

Assessment of rural tourism using SWOT analysis

(Case Study: Masouleh village, Gilan, Iran)

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ABSTRACT

Tourism and tourism economy are as the most essential economical-commercial elements of the world. Rural tourism is considered as a part of the great industry of tourism and in this field Iran has various, huge and actual tourism attractions to develop rural tourism. The historical and extensive Iran, in spite of having more than 75 thousand villages, that some of them have several millennial records or possess the wonderful historic works and perspectives in comparison with universal standards, has essential potential for active presence in the field of this several dimensional industry. Therefore, it is necessary to record it as a basic cogitation in reflection to executive, decision and scientific centers of the country and even consider an elevated place for it in development programs. Iran by having many beautiful and natural regions is among 10 superior countries in the world but unfortunately, it has not been able to profit by this place well. Therefore, we decided to introduce rural tourism and its relevant tourism as the highest income industry and motivation for a stable development of rural regions and to explain its value and place, which includes some contexts of rural tourism. Stable development, the position of tourism in villages' economic, Limitations, abilities, the subsequent events etc., is done by case study of Masouleh village (Gilan, Iran) in this article. This study has dealt with presenting strategies and guidelines to develop tourism within Masouleh village, Gilan, Iran, using a survey, field studies and Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis. Empirical analysis in the study area shows that vulnerability threshold for rural areas can be extremely high due to openness to tourists and requires review and present appropriate policies in order to remove the limitations and to apply relative advantages.

Keywords: Sustainable development, Rural tourism, SOWT, Tourism, Masouleh.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, in spite of the existence of modern technologies, multifaceted revolutionary changes, and new developments in mobilization systems, human life_ especially in urban communities_ has faced a lot of problems like intensive and overwhelming exhaustion. Therefore, traveling and moving in order to relieve fatigue and refresh physical and mental abilities has become one of the essential components of human life (Rezvani, 2006). ecotourism is defined as “environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features both past and present that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impacts, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local people” (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996; Jalani, 2012). Tourism as a dynamic industry with significant and an exclusive property has taken up an important part of economic and productive activities of developed and under-development countries. This industry involves all phenomena and relations that are caused by tourists' interactions (Maghsoudi, 2005). Tourism encompasses prominent results and achievements such as job creation and its effects on development, developmental and socio-economic functions on regional and country scales. So that in industrialized countries and in

developing is diversifying revenues, reducing the imbalances in the economy, exports, foreign exchange and employment generation. (Tavalaei, 2007).

Ecotourism is about uniting conservation, communities, and sustainable travel. This means that those who implement and participate in ecotourism activities should follow the following ecotourism principles: to minimize negative environmental impact; to build environmental and cultural awareness and respect; to provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts; to provide direct financial benefits for conservation; provide financial benefits and empowerment for local people; and raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental, and social climate (Higham, 2007; Holden, 2007; Das & Chatterjee, 2015). According to Quebec declaration on ecotourism (2002), the economic, social and environmental impacts of tourism should be considered to recognize the principles of sustainable ecotourism (Das & Chatterjee, 2015). Therefore Ecotourism is a noticeable strategy for protecting environment and creating income for local communities if its principles consider in a sustainable manner. It can deeply impact on economic development and conservation of natural resources (Surendran & Sekhar, 2011). Conservationists have identified ecotourism as a valuable tool of protection of natural resources and development of local communities (Stronza, 2007). Generally, ecotourism deals with living parts of the natural environments (Sadry, 2009) and mainly focuses on socially responsible travel, personal growth, and environmental sustainability.

Iran is very capable in terms of tourism so that the richness and the diversity of its attractions have made it to be called a unique world within boundaries. The diversity of attractions in Iran is so high that persuades almost everybody, with every taste, to have a trip to this country (Tepelus and Cordobci, 2005).

Iran's historical city Masouleh is to be announced as UNESCO Historical Heritage Site in September 2015.

A heritage tourism site, Masouleh is visited by thousands of tourists every year with a population of 554 individuals from 180 families according to the 2006 census.

Although the town has been entered in the National Heritage List of Iran in 1975 but the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has not finalized its registration in the list of World Heritage Sites yet.

That being said, this study aims to investigate and analyze the most important possibilities and barriers on the way of the tourist development of Masouleh village, so that by strategic planning an important and essential step is taken for tourism development programming in the region and subsequently the regional and national sustainable development.

There have been many studies inside and outside Iran regarding rural tourism which we briefly consider in the following section: a) Iran: Mohammadi (2007) in his paper with the title of rural tourism argues that today tourism is a new product leading to income as well as a very good opportunity for rural communities facing economic problems. He adds that even today tourism is progressing through activities like foresting, water reservation and environment preservation, which not only shows a mutual relationship between different rural resources but also shows a mutual correlation between these two. Rural tourism can have a very great role in economical variation and stable development and lead to the development of deprived regions through increasing employment and income. The employment opportunities related to this industry are not very professional and do not yield high incomes, however they have so much benefit for the local people. A number of studies conducted in relation to the present study are mentioned in the following: Karami (2007) in the article Geo-tourism Capabilities in Kandovan Village Development investigated the role of geomorphologic models in the attraction of tourists in Kandovan village and concluded that geomorphologic capabilities had an essential role in tourism and that this village because of the enjoyment of geo-tourist capabilities would have a better condition in terms of infrastructures, the expansion of health-medical network, etc. in the future. Fazelnia and Selah (2010) in another study, by means of a field survey method and specifying the weaknesses, strengths, opportunities, and threats of tourism through the SWOT model, presented strategies for the tourist development of the Zarivar Lake. The results of their research showed that the vulnerability threshold of this lake was very high because of its tourist position in the region and that it required reforms, appropriate policies, and a united management in order to have its limitations obviated and its opportunities and capabilities expanded. According to Sadeghi's research findings (2005), tourism development in the west of Iran entails culture making and a lot of advertisement so that rural communities are benefited the best and the rural development procedure is aided by appropriate programming. Daneshmehr (2013) have investigated the effects of ecotourism on rural development using SWOT analysis. The results showed that in their study area, "beautiful and unique landscapes of the village"

component was strength beside “gardens and green areas”, “no government planning and investment” component was main weakness in the area. “More attention to planning and funding by authorities” component was the most important external opportunity, and finally “lack of management knowledgeable about ecotourism issues” component was the main threat. In addition, in another research undertaken by Khatoonabadi and Rastghalam (2012), it has been devoted to assessment of 4 pillars of rural tourism using SWOT analysis: case study in targeted villages of Chahar-Mahal-VaBakhtiari Province. The results showed that the rate 57.69 for limitations (including weaknesses and threats) is higher than rate 55.33 for advantages (strengths and opportunities). Although “establishment of tourism centers elsewhere” component was recognized as the most important threat. This component, because of inappropriate tourism infrastructures such as access roads, residential places and recreational facilities and also misunderstanding of tourists of rural tourism in the studied villages, causes to “mitigate vulnerabilities and also reduce the destruction of beautiful landscapes and untouched nature” as the most important strength of rural tourism development. (Maghsudi & Lashgar-ara, 2011) b) Outside Iran: Volunteer & Gaul (2003) in their study called the capabilities of rural tourism in Gallipoli village reached the conclusion that increasing and improving knowledge about natural resources, protecting vegetation and local wildlife by the local people are among the positive impacts of environmental tourism and the loss of vegetation and animal species, the quick spread of epidemic diseases, unnatural combination of species and unnatural conditions, decreasing the volume of vegetation and in turn decreasing the volume of biomass, degradation and threatening the ecology, mechanical damages to the vegetation, water pollution and its darkening, soil erosion and compression, interfering in the flow of ecosystem energy are among the negative effects of it. Halder (2007) in his study with the title of opportunities and problems of rural tourism suggests that developing the infrastructures leads to health tourism. He adds that the impacts of tourism on rural environment can improve the body and mind status, help the foundation and preservation of natural parks, preservation of natural resources and so on and it teaches people how to develop the health of the environment through proper sewage systems, roads, electricity, and telephone communication. They will learn how to use the technology and its components and how to preserve and protect natural ecologies, and historical castles with biological variation. He also argues that damaging the infrastructures and environmental pollution through tourist activities like camping, high exploitation of natural resources by the shear amount of visitors, impacting the wildlife population by hunting, damaging natural ecology, damaging the landscapes by too much population, devastating the beauty of natural landscapes by building high altitude buildings for tourist residence are among the negative effects of environmental tourism. Dyer et al (2007) in a study titled the impacts of structural model of tourism on the perception of local residents and the expansion of their contact in seashores in Australia reached the conclusion that there is a significant difference between the perceptions of the residents of seashores in different regions of Australia. In addition, Tosun (1998) by comparing the perceptions of three different regions realized that there is a significant difference in different regions because of the difference in personal characteristics.

2. Methodology

This research is considered as a library research whose information sources are collected by existing sources in publishing reserves and the presented basic facts and theoretical framework are combined by research’s understanding and analysis. In order to collect information, the following methods have been used:

Collecting information and examining background impression

Set of analysis activities

Adding up and presenting the solutions In this research,

we have tried to draw a rural tourism pattern in stable development programs by using different viewpoint of experts and theorists and by collecting documents in libraries, digital archives and sites. In order to achieve research issues, analytical-descriptive method was initially applied. In this stage with regard to data and information available from documental and library investigations attractions facilities, services and generally speaking tourism position in the area have been dealt with. Next, SWOT analysis was implemented to analyze findings and determine appropriate strategies. For this, internal (strengths and weaknesses) and external (threats and opportunities) environments were studied and a list of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats was provided in a tabular SWOT framework,

analysis and investigation of which the priorities were specified. In order to remove or decline threats and weaknesses, strengths and opportunities were studied. Finally, appropriate strategies for tourism development were provided based on analyses in the studied area.

2.1. case study

Masuleh is a village in Gilan. Masuleh is approximately 60 km southwest of Rasht and 32 km west of Fuman. The village is 1,050 meters above sea level in the Alborz mountain range, near the southern coast of the Caspian sea. The village itself has a difference in elevation of 100 meters. Although it has been written that the community was established around 10 AD, the province of Gilan has a long history. The first village of Masuleh was established around 1006 AD, 6 km northwest of the current city, and it is called Old-Masuleh (Kohneh Masuleh in Persian). People moved from Old-Masuleh to the current city because of pestilence and attacks from neighbouring communities. Masouheh-Rood-Khan is the river passing through the city, with a waterfall located just 200 meters away from the village. It's cut-off by snow during the winter months. Fog is the predominant weather feature of Masuleh. At the 2006 census, its population was 554 individuals from 180 families. Masouleh village is perched high on a densely forested mountainside about 60 kilometers inland from the Caspian Sea. Due to its location, the climate of Masouleh village is different from much of Iran. Warm, moist air blowing southwest from the Caspian is blocked by the Alborz Mountains, creating heavy precipitation and fog on the seaward side of the mountains (this ecoregion is known as the Caspian and Hyrcanian Mixed Forests). Further inland, the landward side of the Alborz receives very little rainfall and rapidly becomes arid. Masouleh is located about 1,050 meters above sea level, but the range of elevation varies by over a hundred meters in the village. The roofs of houses on lower tiers are used as courtyards for houses on the tiers above them. In some cases, public streets are laid out along interconnected roofs. The organic layout and steep stairs have made motor vehicles impractical, so they are banned in the village. About 800 people currently live in the village.(figure1,2)



Figure1. study area



Figure2. Masouleh village is perched high on a densely forested mountainside

2.2. SWOT analysis

A SWOT analysis is a technique commonly used to assist in identifying strategic direction for an organization or practice. SWOT model is a classic strategic analysis tool for strategic management, first proposed by Ken Andrews. The benefits of such an analysis tool is that it can better balance all internal and external aspects of enterprises, ensuring that analysis is more comprehensive. The strengths and weaknesses of a system are determined by internal elements, whereas external forces dictate opportunities and threats. Strengths can be defined as any available resource that can be used to improve its performance. Weaknesses are flaws/shortcomings of any system that may cause to lose a competitive advantage, efficiency or financial resources (Wang and Hong, 2011)



Figure 3. Swot model

2.3. Tourism

Tourism is synthesized from mass and alternative tourism. Large numbers of people seeking relevant to their culture holidays in popular resort destinations characterizes mass tourism. Alternative tourism is sometimes referred to as “special interest tourism” or “responsible tourism” and it’s usually taken to mean alternative forms of tourism which give emphasis on the contact and understanding of inhabitants’ way of living and the local natural environment. As to the specific forms of alternative tourism (Figure 4).

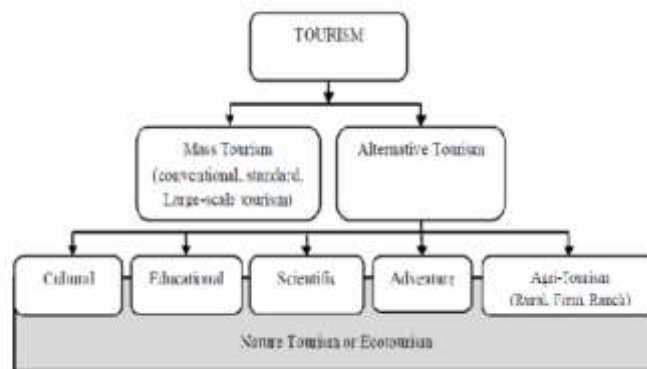


Figure 4. Nature Tourism or Ecotourism

2.4. Rural Tourism

Rural tourism is among the most polymorphous of all forms of Special Interest Tourism (SIT). The diversity of attractions included within rural tourism embrace: - Indigenous and Asian heritage sites - Aspects of culture (agriculture) - Industrial tourism (farm practices) - Educational tourism - Special events - Ecological attractions - Adventure tourism - Wine tourism Such diversity represents major opportunities for rural areas that have turned to

tourism as a means of supplementing diminished incomes. Rural tourism could be a strategy for sustainable development for rural areas and could be a tool for product differentiation for area that is at stagnation stage of the Destination Life Cycle model. Although, Tourist commission advises that: 1- Not all areas are suitable for development 2- Not all communities wish to be developed or are suitable for development 3- Not all forms of tourism activity are acceptable in every location 4- There may have to be employed to prevent or repair environmental damage caused by visitor pressure Rural tourism is a good opportunity for agricultural based communities but the setting of objectives and the final tourism development plan needs caution. For better results, the whole ranges of the stakeholders have to participate in the planning stage. Slow and stable steps needs for this kind of planning in order conflicts and mistakes to be avoided.

2.5 Rural Tourism Historical Development

Economic, social, and cultural developments of the world in the last a few centuries, specifically in terms of population growth, urbanism development, communication and transport development, leisure time expansion, and social welfare improvement, have resulted in tourism development in rural areas or, in other words, rural tourism. Although rural tourism is a social activity first turned up in England and Europe in the second half of the 18th century. Before that also rural areas had recreational usages, however, limited to nobles, courtiers and special classes (Rezvani,2006). Table 1. The matrix for internal factors

A number of newly set up tourist destinations have changed usage to rural tourism that is because of the diversity of tourist products and markets and in order to develop tourism benefits separated from coasts and coastal tourism. Therefore, rural tourism has developed explicitly from the 1970's onwards. At first, i.e. in the 60's and the 70's, rural tourism was regarded by local communities more from economic points of view, then rural tourism development was considered as a tool for rural communities development, and meanwhile thinkers and policy makers tried, by presenting different methods and patterns, to emphasize the role of tourism in economic and social regeneration. Nowadays, different economic, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions of rural tourism are widely considered and are paid attention to (Rezvani,2006).

3. Result

3.1. Internal and external factors analysis

3.1.1. Internal factors effective on tourism in Masouleh

The purpose of this stage is to assess internal environment of the studied area in order to recognize facilities or strengths and bottlenecks or weaknesses. Available strategies, functions and resources investigated in this section are presented in Table 1 as strengths and weaknesses according to rural development (economic, social, cultural, environmental, ecological and institutional) dimensions.

Table 1. The matrix for internal factors

weaknesses	strengths	indices
Lack of planning and public investment in this area	Prosperity in agriculture and gardening; appropriate market for the sale of agricultural products to tourists	
Lack of government policies, plans and funding in the area	Proneness for investment and tourism planning in order to use its natural, cultural and human resources as a major hub around Gilan inside the country	Economic

Lack of willingness of people to investment in tourism sector	Relatively appropriate knowledge and education of people in the area beside good cooperation	
Inappropriate and inadequate facilities of accommodation, welfare and health services	Customs, local culture and scenic locations	Socio-cultural
Improper distribution of tourists in different seasons	The unique architecture and Green mountain ranges	
Conflict and difference between culture of tourists and rural people; Lack of skilled and trained forces in the village	Close proximity to population and urban centers including Gilan and other cities	
Lack of tourism infrastructures (such as roads and sewage)	Variety of attractions and untouched natural, leisure resources	
Inadequate equipment and recreational, sport facilities	Possession of pleasant weather in most months of the year	
	Quiet environment, without any noise, especially for citizens for fun and relaxation	Environmental
	Believe in employment from authorities by tourism development as one of the most important infrastructures for developing villages	Institutional

3.2. External factors effective on tourism in Masouleh

The purpose of this section is to investigate the effects of external environment in the studied area in order to recognize threa with regard to tourism. Based on previous studies and researches on condition of areas around the study area, all threats and opportunities are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. The matrix for external factors

threats	opportunities	indices
Lack of direct road to transit road	Holding the first place in the production of olives in the country and unique variety in its	



No government licenses and facilities for development of services and tourism in the area	plantation (of over 50 agricultural and garden products) Providing appropriate facilities to attract domestic and foreign tourists	
Increasing land prices and creating the exchange	Increase incentives of private sectors for investment in the village Paying more attention to planning and investment in tourism sector	Economic
Lack of enough advertising facilities and guiding signs of tourist attractions Loss of traditional and indigenous culture of the people by tourists	The existence of over 500 cultural, historical and naturalists capable of being registered as national treasures The existence of roads and transportation routes and economics as well as cultural exchanges with the North of country	
Increased interest and incentive of tourists to travel to other nearby recreation areas	Variety in the production of hand crafted arts, such as weaving coarse carpets and rage	Socio-cultural
Excessive population density of the area and overcrowding in comparison with competing areas in the future	Create and increase motivation for travel to the area and availability to the largest centers of population in Gilan More investment in health & social services	
Increase in social crimes by tourist entrance relative to the past	Relatively many points for tourism and tourism activities	
Being located on earthquake belt and vulnerability of some part of regions with high risks	Existing of summer-quarters regions with regional varieties and having an appropriate plant and medicinal covering in winter. Spring and summer, as a place for sojourn of tribes and	Environmental

	native animal husbandry and appropriate place for rotating nature.	
Loss of vegetation, trees, gardens and rural farms	Being located on two ancient and traditional forest routs: Fouman rout	
Pollution of water, soil and climate resources of the area relative to competing areas	Support of public organizations and institutions of rural development in light of employment and income Availability to various government and nongovernment organizations in masouleh in order to present and support different services and facilities for villages	
Lack of enough governmental investment and lack of interests of non- governmental parts in tourists' affairs No government licenses and facilities for development of services and tourism in the area Lack of identified ownership required for tourists plans in some parts of the province	Availability to specialists in adjacent to the area	Institutional

3.2. SWOT analysis

As it is seen in Tables 1 and 2, there are 10 strengths against 8 weaknesses, and 15 opportunities against 11 threats for tourism development in Masouleh region. On the whole, 25 strengths and opportunities and 19 weaknesses and threats were respectively identified as advantages and limitations of tourism development in Masouleh region.

3.2.1. Strategies and solutions for rural tourism development *Offensive/competitive strategies (SO)*

In offensive strategies concentrated on internal strengths and external opportunities, following strategies are proposed to utilize available priorities in order to develop rural tourism in Masouleh village:

1. More development in ecotourism and indigenous tourism because of relative advantages for developing rural tourism;
2. Optimum and efficient application of increased incentive to travel among citizens and also availability to metropolitan centers (Gilan and Zanjan) in order to utilize the rural attractions and tourism products and create employment and earnings for the residents of studied villages;



3. Utilization and preparation of private sector supports for investments in tourism sector in the villages of the district
4. Identify and take advantage of attractions, products and other relative tourism advantages in the area in order to compete with other recreational areas;
5. Main focus of tourism activities on taking advantage of resources and available attractions without using landscapes, gardens, vegetation and etc. for earnings, employment and rural development.

3.2.2. *Diversification strategies (ST)*

The attention in diversification strategies is devoted to internal strengths and external threats. The followings are presented to provide some demands in Tarom province:

1. Developing and equipping required facilities for the utilize impassible areas to be visited by tourists;
2. Diversification and developing advertisement programs to more introduce natural, human attractions and rural architecture within provincial centers and organizing seminars and exhibitions in universities and ICHTO;
3. Diversifying activities, facilities and tourism services in order to satisfy tourists and accordingly increase tourists for Masouleh village beside different classes of people in different activities;
4. Providing manuals with the aim of further guiding tourists;
5. Optimum appropriate capacity and density of population in order to decline stresses on vegetation and pastures.

3.2.3. *Overview strategies (WO)*

In these strategies, in addition to emphasize on internal weakness, it has been tried that taking advantages of external opportunities, constitutional proposals are presented to remove weaknesses in the district. By the way, following proposes are provided:

1. In addition to public and private investment in the area, improvement of environmental infrastructures and facilities;
2. Review the rural land rules and regulations in villages and tourist places of the area in order to utilize different parts for the public and tourists and also prevention of land speculations;
3. In addition to review public participations to develop, provide and implement designs and equip studied rural areas with facilities and tourist services, the need for take intensive activities by skilled labors and different institutions to develop and rehabilitate the areas.

3.2.4. *Defensive strategies (WT)*

In these strategies, it has been provided proposes to remove challenges and problems in Tarom province against tourism development:

1. Educate and inform the public about interactions with tourists within the area;
2. Encourage people to participate in the development of infrastructures, various equipment and facilities for tourism;
3. Regulate special rules and regulations for optimal utilization of attractions and tourism products, prevention of destruction and pollution and loss of these resources in the area;
4. Seminars and settlements in “developing investment on rural tourism industry” by authorities and respective systems; also, invitation and encouragement of internal and external investors; creating special facilities and privileges to invest in constructing hotels, residential complexes, recreational facilities and etc.

4. Conclusion

Saeedeh Nasehi, Hadis et al., Assessment of rural tourism using SWOT analysis

For the betterment of the development process in these areas, especially the areas under investigation which, for a long time, have been considered recreation centers structurally, ecologically and spatially, a dire need is felt to implement appropriate strategies and measures to enhance tourism, but optimal use of the recreational and touristic sources of an area is only possible through balance, coordination and cooperation among organizations and institutes responsible for cultural recreational, touristic and athletic programs on one hand, and institutes responsible for the protection of natural environment resources as well as trade organizations on the other. If not, uncoordinated policies and measures for tourism, pastime, and management of tourism industry for rural development will lead no, where! Proper attention to the above- mentioned factors and proposals for the removal of the existing obstacles is a big step forward for the development of rural areas in this region. Some of these proposed measures are:

- Providing the necessary and sufficient budget for technical and physical protection of historical monuments (Unique architecture) and the development of the tourism industry.
- Supporting the infrastructural investments in different economic sectors including tourism
- Increasing infrastructural services and welfare facilities such as: residential camping's, W.Cs, prayers halls and the like, along with tourist attractions in the city.
- Increasing the number of courses related to tourism in higher education as well as the related fields.
- Increasing the level of expertise and the specialized knowledge of the people working in tourism industry.
- Enhancing the local people's information about ecotourism and tourism industry.
- Providing appropriate places for cultural and exhibitioner events as well as tourist attraction festivals across the region.
- Increasing the quality of the communicational and travel networks of the rural rout.
- Increasing the coefficient of the protection cover of natural resources and safaris through appropriate equipment and supply of human resources.
- Correction and revival of meadows and jungle plant coverage as well as medicinal and industrial plants as means of attracting tourists.

Therefore, by foregoing plans and strategies many threats and weaknesses of the tourist development of Masouleh village could be obviated and the path of tourism development could be paved and significant steps taken for the regional and national sustainable development.

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Saeedeh Nasehi, Hadis et al., Assessment of rural tourism using SWOT analysis

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