

## Structural Equation Modeling of Brand Development in Tourism of Natural Places

Yasamin Golafshan Yousefi<sup>1</sup>, Azam Rahiminik<sup>2\*</sup>, Sina Nematizadeh<sup>3</sup>, Mandan Momeni<sup>4</sup>

1. Department of Business Management, Central Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran.
2. Department of Business Management, Central Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran.
3. Department of Business Management, Central Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran.
4. Department of Human Resource Development Management, Central Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran.

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**Purpose:** Brand development in tourism of natural places can play a vital and effective role in attracting tourists. Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate a structural equation modeling of brand development in tourism of natural places.

**Methodology:** This study was applied in terms of its objective and quantitative in its approach. The research population consisted of employees of organizations and cultural heritage institutions in Tehran city (1,200 individuals). The sample size was determined as 384 individuals using the Krejcie and Morgan table, and they were selected through multi-stage cluster sampling. The research instrument was a researcher-made questionnaire on brand development in tourism of natural places with 23 items, whose content validity was confirmed by 20 experts, and its reliability was calculated using Cronbach's alpha as 0.82. Data were analyzed using exploratory factor analysis and structural equation modeling in software such as SPSS and LISREL.

**Findings:** Seven factors were identified: place value, communications and information, tourist facilities and services, physical factor, awareness of the tourism destination brand, attachment to the place, and contextual conditions. All of them had factor loadings exceeding 0.60, the extracted variances were all over 0.70, and the Cronbach's alpha for all of them was higher than 0.80. Furthermore, the model of brand development in tourism of natural places had a good fit, and brand development in tourism of natural places had a positive and significant impact on all seven mentioned factors ( $p < 0.05$ ).

**Conclusion:** Based on the results of this study, to attract tourists, conditions can be provided for the realization of place value, communications and information, tourist facilities and services, physical factor, awareness of the tourism destination brand, attachment to the place, and contextual conditions.

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\* Corresponding Author: [arnik2004@yahoo.com](mailto:arnik2004@yahoo.com)

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## 1. Introduction

Today, branding is an integral and essential part of marketing strategies, and brand marketing is at the heart of business. Many of the world's best-known companies and organizations structure themselves around their brands. Brands can establish connections with their customers, and when consumers in their daily lives seek a specific brand to fulfill their desires, they are looking for a name that satisfies them (Freydoni and Kalateh Seyfari, 2019). Organizations use long-term and strategic planning to create a competitive advantage, achieve organizational goals, and develop their brand. These strategic plans require extensive and accurate information about the internal and external conditions of the organization, helping the organization succeed (Trigeorgis, Baldi, and Katsikeas, 2021). In the present era, achieving a competitive advantage is not solely reliant on the functional features of products and services. In the contemporary age, a brand is the most valuable asset of a company, distinguishing it from competitors (Eriksson, Nappa, and Robertson, 2023). Branding is one of the most valuable and important assets of any organization and company. The value of a brand is evident in loyalty, positive perceptions, the ability to attract new customers and command higher prices, ease of entry into new markets, and resistance to new competitors (Porgarm, Kageeporn, Koraklod, and Pansiri, 2016). A successful brand is not only a point of differentiation from competitors but also creates added value for its target market. Therefore, branding and brand development are among the most challenging marketing activities (Okten, Okan, Arslan, and Gungor, 2019). One of the significant solutions for economic growth in advanced countries is the creation of a brand name or branding. A brand name or symbol represents an identity for a product, aiming to create a meaningful connection between a symbol, a product, feelings, and perceptions of a service or organization with the goal of building loyalty and differentiation (Escribano, Gaspar, and Mesias, 2020). Brand development involves introducing new products under a brand name, and this strategy has evolved since the 1980s. The importance of managing brand development strategies has been conceptually and empirically proven (Ye, Barreda, Okumus, and Nusair, 2019). This structure indicates a successful brand's ability to introduce another new product that may belong to a similar or different product category. When evaluating brand development, if consumer attitudes are favorable, they positively impact the parent brand's equity. Conversely, if consumer evaluations of brand development are negative, it may threaten the equity and even lead to its destruction (Akhlaghi, Askari, Naami, and Rousta, 2022). Brand development occurs in two forms: vertical and horizontal. In vertical development, two types of products are introduced to the market. One is a high-quality, high-priced product, and the other is a low-quality, low-priced product under the same brand. In contrast, in horizontal development, development occurs within a different product category than the parent brand (Xiong, Hu, and Gursoy, 2023). Brand development creates a framework for focusing on priorities, increasing productivity, retaining employees, creating a competitive advantage for the organization, and fostering employee loyalty (Reijonen, Hirvonen, Nagy, Laukkanen, and Gabrielsson, 2015). One of the areas where brand development is realized is in tourism of natural places, which is not just an economic growth factor but also a platform for achieving development goals (Yang, Lu, Scoglio, De Jong, and Gruenbacher, 2018). Tourism is a phenomenon that has existed among humans since ancient times and has gradually gained prevalence, becoming one of the significant economic, social, and cultural transformations rooted in tourism today (Bogan, Sarac, Kiper, and Batman, 2023). According to the World Health Organization's definition, tourism refers to traveling outside one's usual environment for less than one year for leisure, visiting relatives, and other non-income-generating purposes (Liu, Dou, Li, and Cai, 2020). Tourism encompasses a range of activities that occur during a traveler's journey, including trip planning, traveling to a destination, return, purchasing various goods, interacting with hosts and other people, and even reminiscing about travel memories (Almeida, Costa, and Da Silva, 2018). Given the increasing importance of tourism and the growing competition in the global tourism market, there is fierce competition among organizations and destinations to attract tourists. Therefore, the tourism industry is considered one of the essential and revenue-generating industries (Cao, Zhang, and Zhang, 2021). Tourism is one of the fastest-growing and developing industries in the global economy, and its importance is such

that only the oil and automotive industries surpass it (Holt, 2023). Today's people are seeking places with a high-quality environment, finding attractive, clean, less crowded, and pollution-free environments appealing. Increasing awareness, promoting justice and development, improving the quality of life, providing high-quality experiences for visitors, and maintaining the environment are among the most important goals of tourism (Haji Beg Lou and Mursal, 2021). Today, natural attractions have gained significant attention from people, as they have various needs for connecting with nature and, as a result, are obligated to preserve it. Tourism in natural locations serves as a suitable way to spend leisure time and aims to reduce the impact of increasing urban and industrial life stresses (Shabanzadeh, Baniasadi, Hayati, and Raheli, 2016).

There has been limited research on brand development in tourism, particularly regarding the brand development model in tourism of natural locations in Iran. In the following, the most important and relevant research findings in this field are reported. Souri, Ghafari, Shirazi, and Khodadad Hosseini (2022) conducted research on citizen behavior development in medical tourism and concluded that the causal factors in this model include brand commitment, brand identity, job satisfaction, personality traits, organizational culture, brand credibility and reputation, brand-centric human resource management, and receiving feedback from patients. Interventional factors include organizational structure, healthcare industry characteristics, job history, personal quality of life, management performance, and environmental factors. Contextual factors encompass social capital, organizational justice, work-life quality, competitive work environment, and social responsibility. Strategies include comprehensive marketing planning, branding, and human resource support, while outcomes comprise customer brand satisfaction, brand image, goal achievement, competitive advantage, brand performance, employee satisfaction, and macroeconomic factors.

Rabani, Jalali, and Mehrmanesh (2020) conducted research on a city brand model for creating a tourist destination brand. They found that in this model, for the causal dimension, modern city development strategies, urban modeling, policy-making with a focus on tourism, and urban tourism identification were essential. For the interventional dimension, budget and financial resources, city managers, and decision-makers played a crucial role. For the background dimension, urban infrastructure, city facilities, political management spaces, and cultural and social city spaces were key factors. As for the strategies, they involved internal marketing, transformation management, organizing festivals and scientific events, formulating tourism indicators, and identifying and introducing city attractions. The outcomes included process integration, enhancing the city's position, sustainable tourism development, city economic development, and community peace and friendship identification.

Cheraghali Khani, Rezaali, and Khoshlahje Mino (2020) conducted research on the factors influencing tourist destination selection in the tourism industry and found that the influencing factors include performance and transportation, natural attractions, historical sites, geographical location, commercial centers, recreational sites, luxurious accommodation facilities, diversity of attractions, culture, customs and traditions, individuals' lifestyles, cost levels, and service facilities. Influential factors include the culture of hospitality, uniqueness of attractions, urban architectural beauty, sanitary conditions, distance, recognition and familiarity, political-religious status, security, products and souvenirs, and language and dialect.

Taghizadeh Joorshari, Delafrooz, Shabgu Monsef, and Baghersalimi (2020) conducted research on tourism branding with an emphasis on identifying brand personality dimensions. They concluded that the mentioned model consists of three unique dimensions: Warm (with components of artistic, unique, pleasant, exciting, authentic, and appealing), Hospitable (with components of cultural, social, joyful, hospitable, civilized, and cheerful), and Stylish (with components of chic, tasteful, appetizing, and enjoyable).

Jalalian (2019) conducted research on the factors affecting brand added value in tourism destinations and identified four factors: brand image, perceived quality, brand awareness, and loyalty, which had good reliability and acceptability.

Nassaji Kamrani, Karimi, Mahmoudi Meimand, and Darvish (2017) conducted research on the factors influencing tourism brand enhancement and found that influential factors included destination factors (with components of cultural and historical heritage, geographical location and natural attractions, language, society's traditions and beliefs), tourism industry factors (with components of tourism infrastructure, tourism industry professionals in Iran, and tourism marketing), governance factors (with components of government foreign policy, religious policy, domestic government policy, and economic policy), and international environmental factors (with components of foreign tourists' experiences, social networks, global scientific and artistic achievements, interregional agreements, international organizations like UNESCO, and global sports achievements).

In recent years, the determination of officials, planners, and decision-makers in the country to focus on the development of the non-oil economy and the high potential of nature and climate in Iran has increased the importance of addressing issues related to the tourism industry in the country. Brand development in tourism is one of the main and consistent income-generating programs for both domestic and foreign revenues by advanced countries, and many developed countries have accelerated their economic growth by facilitating various aspects of this industry. Iran has historically been one of the top tourist destinations due to its historical, cultural, and natural attractions. Therefore, one suitable way to diversify sources of foreign exchange earnings, create employment, and promote economic growth and development is by paying sufficient attention to the growth of the tourism industry (Cheraghali Khani et al., 2020).

Conducting research on brand development, especially in the field of tourism of natural places, can provide a competitive advantage for the country's officials. Consequently, conducting research in this field and applying its results in the real world can contribute to the development of branding for tourism of natural places. Developing the brand of natural attractions can play an important and effective role in attracting tourists, and hence, the objective of this study was to model the structural equations of brand development in tourism of natural places.

## 2. Methodology

This study was both applied in terms of its objective and quantitative in terms of its execution. The research population consisted of employees of tourism and cultural heritage organizations in Tehran city, totaling 1200 individuals. The sample size was determined as 384 individuals using Krejcie and Morgan's table, and this number was selected through multi-stage cluster sampling. In this sampling method, Tehran city was first divided into five districts, and three of these districts were randomly selected. Then, from each selected district, some of the tourism and cultural heritage organizations were randomly chosen, and all their employees were selected as the sample.

The research tool was a researcher-developed questionnaire on natural attraction brand development with 23 items. The questionnaire was designed by the researchers of this study based on theoretical foundations and was structured into seven factors, including place value, communications and information, tourism facilities and services, physical factors, awareness of the tourism destination brand, attachment to the place, and contextual conditions, which were identified as effective factors in natural attraction brand development. A five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (score 1) to "strongly agree" (score 5) was used to respond to each item. The score of each factor is obtained by summing the scores of its constituent items, and a higher score in each factor indicates greater importance. Content validity of the researcher-developed questionnaire on natural places brand development was confirmed by 20 experts (8 managers, 5 cultural heritage experts, and 7 university professors) after several revisions, and its reliability was calculated using Cronbach's alpha as 0.82.

The implementation process of the present research proceeded as follows: After the approval of the proposal, a review of the background and interviews with 10 tourism industry experts were conducted. Based on their input, the researcher-developed questionnaire on natural attraction brand development was designed with seven factors: place value, communications and information, tourism facilities and services,

physical factors, awareness of the tourism destination brand, attachment to the place, and contextual conditions. After several revisions, the questionnaire was finalized.

In the next stage, sampling and identification of participants, i.e., employees of tourism and cultural heritage organizations in Tehran city, were carried out. Following their selection, the importance and ethical considerations of the research were explained to them, and they were asked to honestly and fully respond to the questionnaire on natural attraction brand development. Finally, they were thanked for their participation, and coordination regarding the dissemination of the research results was undertaken.

The collected data, obtained through the researcher-developed questionnaire on brand development of natural places, were analyzed using exploratory factor analysis and structural equation modeling methods in software such as SPSS and Lisrel.

### 3. Findings

The findings of this study are the result of analyzing a researcher-made questionnaire on brand development in tourism of natural places for 384 employees of organizations and cultural heritage institutions in Tehran city. Exploratory factor analysis showed that the KMO index, with a value of 0.86, indicates sample adequacy, as it is higher than 0.70, and the Bartlett's test of sphericity with a significance level less than 0.001 ( $p < 0.001$ ) suggests the fulfillment of the assumptions for the intended analysis method. The examination of the questionnaire's factor loadings for brand development in tourism of natural places indicated that 7 items were removed due to factor loadings less than 0.40, resulting in a final form with 16 items. The results of the exploratory factor analysis for the researcher-made questionnaire on brand development in tourism of natural places are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Results of Exploratory Factor Analysis for the Researcher-Developed Questionnaire on Brand Development in Tourism of Natural Places

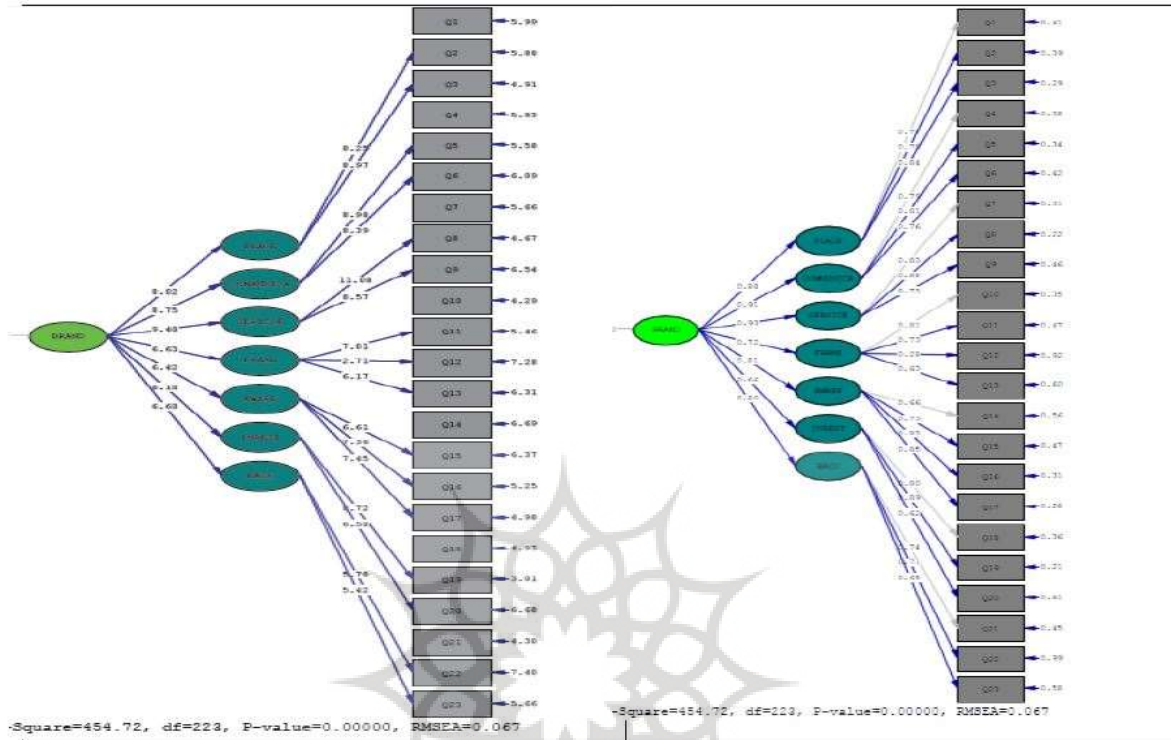
Factor	Number of Items	Factor Loadings	Extracted Variance	Mean and	Cronbach's Reliability
Place Value	2	0.88	0.89		0.86
Communication and Information	2	0.91	0.95		0.92
Tourism Facilities and Services	2	0.93	0.86		0.95
Physical Factor	3	0.72	0.79		0.84
Awareness of Destination Brand	3	0.81	0.86		0.90
Attachment to Place	2	0.66	0.75		0.87
Contextual Conditions	2	0.80	0.77		0.94

As can be observed in Table 1, for the researcher-developed questionnaire on brand development in tourism of natural places, seven factors were identified: Place Value, Communication and Information, Tourism Facilities and Services, Physical Factor, Awareness of Destination Brand, Attachment to Place, and Contextual Conditions. The factor loadings for all of them were above 0.60, the extracted mean variances for all of them were above 0.70, and Cronbach's reliability for all of them was above 0.80. The results of the model fit indices for brand development in natural tourism are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Results of Model Fit Indices for Brand Development in Tourism of Natural Places

Index	Calculated Value	Acceptance Threshold
RMSA	0.06	Less than 0.08
CFI	0.95	Greater than 90
IFI	0.95	Greater than 90
NFI	0.91	Greater than 90

As can be seen in Table 2, the model of brand development in tourism of natural places had a good fit. The results of the structural equation modeling for brand development in tourism of natural places are presented in Figure 1 and Table 3.



**Figure 1.** Results of Structural Equation Modeling for Brand Development in Tourism of Natural Places in Path Coefficients and T-Statistics

**Table 3.** Results of Structural Equation Modeling for Brand Development in Tourism of Natural Places

Path	Path Coefficient	T-Statistic	Significance
Brand Development in Tourism of Natural Places → Place Value	0.88	8.02	<0.05
Brand Development in Tourism of Natural Places → Communication and Information	0.91	8.75	<0.05
Brand Development in Tourism of Natural Places → Tourism Facilities and Services	0.93	9.40	<0.05
Brand Development in Tourism of Natural Places → Physical Factor	0.72	6.63	<0.05
Brand Development in Tourism of Natural Places → Awareness of Destination Brand	0.81	6.42	<0.05
Brand Development in Tourism of Natural Places → Attachment to Place	0.66	6.10	<0.05
Brand Development in Tourism of Natural Places → Contextual Conditions	0.80	6.63	<0.05

As observed in Figure 1 and Table 3, brand development in tourism of natural places had a positive and significant impact on all seven factors: Place Value, Communication and Information, Tourism Facilities and Services, Physical Factor, Awareness of Destination Brand, Attachment to Place, and contextual Conditions ( $p < 0.05$ ).

#### 4. Discussion

Tourism in natural sites can play a significant role in economic, cultural, social, and political development by attracting both domestic and international tourists. Therefore, the aim of this study was to model brand development in tourism of natural places.

The findings indicated that for brand development in tourism of natural places, seven factors were identified: place value, communication and information, tourism facilities and services, physical factors, awareness of destination brand, attachment to the place, and environmental conditions. All of these factors had factor loadings above 0.60, average extracted variances above 0.70, and Cronbach's alpha reliability above 0.80. Furthermore, the model of brand development in tourism of natural places had a good fit, and brand development in tourism of natural places had a positive and significant impact on all seven mentioned factors.

Although there have been few quantitative studies on brand development in tourism, and most of the research in this area has been qualitative, the results and findings of this study were in line with the results and findings of Souri et al. (2022), Rabani et al. (2020), Cheraghali Khani et al. (2020), Taghizadeh Joorshari et al. (2020), Jalalian (2019), and Nassaji Kamrani et al. (2017).

In interpreting the concept of "place value," it can be said that this factor comprises two components: place fame and place attractiveness. Considering this factor, for brand development in tourism of natural places, one can utilize unique characteristics of each place (such as Iran's Qanats and Lut Desert), physical facilities and historical backgrounds of the location, key attributes, and the place's identity (such as the roaring rivers of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari), as well as the presence of tourist attractions (unique environmental features) to enhance the brand. In the interpretation of "communication and information," this factor has two parts: increasing information for citizens and tourists about natural tourist attractions and using new media to promote natural attractions. Considering this factor, brand development in tourism of natural places can involve introducing and advertising the natural attractions, involving local communities and authorities in marketing and communications efforts, local community awareness of the destination brand, advertising and image-building for the location, promoting, introducing, and advertising natural tourist attractions through digital platforms and media campaigns. Additionally, in interpreting "tourism facilities and services," this factor has two components: developing hard transportation and accommodation infrastructure and developing soft infrastructure in the realm of branding the attractions. Considering this factor, for brand development in tourism of natural places, one can make use of indicators related to accommodation and recreational infrastructure, communication and transportation infrastructure, hard infrastructure on-site (such as roads, water networks, electricity, and telecommunications), the presence of hotels, shops, and accommodation facilities, as well as soft infrastructure elements (like marketing and advertising, manager training, involving local communities, tourists, and stakeholders, ensuring a sense of trust and security in the brand, and having specialized human resources in the field of branding). Furthermore, in interpreting the "physical factor," this factor comprises four parts: environmental and climatic conditions, historical and natural attractions, recreational attractions, and gastronomic attractions. Considering this factor, for brand development in tourism of natural places, one can utilize environmental features (such as carrying capacity and environmental impacts), climate change in tourist destinations, the historical and cultural symbol as a national tourism brand, historical backgrounds and brand capacity, the recreational motivation and entertainment of tourists, developing temporary recreational rest camps, and quality accommodation centers, as well as promoting travel to natural destinations for experiencing local foods and cuisines, as an influential component in increasing demands for traveling to various tourism destinations.

In interpreting "awareness of the destination brand," this factor can be divided into two parts: customer identification with the destination and brand personality. Considering this factor, for brand development in natural tourism, one can leverage indicators related to tourists' awareness of the destination brand,

customer's emotional connection with the brand (such as brand love), brand responsibility, and brand activeness.

Furthermore, in interpreting the "attachment to the place" factor, this factor comprises three parts: place identity, place attachment, and social bonds. Considering this factor, for brand development in natural tourism, one can make use of features such as preserving personal distinctions, a sense of uniqueness, self-esteem, satisfaction, ownership feeling, the length of stay, personal characteristics, and social connections.

Additionally, in interpreting the "contextual conditions" factor, this factor has two components: social and cultural conditions and existing political conditions and institutional structures. Considering this factor, for brand development in tourism of natural places, one can utilize indicators related to the local people's culture, the ability to establish local community interaction with tourists, political conditions, laws, sanctions, prevailing security, government regulations, and public participation in macro and micro-level planning and policymaking.

Based on the results of this study, to attract tourists, conditions can be created to realize the factors of place value, communication and information, tourism facilities and services, physical factors, awareness of the destination brand, attachment to the place, and environmental conditions. In this regard, the following practical recommendations are provided.

These are practical recommendations for brand development in tourism of natural places:

1. Create a positive brand image in the minds of tourists.
2. Establish and expand portable comprehensive social media networks accessible to different segments of society.
3. Guide social and virtual networks with predefined objectives towards domestic tourism development.
4. Plan for comfort and provide accommodation facilities such as hotels, guesthouses, and camps for travelers.
5. Ensure easy and convenient physical access to natural sites and transportation infrastructure, such as air travel and roads connecting to tourist destinations.
6. Develop soft infrastructure elements such as information and advertising, various management aspects, security, education, and culture in the context of electronic tourism.
7. Improve physical attractions and infrastructure, including hotels, motels, restaurants, and transportation services.
8. Enhance cultural attractions and infrastructure, such as culture, heritage, exhibitions, festivals, art, local music, clothing, dance, language, and food.
9. Improve service-related attractions and infrastructure, such as banking facilities, travel agencies, insurance agencies, and tourist guides.
10. Enhance government-related attractions and infrastructure, including regulations, customs, migration, etc.
11. Establish specialized social media for climate conditions and disseminate reports, utilizing short-term seasonal predictions for planning activities at natural sites, providing educational programs on climate change adaptation for camp managers and staff, developing and implementing incentive policies for implementing environmental management in accommodation facilities, and initiating resource conservation initiatives.
12. Offer a variety of dishes while preserving the main essence in a single meal, highlighting the importance of healthy food in attracting a wider audience and creating more motivation for tourism.
13. Use advertising tools to identify natural sites.
14. Provide services tailored to the needs and preferences of customers and tourists.
15. Raise awareness and historical knowledge of people about their environment through media and create social participation sessions to increase public awareness of tourist sites.
16. Plan for cultural promotion to increase the general public's awareness of the importance of tourism.



17. Revive the host community's culture and introduce it to tourists through locals within the framework of community-based tourism, including handicrafts, local music, local food, etc.

18. Develop programs and invest in various areas of cultural, rural, coastal, lake, ecotourism, hydrotherapy, health, winter tourism, etc.

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