crouch in shady corners. This region was selected because it has proven to be the most popular site for ecotourism in the country visited by a relatively high number of people that pay entrance fees and where a good infrastructure for tourism has been established. This area is suitable to gather primary data related to socio-economic impacts of tourism and other relevant information.

1.3. Tourists' survey

The tourist survey was carried out in Jeita Grotto. It covered 100 tourists selected randomly. The interviewed tourists or persons can be classified as follows: 1) families, 2) group of friends (at least two persons per group), 3) organized groups, and 4) alone. In the first category, men were the main respondents, expected to be the decision-makers on the visit of Jeita Grotto. Data concerning expenditures in the "family" category covered all members of the family. In the second and third categories, the interviewed person, when possi-

ble gave information about other members of the group; otherwise, the collected data represent only the opinion and the magnitude of expenditures of the interviewed person. A pre-test of the questionnaire was carried out and modifications were done. The tourists were selected randomly.

The following main points were covered in the questionnaire:

- Issues concerning the provincial origin of the tourists and their social status.
- Expenditures of the tourists in Jeita Grotto.
- Attitudes and opinions concerning ecotourism and natural landscape in Ftouh Region of Kesrouan.

2. Potential of the Ftouh region of Kesrouan

Several field visits have been conducted in the study area where ecotourism potential has been identified. They were conducted with the aid of botanists and biodiversity experts to amass the necessary information in order to draw a clear picture of the region's biodiversity potential and its value to ecotourism. The biodiversity, terraced agricultural land and traditional rural way of life of the local communities in the Ftouh Region of Kesrouan were highlighted.

The study is supplemented by a field survey of visitors to a renowned tourist site, Jeita Grotto, to assess the economic input that would be expected from visitors to potential nature sites in the study area. However, its main purpose was to determine if tourists were interested in eco-tours in the region of Ftouh Kesrouan and to learn about their propensity to pay for similar tours. The obtained information was meant to permit to dwell into a feasibility study of this project in the study area.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Tourists origin

About two third of tourists visited Jeita Grotto with their families. The rest of interviewed tourists came either with friends or on a tour bus, or, came alone. This reflects that family tourism plays an important role in Ecotourism. Foreign countries contribute approximately to half of the tourists visiting Jeita Grotto. This shows that foreign tourists are interested in nature-based tourism. The

majority of local tourists came from Beirut and Mount Lebanon provinces, which are considered to be relatively high income areas in the country. More than two thirds of local tourists came from urban areas. This reflects the importance of nature-related tourism in drawing urban people to rural areas in the country. To the majority of the interviewed tourists, the visit to Jeita Grotto was the main purpose for the journey, the rest visited Jeita Grotto in addition to other places in the region.

2. Socio-economic impacts of Jeita tourism on the local rural community.

Following expenditures of the interviewed persons during their visit to Jeita Grotto cover the whole period of the visit. Restaurants constitute the major field of expenditure of the tourists, followed by souvenir purchasing and finally expenditures when making stops. Restaurants benefit the most from the expenditures of tourists.

3. The opinion of Jeita tourists on the creation of an eco-tour in the Ftouh Region of Kesrouan

More than half of the interviewed tourists had never visited the Ftouh Region of Kesrouan. The lack of information on this region could be considered as the main reason behind the ignorance. The impression of all interviewed tourists who had previously known the Ftouh Region of Kesrouan, concentrates on the beautiful landscape of the region. 90% of interviewed tourists were interested in making eco-tours in the region. The cultural level of the tourists is noticeable. Foreign tourists as well as local ones were highly educated. Tourists in Jeita Grotto were asked about measures or activities they wished to be available in the Ftouh Region of Kesrouan when visiting it. The item related to infrastructure (commuting facilities) was a priority to the majority; another category was related to restaurants, hotels and toilets. This category was requested by 25% of interviewed tourists. A third category was related to the availability of guides and brochures. The enjoyment of nature is mentioned as a motivation for visiting the indicated Ftouh Region of Kesrouan, it supposes a large spectrum of activities desired by the tourists like hiking and camping.

4. Recreational value of the Ftouh Kesrouan Region

Based on the survey, 91% of the interviewed tourists showed interest in an eco-tour in the Ftouh-Kesrouan region. The average willingness to pay for this eco-tour was calculated to be 14,21 US\$/person. The aggregation of this aver-

age to the calculated percentage of visitors to Jeita Grotto in the survey year amounts to 3,387,208 US\$/year. This figure is considered to be the recreational value of the Ftouh - Kesrouan region.

69% of the interviewed tourists showed interest in bird watching in the Ftouh-Kesrouan region. The average willingness to pay to watch migratory birds was calculated to be 2,37 US\$/person/watching day. This figure is derived from the willingness to pay of the 69%. The recreational value of bird watching is 428,827US\$/year, assuming the same visiting pattern to Jeita Cave will continue. Given the time constraint, the sample size of the study was 100 tourists (randomly selected out of a population of 262,000) a size, which is far below what is needed. Therefore, this study should be considered as a pilot study and the aggregation results should be treated carefully.

The benefits are considered to be sustainable due, firstly, to the yearly increasing numbers of visitors to Jeita Grotto as well as amateurs of natural tourism. On the other hand, one fourth of the interviewed tourists had already visited Jeita Grotto at least once in the past five years. This indicates certain regularity in visiting nature sites.

CONCLUSIONS

In view of the great cultural and natural assets of the region, the creation of national parks in the Ftouh Region of Kesrouan would create necessary financial inputs in favor of local authorities and communities and incites them to use resources in a sustainable way. The implementation of these parks and related ecotourism are expected to induce a rural development through the sustainable use of natural resources and through the creation of off-farm activities for local rural communities. Physical infrastructures and management are needed to ensure the basic ecotourism requirements. The physical infrastructure is supposed to be simply based on the definition of ecotourism. Picnic and camping sites, small hotels and simple restaurants are examples of this type of infrastructure.

The natural assets of the study region are corner stones for any attempt to valorize the region and insure a handsome and stable economic input into the area of study. To do this, it is mandatory to incite local people to learn about, respect, protect and defend their heritage through the implementation of recommendations that aim at rural sustainable development.

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