

# **Some Effects of Natural and Cultural Degradations in Trabzon Karadag High Plateau-Tourism Center, Turkey, on Visitors' Preferences and Some Solution Proposals**

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## **Summary**

Eco-tourism is still accepted as a new term and its meaning and content are often changeable depending on what the approach to it is and what it is supposed to do in an area. It is often defined as a way to conserve nature by governments, while it might be just an income resource to local people in many places. By and large, eco-tourism has been promoted in many countries for a few decades in order to make a contribution to nature conservation and income generation. Although it is supposed to be sustainable on paper, some authors claim that there are hardly any places, in which eco-tourism activities are just how they should have been, all over the world. In fact, a tourism activity might harm natural and cultural resources when it is not organized well due to some difficulties in practices and this might cost much more than what countries were hoping to earn by selling "eco-tours" at the beginning.

Compered with the other countries in the near region, not to mention some such as Austria and Switzeland in central Europe, Turkey is nearly the only place having high plateaus that possess very rich natural resources and traditional life styles to arouse interest for many tourists. Having realized importance of the concept, Turkey has been stressing eco-tourism activities on high plateaus (yayla) especially in Black Sea Region, while the country faced some degradation problems regarding both natural and cultural resources in these areas.

In this study, one of these high plateaus, Trabzon Karadag High Plateau-Tourism Center, has been chosen as the research area and some degradations in natural and cultural structure of the high plateau have been represented. Afterwards, using a graphic programme, these degradations have been manipulated in order to identify the values belonging to current situation and manipulated ones.

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## **Introduction**

Due to the increase in number of people living in big cities being similar to each other and not allowing their settlers to experience natural environment and cultural differences, visiting 'original' natural and cultural areas has become very popular all over the world recently. This phenomenon can be called as "eco-tourism", which is characterised by integrated planning involving local communities [1].

Eco-tourism is still accepted as a new term and its meaning and content are often changeable depending on what the approach to it is and what it is supposed to do in an area. It is often defined as a way to conserve nature by governments, while it might be just an income resource to local people in many places. By and large, eco-tourism has been promoted in many countries for a few decades in order to make a contribution to nature conservation and income generation. Although it is supposed to be sustainable on paper, some authors claim that there are hardly any places that eco-tourism activities are just ideal in.

Successful eco-tourism and protected area management requires sustainable visitor use, necessitating the effective management of natural areas for visitor enjoyment and resource protection in perpetuity [2]. On the other hand, a tourism activity might harm natural and cultural resources when it is not organized well due to some difficulties in practices and this might cost much more than what the countries were hoping to earn by selling "eco-tours" at the beginning. In spite of the fact that several undesirable resource impacts related to tourism development have been realized in many parts of the world, especially developing countries which cannot afford great investments to attract tourists give a priority to this kind of tourism owing to its relatively poor needs to satisfy demandants. This process is likely to continue because international tourism, which is widely believed to be the most rapidly growing global industry, will grow at approximately 4% per year through the year 2010, according to World Tourism Organization [3]. The size of the eco-tourism market is also enormous [4] and it has been getting bigger, according to many academic studies.

Compared with the other countries in the near region, not to mention some such as Austria and Switzerland in central Europe, Turkey is nearly the only place having high plateaus that possess very rich natural resources and traditional life styles to arouse interest for many tourists. Having realized importance of the concept, Turkey has been stressing eco-tourism activities on high plateaus (yayla) especially in Black Sea Region, while the country faced some degradation problems regarding both natural and cultural resources in these areas, as usual.

## **Material and Methods**

In this study, Trabzon Karadag High Plateau-Tourism Center has been chosen as the research area.

Four different points having some degradations in their natural and cultural structures in the research area have been represented. Afterwards, three more graphics having three different characteristics have been produced for each point by using a graphic programme, which means we have had four different representations for each point. While the first and the original representations belonging to four different points in the research area show current situations, the second ones have been manipulated to demonstrate how they would have been without the degradations in the floristic structure, the third ones have been manipulated to

demonstrate how they would have been without the degradations in the floristic and the cultural structure including local architecture, utility poles etc. As for the fourth and the last representations, they have been manipulated to demonstrate how the points would have been with no or very limited residential impact.

To identify the values of the four different situations for the four points, two different groups, specialists including some academicians from Faculty of Forestry and Faculty of Architecture in Karadeniz Technical University and some people living in the Trabzon city center have been asked to evaluate the representations regarding their interest level to visit each form of the four points as “potential” eco-tourists. Afterwards, we have prepared the frequency tables to see which forms have created the highest interest level for participants to visit the area, and which forms have failed to be interesting enough.

### **Some Characteristics of the Research Area**

The research area, Trabzon Karadag High Plateau-Tourism Center, is an area of high biodiversity and cultural values with distinctive flora and fauna, mountain peaks, recreational areas including several streams, forest areas and a pond and traditional life styles making it an attractive destination for tourists. Average altitude of the high plateau is approximately 1800 metres, which makes it a popular place for those suffering from lung problems.

The research area, like other high plateaus in the region, can be used only from May to October by the local people. Rest of the year, the area is covered with snow, which makes the high plateau a temporary residential area. Plus, as a physical geographic term, the high plateau is used for equivalent of the term of plateau where the earth form was deeply split, broken by rivers but the levels on it stay visible though, as a settlement place, the term of high plateau (yayla) means “summer mountain” which stays uninhabited in winter, while group of people deal with livestock, stay and produce dairy products such as milk, butter, cheese and keep them from hot by staying there in the hottest period of summer along with the temporary agriculture.

The high plateau was established as a tourism center by the council of ministers cabinet in 5th March 1990 and a significant improvement regarding some tourism investments including infrastructure such as road constructions has been seen after this date. Access to the area is provided by a totaly 40 km road from the city center. Commercial vehicles offer transportation during the summer months. Despite immigration from villages to the high plateau used to be a tradational ceremony which might take a few days depending on the distance for the local people until a few decades ago, it has become only a short journey taking a few hours owing to new roads and the developments in transportation at the present time.

As for the traditional architecture, it is quite possible to see temporality of the stay in the high plateau. The houses are quite simple planned and often single storey, while some families build their houses on a slope to be able to create a space in the first storey as cowshed. Timber and stone are the only materials to be used in the area. A house possess only one room in general and roof material is basically tin.

## **Major Degrاداتions in the Research Area**

The relationship between eco-tourism activities and degradation problems is interactive. When some degradations problems begin to appear in an area -even if they are because of tourism activities- one of the first thing to be effected most is often touristic demand for the area. Because eco-tourists are often interested in specific attractions, be they particular animals, mountains, cultural sites and indigenou people [5], sustainability of this kind of tourism strongly depends on maintaining integrity of that attraction and, therefore, the balance between the touristic attractions and conservation activities. Hence, it is important to assess not only the nature of the motivations and attraction, but also feedback between them [6].

In the research area, it is possible to see two kinds of major degradations:

### **1- Degrاداتions of the Socio-cultural Resources**

#### **- Degrاداتion of Traditional High Plateau (Yayla) Life**

In traditional Turkish village life in the region, villagers take their cattles and climb high plateaus towards summer. The main reasons of this immigration are to get rid of sultry weather of villages and to provide rich pasture lands for their animals. Basically, the life in high plateaus is quite enjoyable being different from the villages, in which people have to deal with many things.

For a few decades, many villagers have moved to the city center or bigger cities to earn their life and this caused a serious decrease in population living in villages, which is the main reason that livestock activities in the villages has also decreased. Although the main activity had been livestock on high plateaus according to the tradition until early 80's, going to these places and spending time there have turned into a recreational form because of this recent socio-economic changes. Today, thousands of indigenou people living in big cities and even abroad come to the high plateau for vacation. In addition to this, the most important reason for being in the high plateau is the belief that good health depends on the stay there in the indigenou society [7].

#### **- Degrاداتion of Traditional Architecture:**

Having been established as a tourism center, the high plateau has started attracting more attention, which has given a rise to the investments by governments. Because indigenou people and visitors had difficulties in transportation, new roads have been constructed to make the access easier in recent years.

Apart from degradation of nature, one of the worst results of these road constructions is a significant change in traditional architecture of the high plateau. Thinking traditional construction technics are not strong and comfortable enough [7], local people have started using modern or at least non-traditional construction materials and technics in the high plateau. Owing to the new roads, one of which is asphalt, there has been no difficulties in taking anything being at any size and weight to the research area. As a result of this situation, it is quite possible to see many great non-traditional houses, which are incongruous with appropriate size and appearance.

## 2- Degradations of the Natural Resources

### - Degradations Depending on Road Constructions

After the opening of the research area to the tourism, several infrastructure constructions and repairs have been made by government and private enterprises. These constructions and repairs have caused some degradations in the research area. Especially the road constructions, which causes large amount of debris to damage vegetation and wildlife, have always been one of the most important reason of deforestation in the area (*Figure 1*). Secondly, these new wide roads divide several big forests into smaller and disconnected pieces acrossing them. This forest fragmentation might effectively stop foraging animals and decrease biodiversity, which is one of the most important components of the area.



Figure 1- An example of deforestation in the research area

### - Degradations and Environmental Problems Depending on Over-Use

Being different from “mass” tourism, eco-tourism does not maximize benefits and number of tourists. However, because of a lack of knowledge about what eco-tourism is and how it should be organized in an area in the research area, the tourism activities have caused some degradations. Those who are interested in tourism among indigenous people in the area have no significant intention to avoid maximizing number of tourists. Additionally, there are neither legal arrangements nor steps to hold the number of visitors at an appropriate level. Moreover, there has been no study to determine what this appropriate level is.

Some places in the high plateau are known as recreational areas by visitors. These spots have been visited very intensively especially during weekends and national holidays. The most common reason that visitors come to the area is to have a picnic [7]. Apart from some recreational areas, forests have always been very popular places for picnic in the high plateau. Because the visitors often want to have their picnic in the forest areas, it has become possible to see many cars inside the forests for a few years (*Figure 2*) [7]. As a result, some important problems including environment pollution, deforestation and negative effects on wildlife have been seen in even deep inside the forest areas.

A traditional festival is held in the research area during the second weekend of July and population in the high plateau might reach more than a few ten thousands within these two

days. That the area does not have enough sewage disposal to meet increasing needs means another important problem. The high plateau is in one of the most important watersheds in the region and the situation might be more serious because of a sudden increase in the number of visitors in the near future.



Figure 2- Cars in the forest in the research area

## Conclusion

Degradations in the research area have important effects on people's preferences, therefore eco-tourism activities and will probably be so in the future. What we have found upon the preferences for the area are below:

- Both of two groups of people that we have asked to evaluate four different forms of the four different points in the research area have shown a similarity to each other's approach. According to 73 percent of the specialists and 51 percent of those who have evaluated the representations in the second group, number 3s, which have neither natural nor cultural degradations, are the most attractive representations among the others to create an interest level to visit the area. Because this group of representations have been manipulated to demonstrate natural and cultural characteristics of the area, it is important to realize that these two components are very important for the participants especially when they are seen together in an area. Furthermore, this is one of the basic rules of the eco-tourism.
- According to 91 percent of the specialists and 65 percent of the second group, number 1s, which represent current situations including not only natural but also cultural degradations, create the lowest interest level to visit the area. This is one of the most important results to show that the situation in which the research area has been is not that good to arouse interest.
- Although natural resources are often accepted as the most important components of eco-tourism, our study have shown that the fourth representations, which represent the areas in a natural form with no or very limited residential characteristics, are not that effective to create a high interest level. Only 20 percent of the specialists and 23 percent of the people in the second group have found it interesting to visit these forms of the four points. This result is very important to explain that cultural and tradational characteristics make a significant contribution to an eco-tourism area.

- As for another interesting result, we have found that only natural rehabilitations without any promotion of traditional architecture are not that effective to create a high interest level, especially for the specialists, either. While the second representations are the most interesting forms of the four points according to 26 percent of the people in the second group, this rate is only 0,6 percent for the specialists. Because those who built their houses using non-traditional methods in the highland explained this situation as high comfort expectation [7], it is possible to define this huge difference between two participant groups as the same idealized perspective. While the specialists have claimed that local values are always very important for any eco-tourism activities, people belonging to the same geography might have thought that a place to visit should have been more comfortable.

### **Some Solution Proposals**

- Highlands are very important gene resources. This is already one of the main reasons that tourists want to visit. Therefore, their natural resources should be protected as much as possible.

- Highlands, including the research area, already have a magnet effect for visitors. In addition, indigenous people often want to maximize number of tourists and this might seem for them a good way to get income in short term. However, in long term, this might cause some degradations, which are undesirable for the tourists. Being aware of “potential” over use effects, number of visitors should be taken under control to avoid degradations.

- Life in the highlands has local characteristics and this should be protected. Because it has been much easier to reach a highland owing to many new roads, indigenous people have had no difficulties in taking any modern construction materials to the research area. These people should be educated and some effective steps should be taken to prevent this urbanization. It is essential cultural resources be protected in such areas to create a high interest level for tourists and to provide sustainability.

- There have been several efforts to protect the nature in the highland for years though, indigenous people have been free to decide to build their houses. Even though this study have proven how residential areas are important for visitors to decide, many indigenous people have been living in big buildings that can be seen in any part of the world. Because only natural resources might not be interesting enough, cultural resources including especially traditional architecture should be supported.

- Infrastructure problems should be solved to establish sustainable eco-tourism activities anywhere. However, some infrastructure constructions in progress have caused serious degradations, which naturally effects visitors preferences. Those who want to solve an infrastructure problem in the area should realize that no problem can be more important than ecological ones.

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## Appendix

The representations that we have used in this study.



