

THE DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES AND TOURISM POTENTIALS OF THE ÇORUH VALLEY-ERZURUM AXIS

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ABSTRACT

The number of the recorded cultural entities along with the natural sources in the Çoruh Valley-Erzurum axis has been seen as the indicator of touristic significance. Although the region is ecologically and socio-culturally rich, it could not reach to the level that it deserves in the culture and tourism industry. A significant development in tourism, other than the winter sports, has not been observed in spite of the rich touristic capacity. A great development in tourism in the region has been expected as the touristic significance of Turkey has increased.

Keywords: *Erzurum-Çoruh Valley, rural tourism, sustainable tourism, tourism planning.*

ERZURUM-ÇORUH VADİSİNDE TURİZMİN POTANSİYELLERİ VE KALKINMANIN FIRSATLARI

ÖZ

Hükümetler, yerel yönetimler ve sivil toplum kuruluşları bölge kalkınması kapsamında turizm potansiyellerinden yararlanmak istemektedirler. Öncelikli amaç, halkın gelir seviyesini yükseltmek ve istihdam yaratmaktır. Erzurum ve hiterlandında yer alan Çoruh vadisi bu kapsamda dikkat çekmektedir. Potansiyelin geliştirilmesi bölgede çeşitli partnerlerin işbirliğini ve farklı enstrümanlar kullanmayı gerektirmektedir.

Bölgenin sosyal ve ekonomik yapısına turizmin olumlu etkisi, öncelikle bir analizi talep etmektedir. Bu çalışmada, Erzurum-Çoruh vadisinde yapılan saha araştırmasında farklı karar alıcılarının görüşlerine başvurularak sürdürülebilirlik anlayışı içinde bir gelişme konsepti geliştirilmeye gayret edilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Erzurum-Çoruh Vadisi, kırsal turizm, sürdürülebilir turizm, turizm planlaması.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the basic means of developing the socio-economic conditions of an underdeveloped part of a country is to promote rural tourism. Though it obviously seems impossible to solve the development problem of rural areas with a merely tourism sectoral approach, tourism remains a distinctive 'entry point' as long as it would help to activate local resources, create job opportunities and partially ensure socio-economic development of the region.

Eastern Anatolia in Turkey forms an example of such underdeveloped regions offering the necessary opportunities and potentials for rural tourism. Erzurum (for winter tourism activities) and the Çoruh Valley (for summer tourism activities) are the most suitable attractions in the area regarding their location, transportation and existing facilities (Map 1-2).

Not only the natural sources but also the cultural heritage will make up the main attractions in the area.

In these two main tourism areas, tourism and its various activities should form a part of an overall strategy for the promotion of an economically developing area, with the search of provoking effects.

However, the positive effect of tourism on the socio-economic structure of the region requires a detailed analysis. This will help, in the long run, to redirect part of the economy towards rural tourism and thus towards rural development.

In this context, two field case reports have been prepared to realize rural development through rural tourism in the Çoruh Valley-Erzurum axis by interviewing and negotiating with the local governors and authorities. Thus, it was attempted to design a development model and sustainability was given priority in the designation of this concept. From this point of view, the purpose of this study is to attract attention to the subject and present the case studies and solutions after giving brief information on the Çoruh Valley and Erzurum Palandöken ski resort.

In order to have the local community participate in the development activities from the very beginning, three daily workshops were organized in the selected municipalities (Erzurum for winter tourism activities, Ispir and Yusufeli for summer tourism activities) aiming to accomplish a common understanding of needs assessment, strategy, and preliminary activities. Workshops gathered representatives of government bodies (Erzurum and Artvin governorships, local representatives of Culture and Tourism and Forestry Ministries), officials elected (mayors) and representatives of civil initiatives (associations, local governors, hotel owners, private service providers, individual guides, members of civil society organizations etc.). In this respect, a face-to-face model and workshops form the method the study.

2. TOURISM AROUND ERZURUM IN GENERAL

As the socio- economic life standard in and around Erzurum is lower than the average of Turkey, the urbanization level is also low (DPT a, 2000, s.25). Therefore, participating in the recreational activities is quite limited, although natural resting and picnicking areas and sport fields are potentially rich. The fact that Tortum Waterfalls and Ispir -Yusufeli -Artvin main highway and their neighbourhood still preserve their natural virginity are excellent proofs of this.

Map 1. Turkey and Erzurum



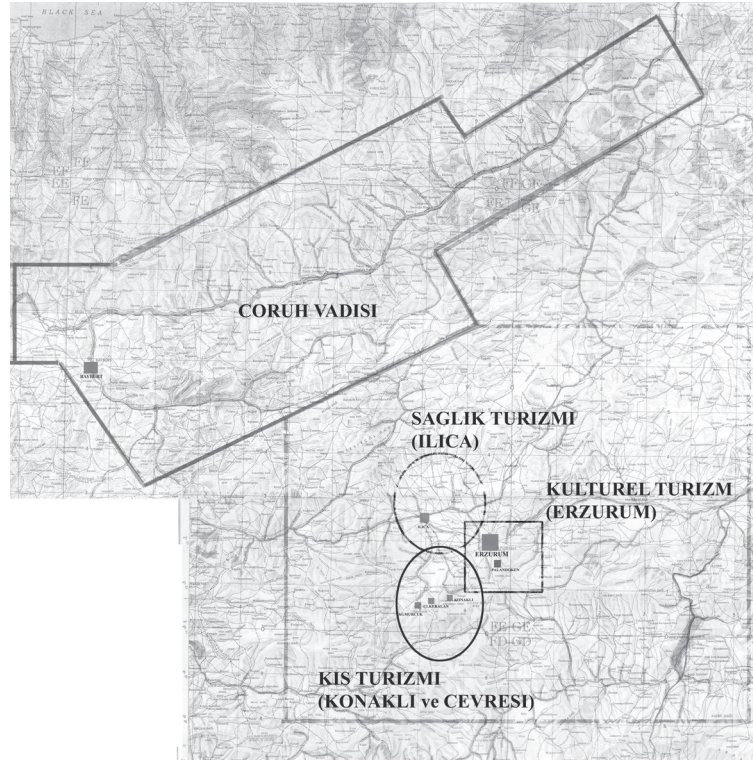
Source: <http://www.geographic.org>, 26.07.05

However, local people are not so interested in fishing, trekking, rafting, mountaineering, skiing and camping although very rich sources and facilities are present in the region. Only the thermal-springs are used by local residents frequently. Yet, this is not enough to make the district a tourist area (DPT b, 2000, s.32).

In recent years, an increase has been observed in the recreational activities outside the city-center. It is hoped that it will gain a fast improvement impact with alternative tourism tendency along with an increase in the transportation facilities the increasing number of vehicle owners.



Map 2. The Çoruh Valley and Erzurum



2.1. The Winter Tourism Issue: Palandöken Ski Resort

The Palandöken ski resort is located on the northern slopes of Mount Palandöken, 5 km from Erzurum city centre and 20 minutes away from the airport. This resort is an element of a broader ski tourism centre yet to be planned, including Gez Highlands and Konaklı, two locations where infrastructure and investment are still missing. The duration of the skiing season is about 150 days a year. The altitude in the skiing area of Palandöken is 2200-3176 m with an average snowfall of 2- 3 meters in normal winter conditions. Due to the climate, the quality of the snow is “powdery” throughout the season (DPT c, 1991, s.8-6).

The resort employs 400 people during high season but activity could be remarkably increased with a clearer perception of goals and strong management of programs for local tourism development.

It is believed that tourism is of great importance in the economic structure of Erzurum. A strong tourist image is to be defined within a communication campaign, such as “the city of winter tourism” (İncekara, 1998, s.58).

Winter tourism as such (i.e. Palandöken ski resort) deals with far different issues: The ski resort made substantial improvements within the last decade, improving infrastructure equipment (7 chairlifts, 1 telecabin, 2 T bars) as well as accommodation (with four high range hotels). The slopes and mechanical equipment are under surveillance of experts and a brand new system for controlled avalanches has been newly implemented (GAZEX system). So far, the ski resort complies with European standards and has a tremendous potential to expand its activity within the next 10 years.

A master plan was designed in 1991 and some significant changes were made regarding tourism activities in Palandöken. The hotel constructed by Provincial Private Administration was privatized and its capacity was raised to 650 beds, two other hotels were built (capacity of 1.326 beds), a main carrier gondola lift was constructed by the Provincial Governorship, three lifts were put in service by the private sector and management of the lifts was privatized (Erzurum Turizm Rehberi, 2005, s.117).

Despite all these factors, the demographic structure of Erzurum is overwhelmingly rural and it is characterized by low-income levels. Regional growth market is anticipated to grow at a more significant rate, as there are several million people living within a day's drive of Palandöken (Rize, Samsun). Other Turkish skiers (from Istanbul and Ankara as well as other centers) also represent a good growth market.

The Turkish skiing industry is still in its infancy in terms of international tourism. Of the ten ski areas throughout the country, the largest and most-well developed resort remains Uludağ, near Bursa (DPT d, 2000, s.18-19). In the Erzurum- Palandöken meeting held on December 24, 2002, the potentials and improvement facilities, the existing physical appearance and the negative aspects of the winter tourism in were Palandöken discussed and proposals were made in order to find a solution.

It was attempted to find out the recreational facilities in the mountainous districts and to organize coordination workshops on winter tourism and rural recreation focusing on the recent regional and rural recreational activities. In addition, making the master program of the mountain, designing a serious policy for tourism and building up coordination among the artisans were the stressed proposals.

Besides, it was emphasized that precautions should be taken to facilitate transportation and social activities, to conduct field studies and to build new accommodation, to find out new jogging paths in safe and reach simple alternative solutions that will operate in harmony with nature.

The importance of recreational fishing in Eco-Tourism was stressed and in addition, it was suggested that a sustainability project should be implemented without destroying the natural and authentic cultural architecture of the region.

On the other hand, it was observed that the hunting potentiality is decreasing day by day. Because of the chaotic urbanization and rural poverty, unawareness of conservation leads to the restriction and destruction of the living areas of wild animals. Therefore, hunting was reviewed in details in regards of its financial value examining the problematic situations such as over- population and extinction of wildlife species.

2.2. Problematic Issues

It is primarily required to have a small-scale tourism plan of the zone. The transportation, catering and accommodation services, and infrastructure arrangements are insufficient.

The transportation problems mostly emerge from delays, rescheduling or cancellations of the flights. Besides, insufficient international connections and long lasting and boring formalities at the Customs Offices discourage the tourists. Sometimes unforeseen troubles with the mechanic equipment and in the infra-structure services on Mount Palandöken make visitors miserably disappointing. More international tourist relations and less bureaucracy in customs and air transportation will help improve tourist activities a great deal.

Although there is a very rich potential for highland tourism in the region, it has not been sufficiently assessed as an organized project. In this respect, this zone is evaluated as a too risky region to make investment although it presents a rich tourism and cultural potential. Therefore, encouragement is so poor.

2.3. The Work and Proposal Projects That Can Be Realized in The Main Project

- Programs for Train the Trainees
- Ski training programs for the primary school students
- Technological aids to establish a closed-system broadcasting at Palandöken (UNDP, 2000).

2.4. Proposed Immediate Actions to Improve Regional Tourism

- To eliminate lack of sufficient structural organizations along the highways
- To improve the main roads and resting places in the short and middle term
- To organize composed tours for 4x4 jeep safaris +horse riding + walking/trekking
- To establish co-operation between fish farms and tourist organizations and including fish farms in tour programs
- To organize motor-cycle tours

To establish composed tour centers

To get state aid in order to arrange the composed tours and promoting them

To make preparations for motor-cycle tours

To install development projects and promoting them.

- Holding Winter Olympics In The Region

To perform annual winter tournaments

To prepare projects to establish the Olympic committee and to organize the required foundations

To construct sports complexes

To realize environmental complexes such as shopping centers on the International Highway between Turkey and Iran

To build composed tour main roads

To establish a motor-cycle tour committee and to organize annual motor-cycle tours

To organize international tournaments in the region

- To preserve the existing flora and fauna reserves and to establish new reserves mainly along the tour roads

- To improve the museums in the region and to establish museum + congress center + open air museum complexes
- To improve paragliding and including it in the competitions (DAPa, 2000, s.415-418).

3. THE ÇORUH VALLEY AND SUMMER TOURISM ISSUES

The Çoruh valley, with its high potential for summer tourism activities could provide, in the long run, new economic life and new opportunities to the region. River Çoruh, one of Turkey's natural beauties, originates at the Mescit Mountains (3,225 m) and flows 466 km before reaching the Black Sea within the national boundaries of Georgia. This is one of the fastest flowing rivers in the world. The small towns and villages located along the river are impressively authentic and historically interesting. The area as a whole represents the synthesis of the cultures of Eastern Anatolia and the Black Sea, and the Kaçkar Mountains offer highly attractive possibilities for canoeing, rafting and trekking (Artvinli, 2000, s.74).

The natural habitat of Çoruh River remains undisturbed. As the Çoruh passes 150 km through the province of Artvin, the river cuts through steep and impregnable mountains on its way towards the Black Sea.

Relevance of the area size as a wildlife zone was clearly confirmed during the consultations process. It was decided to consider the valley area with its towns and smaller valleys as a whole: existing problems and their potential solutions have to be dealt with considering the capacity of the sources rather than their geographic limits. Future prospects might cast a shadow over the valley, mainly due to various previously planned dam projects, which will deeply affect the Çoruh Valley, notably Yusufeli town and surroundings.

3.1. General Assessment

Regarding its natural structure a cultural geography, the Çoruh Valley has the capacity of presenting a wide range of tourism activities. However, being unable to signify a dynamic zone in the current situation, it cannot offer remarkable financial benefits and employment.

As a probable promising tourism zone in near future, the image of the Çoruh Valley is mainly based on its specific natural character, panoramic landscape and potentials of cultural history. However, it cannot be a homogenous holiday destination. Mostly nature lovers can feel themselves happy with its various kinds of attractions. On the other hand, the historical heritage supports its image very profoundly.

Accommodation facilities in İspir are so poor that tourists have only stayed in the low range pensions so far. Therefore, the needs of tourists travelling in groups cannot be met. But, it has been observed that pensions in Yusufeli are in better conditions.

The majority of tourists are mostly from Israel, North America and Holland having interest mainly on rafting and trekking.

Although the locals are quite hospitable, tourism services in general are not so qualified.

The existing tourism shareholders' complaints mainly focus on capital insufficiency being unable to meet the high quality demands.

The cultural and historical wealth worth visiting does not have the required physical formation in appearance to draw the attraction of tourists (i.e.Sıra Konaklar, Ambar Evler).

Both the roads and buildings need to be repaired. Tourism facilities such as trekking, cycling, mountaineering, water sports, horseback riding and skiing are easily available.

The rich and easy capacity of the valley for camping is another facility that can be a “kick start” in the near future for the increasing demands.

The implementation of tourism function seems hardly possible because of the inexistency of a united cooperation among all the tourism bodies including all the Çoruh Valley. Developing a co-operation study among the existing civil society organizations may lead to the use of the sources at maximum levels creating a wider range of tourism products and thus their members will be provided with significant capacity and responsibility to formulate a vision. Such an organization will be highly influential in launching a series of projects covering environmental protective issues.

3.2. Main Goals

Either in Ispir or in Yusufeli, tourism can be developed by meeting the demands of the target groups and increasing the quality of tourism services. Touristic activities should carry out ecological, economical, social and cultural responsibilities. Therefore, in order to utilize the touristic attraction of the Çoruh Valley in creating more employment and financial benefits, a project of tourism economy is to be implemented with all facilities meeting the abovementioned demands.

Conserving nature and environment, and establishing ecological touristic infrastructure are the main goals. Regarding it as an advantage that the district is at the first stage of tourism and recognizing its sustainable characteristics, biologic diversity should be dominant agent in implementing projects and politics. Environmental awareness can only be created by education and training. Therefore, concrete precautions have to be taken for its protection.

The present potentials should be utilized in order to benefit from the advantage of the diversities of the tourism facilities. The specific features of the district are significant impacts on regional cooperating studies. Besides, presenting the differencer and the offers in one pocket can be another advantage.

Promoting the regional tourism and making a tourism strategy should be based on nature culture-sport potentials.

The rich sources for the promotion of tourism in the district are:

- Diversities in natural life
- Authentic Structure
- Mountaineering opportunities
- A wide range of observation in the region for the youths
- Water sports facilities
- Trekking possibilities

Recreation zones, picnic areas, sport centers and camping sites have to be built to promote the regional tourism in the near future. For the time being, however, small-scale investments such as accommodation and daily service elements as taking shower, toilet etc. are satisfactory.

To overcome the problems of the organization of tourism is vital:

- to develop a systematic product policy due to tourism marketing
- to be in agreement with the residents in planning and taking precautions
- to provide extensive information about the activities in the region.

4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

While giving the conclusions we reached, it was thought that it would be better to give them in two parts; the first part about the tourism around Erzurum and the second about Çoruh Valley.

It is believed that tourism will have priority with a great importance in the economic structure of Erzurum. Its rich culture-mountain and winter tourism potentials are about to be spoiled because of the lack of good quality tourism understanding and having rivalry at low capacity. Consequently, the lack of qualified infrastructure and trained personnel are the basic problems of the issue.

It is thought that the improvement of the regional tourism activities does not only signify financial benefits but may also bring socio-economic valuables. Therefore, tourism will be the socio-politic leader in local field creating a good opportunity for the regional development.

The recent improvement in the transportation by air is not satisfactory. Therefore, completing the current airport construction, increasing the number of other tourism factors, that this region can offer; such as hunting, hiking, trekking, rafting and thermal, belief and eco-tourism is of significance.

In spite of the good cooperation between the public and private tourism service providers, and stakeholders, some promotion and organization problems still exist. Therefore, private agencies and private tour operators are needed. In this respect, associations and/or other civil society organizations should work as improvement agencies informing their members about daily and weekly flights. Decreasing the number of the cancelled flights will be of great importance and help for Erzurum where winter tourism occupies the most significant importance.

As it will be risky and not efficient to have only one firm to make promotions, to build other civil institutions to work as public travel agencies can be highly useful. .Actually, in the Western countries, tourism operators enter the markets with their own travel agencies except the big chains of hotels.

Apart from the local travel agencies in Europe, municipalities, Provincial Tourism Directorate and Civil Society Organizations take the most important places. Besides, professional marketers work with the target markets to create demands using all means of promotions.

Tourism associations that may be composed of tourism companies and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism officials can build local agencies to solve the infrastructure, promotion and marketing problems more efficiently.

According to the city tourism inventory made by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, cultural, thermal, winter, sport, congress and eco tourism are the types and fields to be developed.

So far, the abovementioned issues have been regarded as the primary and foremost ones for the regional tourism. Although the natural facilities and sufficiency are the fundamental pre-conditions, the potentials have to be converted to authentic local tourist products to captivate the markets. Besides, winter tourism can be the other attractive interest.

The conception of “Tourism City”, which has been pronounced by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism recently can be converted into the conception of “The City Of Winter Tourism”. Erzurum- Palandöken can be selected as an exemplary region of this practice in the first step. So, regional supports and financial aids from the expatriates can be provided with this process.

Improving the credit conditions of the Development Bank of Turkey for the investors in this region, finding other financial solutions to overcome the difficulties of the sector and strengthening the capacity of rivalry will be important encouragements.

Erzurum airport has some advantages with its short distance arrival to the skiing resort. From time to time, it takes too long to complete customs formalities that cause the tourists to waste their time and get bored. Therefore, necessary radical precautions should be taken. Besides, it is advisable to reduce the costs of airport service, fuel etc. Turkish Airlines may sell cheaper tickets to carry more passengers. This will bring remarkable financial benefits to the region.

Beside cheaper and more comfortable transportation, cheaper accommodation will help a great deal to increase the number of visitors. On the other hand, everybody working in this sector should be taught the currently necessary foreign languages giving priority to English.

Two other than ski resorts beside Palandöken-Boğaz resort, should be taken into consideration: Palandöken-Konaklı and Sarıkamış skiing resorts. The former may compete with the worldwide famous skiing resorts providing that both infrastructure and all other required services are completed. In this case, the cooperation of public and private sectors is a must for successful processes from promotion to marketing.

Another project may be installed for the passers-by building fish farms, shopping centers and other recreational organizations along the main roads. Thermal water can be carried through a pipeline system to these stations from very short distances of only 7-8 km; or new thermal centers may be established to meet increasing demand. Regarding winter sports, this region has so great a potentiality that various international ski cups, University Olympics and other championships may be held here after fulfilling the infrastructure arrangements and opening the Palandöken-Konaklı skiing resort. Regional and local promotion and improvement programs for tourism such as festivals, fairs and congresses should be planned.

It will be highly useful to launch discussion panels to overcome the obstacles in the creation of wide range of marketing and infrastructure improvements taking Çoruh Valley into account, after establishing a participatory cooperation among all tourism service providers,. It is believed that preparing thematic touristic maps charting trekking paths etc. and then placing them at the departure points of treks and expeditions can be done more easily in a cooperation study.

A tourism information office built in the region can be converted to a tourism agency having central reservation system in the near future. Responding the online questions in such an information - reservation system will enable the local tourism service providers to collaborate with tour operators faster and in a wider range.

Having Palandöken-Erzurum cooperation in the fairs and exhibitions promoting the Çoruh Valley will make the efforts to capture tour markets to generate economy more successfully.

The following infrastructure arrangements should be implemented in order to increase the attraction of the potential camping sites.

- To establish a perfect link of transportation,
- To provide adequate signaling to facilitate orientation,
- To provide other services such as riding and renting horses, offering all hygienic facilities, building cycling roads and discovering new trekking walks and paths,
- To make the required arrangements for rafting

It is thought that to establish organizations promoting the national and international youth tourism and to complete the infrastructure arrangements will exclusively increase the financial benefits of tourism. Moreover, it sounds necessary that several groups of pilot projects be launched in order to captivate interest from donor organizations abroad and within the country as well.

Some rich potential for winter and caravan tourism exists in the region (i.e. skiing in Öğdem and summer skiing in Karadağ). Besides, conservation of nature and reservation of wilderness are highly attractive activities in Kılıçkaya and Çamlıkaya. Consequently, a pure contact between man and nature can be experienced in the district.

Raising tourism awareness and promoting diversity tourism with all its assets can only be accomplished by education. Additionally, to base the field of study on local priorities in sustainable tourism implementations in the Education Programs will denote the exclusivity of the region.

Therefore, the mountains in the region should be included in projects covering mountain-highland tourism, environmental arrangements should be given priority in the historical sites in the vicinity and the ongoing construction activities should be immediately stopped around the recorded historical and cultural edifices.

Unfortunately, only the state schools educate and train qualified personnel to work in the tourism sector. Private training and educational institutions are also needed to meet the demand for qualified personnel.

In addition, The Tourism Improvement Law No 2634 impedes to make up immediate local decisions in subjects of “Designing”, “Improving”, “Promoting” and “Controlling”. Furthermore, the same law does not give enough power and competence to the municipalities in the field of construction causing chaotic urbanization. The absence of coordinating studies between public organizations, municipalities, universities and especially associations prevents making substantial touristic improvements.

Consequently, in order to open the potentials of the region to the worldwide tourism, much bigger projects covering both domestic and international tourism activities based on international standards should be realized. In this sense, regional and local authorities have great responsibilities. Therefore, a

sound cooperation between the public and private sectors in regards of technology, project-making, raising funds for investments is a must.

It is necessary to promote the region both within the country and abroad to accomplish this goal. Therefore, the local promotion institutions should support such efforts to reach the target markets. Either tour operators or tourism agencies should be opened or coordinating studies have to be made with the tour operators who are dominant in the tourism markets. It is only with the help and support of the state to educate and train qualified personnel. For this reason, Tourism Artisan High Schools, undergraduate and graduate tourism and hotel management colleges should be established (İncekara, 1998, s.54-64).

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Mehmet Gültekin	:	Mayor of County of Çamlıkaya
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Fatih Şahin	:	Tourist Guide, Yusufeli
Sıralı Aydın	:	Chief of Yusufeli Rafting Club
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