

# **Tourism Development in Rural Areas: Assessing the qualities of place in the village of Nawgoul, Iran**

Hooshmand Alizadeh

Assistant professor, Department of Architecture and Planning, Kurdistan University, Sanandaj, Iran, hoshali@yahoo.co.uk

Mohamad Rasouly

Lecturer, Department of Architecture and Planning, Kurdistan University, Sanandaj, Iran

## **Abstract**

In developing countries, rural areas generally suffer high level of poverty, and are also characterized by lower levels of non-farm economic activity, infrastructural development, and access to essential services. As Robert & Hall (2001) say, to cope with these problems it is necessary to diversified range of rural products. Tourism is recognized as prime contributor to this process as an effective catalyst of rural socio-economic development and regeneration. Considering this point, this study assesses the qualities of place in Nawgoul as case study, a village in west of Kurdistan province, Iran. This has been dealt through document analysis, questionnaire for both residences and visitors and observation of the built form of the village and its natural setting (taking photograph and analytical drawings). Following this stage, SWOT Analysis has been used to explore strategies for decision-making, and in so doing, diversifying tourism products and therefore expanding tourism benefits to the residents. The SWOT analysis is followed by possible policy implications and executive decisions (actions) for each of the SWOT factors, which can influence the level of tourism development. The outcome of the case study is that Nawgoul and its region has the potential for nature and culture-based tourism development, but this has not been explored as of yet.

**Keywords:** Rural Tourism, SWOT analysis, Nawgoul, cultural and natural tourism

## **1. Introduction**

“Tourism is a basic and most desirable human activity deserving the praise and encouragement of all people and all governments”.

Considering this statement which has been made at the XXI United Nations General Assembly in 1967 and the tourism contribution to the world economy which is second only to that of oil and is set to better it in near future, many countries are concentrating

on the tourism sector as a sustainable alternative to more extractive resource uses to boost up their economies. This “smoke-less” industry was grew by rapid advancements made in the field of communication and transport after the second world. It is now recognized as a catalyst for socio-economic development through providing jobs (Honey, 1999), enhancing local economies (McCool, 1995; Wight, 1997), protecting destinations (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996), instilling pride in communities for their heritage and land (Scheyvens, 1999; Goodwin, 1996), raising the standards of living (MacDonald & Jolliffe 2003), and in short a miracle hangover cure for the overindulgence of a materialistic and hedonistic past (Hughes, 2000). Considering these points and limited options for economic development in rural areas of the third world countries concerning the remoteness and underdevelopment constrains, tourism can be an alternative uses for local resources, an option for

- Enhancing rural lifestyles and for inducing positive changes in the distribution of income (Liu 2006).
- Generating additional or supplementary income
- Rehabilitation of historic buildings and for the improvement of the visual appearance of villages (which are an important re-source for tourism), and
- Rehabilitation of traditional arts and crafts (cf. Strasdas 2004).
- Improving world communication, which seems so important in building bridges of mutual appreciation, respect, friendship, and thus positive effect on world peace (Goeldner 2006).

These depends on a wide range of publicly and privately owned natural and cultural resources, associated infrastructure, and interpretative facilities, as well as provision of accommodation, food, beverages, and goods (Cawleya and Desmond 2008). Unless appropriately regulated, threats can arise to the quality of the physical environment, social structures, and cultures arising from the types and scale of development and the numbers of tourists attracted [(Garrod et al, 2006), (Holden, 2005), (Lane, 1994) and (MacDonald and Jolliffe, 2003)]. As a result, issues of sustainability needs to be considered in the context of rural tourism (Butler 1999; Garrod et al 2006; Hardy, Beeton and Pearson 2002).

After having set this introduction points with regard to rural tourism the paper now look at the status of rural tourism in Iran in general, and then analysis Nawgoul socio-spatial potential for tourism in specific.

## **2. Rural tourism in Iran**

Iran’s particular geographic location has given it climatic diversity (e.g. Iran has 12 out of 17 kinds of climate) and the ancient background (e.g. 11 thousand registered historical attractions) with its location between two rival philosophical inspirations and relating empires (east and west) contextualized the existence of various ethnic groups as well.

Based on late professor A.O. Pope, the art of Iran is an ever-lasting gift of the Iranian people to the history of the world (Haji pour, 2006). This socio-spatial diversity made Iran an attractive and picturesque land, a strong potential for tourism development, in which every visitor can find his/her own subject of interest. For centuries, the hospitable people of Iran have understood the necessity of cultural interaction and exchange and have been hosting many tourists from all over the world. Today, considering the positive cultural and economic effects of the tourism industry, especially its role to offset the increasing negative political propagandas against Iran from the West (as a dialogue of civilization) and to introduce its real cultural characteristics, Iranian welcome the worldwide development of this effective catalyst of development and regeneration and they also involved in seeking measures for the development of this industry at the national and international levels.

Although Iran is in the list of 10 superior countries of the world view point of tourist attractions, it has not found its real place because due to the number of tourists entered the country, it stands about sixty among the countries of the world and thus the share of Iran from income of tourism industry in the world became just %0.04 (Jam, F. 2006, November 28. Tourism, a Disturbed industry. Hamshahry, pp 7). This can be linked to some socio-cultural barrier specific to Iran (For more information on theses barrier, the reader is referred to Farsi Article of Shoujaee and Nouri 2007). For more evidence of this, we can look at the aims of Third Development plan which only %13 of them has been achieved (Heidarabadi 2008). According to the latest report to UNWTO by International Affairs Bureau of Iran's Cultural Heritage, Handicraft and Tourism Organization (ICHTO), the number of international foreign tourists for the year 2007 and spring of 2008 were 2644442 (Table 1). This shows a slight growth rate in the international tourism Compare with 2002 which recorded a number of 1547922. More importantly, most of this people are not tourists, some of them from Afghanistan and other neighbors were seeking job and some are Iranian meeting their families. From this point and to safeguard the nation's sovereignty by protecting its culture and environment, the Iran Interior Ministry has taken a cautious approach to tourism development in rural areas and accorded priority to the conservation of natural resources through its branches in the provinces. This approach of the government can be linked to the problems of poverty of villages which moves massive rural folk to cities, high unemployment rate, urban chaos resulted from massive rural migration to cities, socio-cultural barriers of international tourism and more dependency on oil income.

*Table 1: Latest report of Tourism Organization (ICHTO) for the year 2007 and spring of 2008*

Statistical variable	Jan.-Feb. - Mar. 2007 (person)	9 remaining months of 2007 (person)	Jan. - Feb. Mar. 2008 (person)
International foreign tourist arrivals	464748	1774490	405204
International outbound tourists	472521	1783712	384961
Iranian inbound tourists	432050	3854500	1204478
Iranian outbound tourist	421007	4135613	1006287

Source: [http://www.irtat.ir/Tourism%20News/2008/June/05\\_iran\\_1.html](http://www.irtat.ir/Tourism%20News/2008/June/05_iran_1.html)

After this brief review of rural tourism in Iran, the following paragraphs take a closer look on the facts concerning the potentials of tourism development, mainly the qualities of place, in the village of Nawgoul, Kurdistan, Iran.

### **3. The Village of Nawgoul, its geographical location**

Nawgoul is beautifully located in western Kurdistan province, on the way to Marivan, one of the tourist cities of Kurdistan, where snaky road lead through mountainous landscape with a collection of acorn. Where the people are warm and friendly and where modernization hasn't affected the pure way of living. Kurdistan is one of the thirty provinces of Iran, not to be confused with the greater geographical area of Kurdistan. It is in the west of the country, bordering Iraq. The province of Kurdistan is 28,817 km<sup>2</sup> in area. It is bound by Iraq on its west, the province of west Azerbaijan to its north, Zanzan to the northeast and Kermanshah to the south. Kurdistan Province is entirely a mountainous region that can be divided into two western and eastern sections from topographical points of view which are located in the east and west of Sanandaj (Sinne),

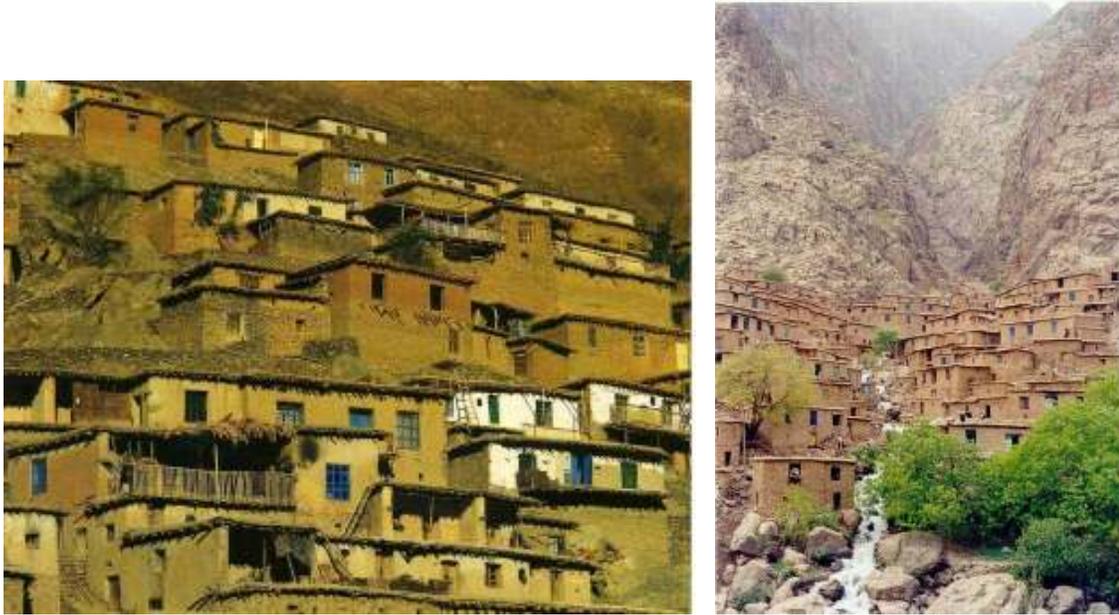
its capital. The western part of the province, where the Nawgoul is located, has the highest rate of annual precipitation due to the height of mountains in this part which act like a wall against the rain generating system of Mediterranean sea thus benefit from the maximum rain of this system. The highest parallel ranges with sheer rugged peaks are located in this part. Shaho is the highest peak in this part and one of the highest peaks of the Zagros Mountains. Furthermore, the existence of heights and elevated grounds which are covered by snow and the lofty and high streams flow down to extensive and green plains leads to diverse special climatic conditions.

The Zâgros Mountains are one of the most striking features on the landscape of the Near East. The mountains are one of the great natural boundaries between the lowlands of Mesopotamia to the west and the Iranian plateau to the east (Levine 1974). The forest and steppe forest areas of the Zagros Mountain range have a semi-arid temperate climate, with annual precipitation ranging from 400 mm to 800 mm, falling mostly in winter and spring. Winters are severe, with winter minima often below 25 degrees C, and extreme summer aridity also prevails (Anderson 1999; Frey & Probst 1986). Despite its mountainous nature, expansive river valleys create a fertile network in most parts of Zagros range. Many of the Valleys and plains have fertile soils suitable for agriculture and livestock products and appropriate for human settlements. Apart from this, the rich color of its nature along with variety of mixed features; waterfalls, a variety of medicinal industrial and edible plants, beautiful natural sites as well as famous pools and lakes, provide special tourist attractions for tourism development.

The physical form of Zagros Mountain range can be visualized as a great wall (Figure 1) with a high outer rim, where "human settlements are primarily situated on the aprons of majestic mountain ranges as centripetal nodes that often relate centrifugally to a geographic space of vast dimensions" (Ardalan and Bakhtiar 1973: 13). The mountains are a source of water<sup>2</sup> (usually transferred to the settlements in the arid zone, through Qanâts, subterranean canals) and a place of security that seems to have had an unusual amount of influence on the distribution of human settlements and activities. Thus, mountains are places which "make the structure of being manifest" (Norberg-Schulz 1980: 25). Human settlements, especially within the Zâgros Mountains (Figure 1), can be viewed as isolated settlements which imply self-reliance and little contact with the external world (Grandmaison 1977). In this regional view, the mountain passes, especially the positive spaces, become points of arrival and departure and gateways for defensive purposes.

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<sup>2</sup> Some rivers such as Zayandeh Roud, Karoon, Karkheh and Dez originate from this mountain, and about 5 million hectares of forests of Iran are situated in this region.



**Figure 1. Typical settlements in the *Zâgros* Mountains**  
Source: *Sâzmân-e Mirâs-e Kurdistan*

#### **4. Nawgoul's geophysical setting**

If we turn our view from the macro-scale of Zagros mountain range to the geo-physical context of this study, we can see some characteristics which define the geophysical setting of the village. It is the intermountain setting of the *Zâgros*, where a narrow valley formed by the Nawgoul's river<sup>3</sup> to the east and a gully to the south defines the main geophysical features of the village's site. The Nawgoul's river feeds into the Sirwan River (Diyala in Arabic)<sup>4</sup> which finally enters into the Tigris below Baghdad. This geo-physical rim can be imagined as two strong curved walls bisected by the Main River. The river defines the course of arrival and departure for the north and the south of the region. Due to the features of the landscape, mainly from view point of forestry, heights and elevated grounds, the beginning of the Nawgoul can be recognized as a gateway to the special tourist attractions of the western Kurdistan province, Marivan and Awraman or Hawraman<sup>5</sup> areas. This potential has been further emphasized by its link to the city of

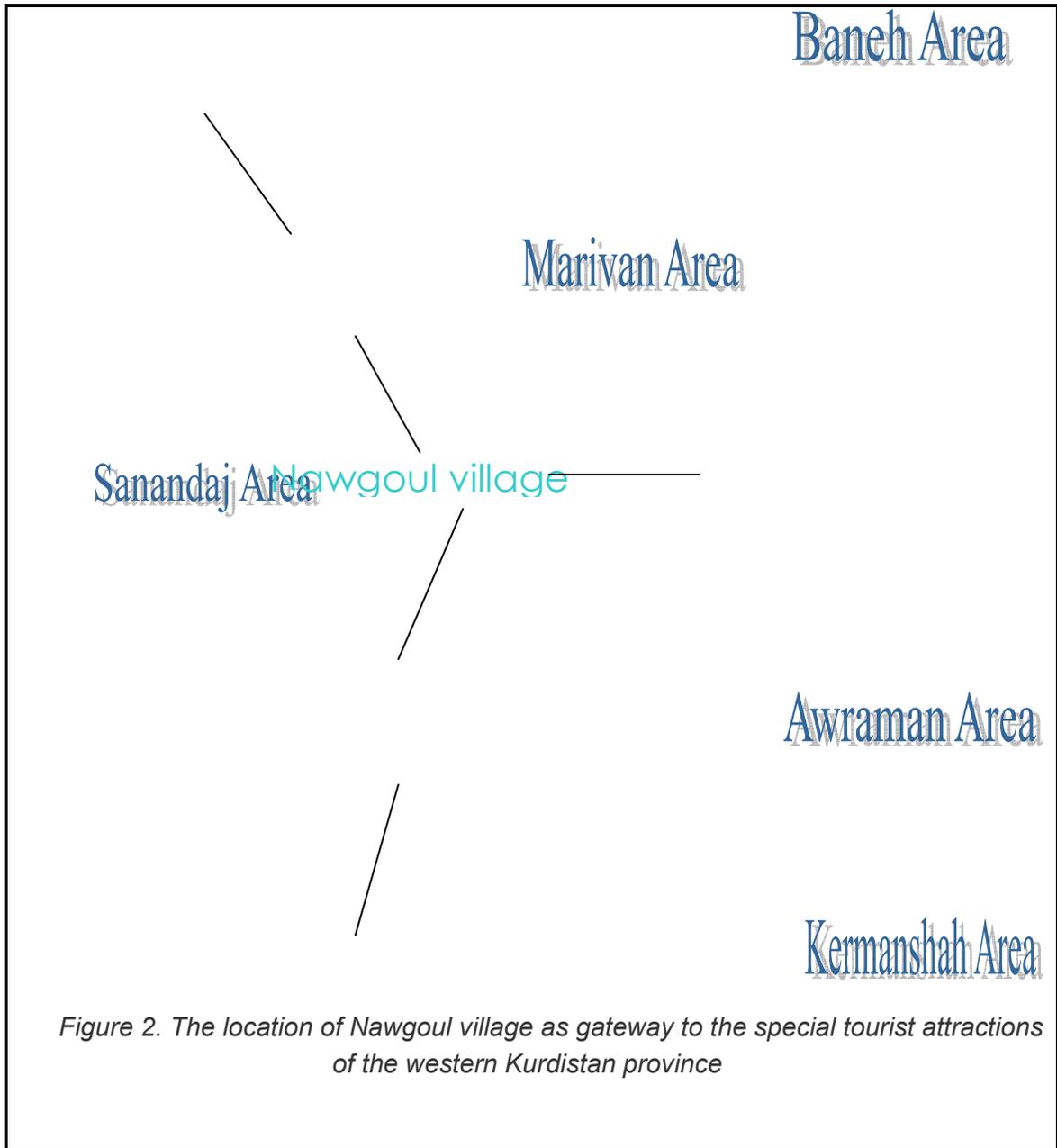
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<sup>3</sup> A river is usually an inevitable natural element which man would settle close to so as to benefit from its conditions.

<sup>4</sup>It is a river and tributary of the Tigris that runs through Kurdistan Iran and Iraq. It covers a total distance of 445 km (275 miles).

<sup>5</sup>Hawrâmân is a region located in rough part of Zagros Mountain in western Kurdistan province, Iran. The inhabitants of Hawraman are Gorani Kurds who speak Hewrami, a sub-dialect of the greater Gorani branch of Kurdish dialects. Hewraman is best known for its unique arrangement of

Sanandaj as the capital of Kurdistan province. This means that Nawgoul village has a particular situation as a node to other places of tourist's attractions (figure 2). Each visitor on the way to those places has to go through the Nawgoul village.



Considering the above geophysical setting, Nawgoul village is beautifully lies on the slope part of the gully away from the course of Main corridor defined by the Nawgoul River, and facing the south. Being away from the this corridor and due

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settlements built along the mountain slopes of the region. Ancient religions are also practiced throughout Hawraman and the region is home to the ancient holy places of the Yarsan faith (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hawraman>).

to the snaky course of the river is such that a visitor or traveler cannot see the village on the first and even second approaches along the way to the city of Marivan. Facing the south is the main environmental principal in the traditional architecture of the region. The reason of this can be linked to the harsh weather of the winter which usually affect the location and direction of the settlements to maximize the possibility of getting more sun during this time of the year. The effect of this principal is such that most of the settlements of the region have been positioned on the northern side along the valleys and river sites. This way of organization of the settlements on the region and their terraced architecture created a nice landscape valuable for tourist attraction.



*Figure 3. The mountainous landscape of Zagros region*

Following this geographical information, we move on the research findings mainly based on close fieldwork and the questionnaire has been done in different times of the year from residents and visitors.

## **5. The qualities of place**

Having something to do gives people a reason to come to a place—and to return again and again. When there is nothing to do, a place will remain empty, which can lead to other problems. In tourism development, it is important to consider a wide range of attractions and activities for people alone and in groups. Within the Nawgoul village, the main attraction of people is a volume of the Holy Qoran in the 'Kufic' script dates back to more than 1000 years (Figure 4). Due to this

wonderful religious artistic piece many people from different parts of Iran both regional and national levels attend to make a pilgrimage to it. This pilgrim usually takes about 30 minutes to one hour. After this, the visitors leave the village to their main destination which is the city of Marivan<sup>6</sup>. The Holy Qoran was recognized as the main attraction of the village by most of the visitors. In replying to the question, why are you here? They directly referred to the Holy Qoran.

Apart from the result of fieldwork which is mainly based on the researcher's own analysis of the place, we tried to ask the visitors and residents some questions concerning other attractions of the village. In this regard, they mainly mentioned the natural and manmade landscape of the village and surrounding area. For the site, the following features have been highlighted: traditional settlements (terraced houses with the character of stone architecture), gardening and horticulture<sup>7</sup> (terraced farms), the traditional structure of society and aspects of identity (hospitality, costume, Handicraft, and customs).

The terraced houses pattern structured the place in a stepped configuration so that "one never knows whether one is standing on a floor or on a roof, since the terrace or open space which contains the floor of one house forms the roof of the one below" (Hansen 1960:30). This form of organization of the region necessitated the dense pattern of settlements, the piling of buildings upon each other, in order to optimize the restricted space. The terraced houses can be recognized as the main order of place in mountain areas (figures 5, 7) so that one can experience the distant and the close sceneries simultaneously.



*Figure 4. Holly Quran In Negel Village*

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<sup>6</sup> The city of Marivan lies close to the border of Iran-Iraq (Iraqi Kurdistan). Lake Zarivar which has a length of 5 km (3.1 mi) and a maximum width of 1.6 km (0.99 mi), lies west of Marivan. The lake's water is sparkingly fresh and has a maximum depth of 5 m. Zarivar Lake is a major tourist attraction in the region. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marivan>).

<sup>7</sup> Region heights and elevations are very suitable for gardening which prevent the erosion of soil as well.



*Figure 5. Terraced houses and farms*



*Figure 6. Traditional dress of people*



Figure 7. Stone architecture

## 6. Swot analysis of the Nawgoul village

Following the general information, it is time to assess the quality of place using the research findings and through four elements of SWOT analysis: Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. As Rowley *et al.* (1997) state, "...conventional planning approaches tend to be oriented toward looking at problems based on current understanding, or an inside-out mind set; whereas strategic planning requires an understanding of the nature of the issue, and then of an appropriate response, or an outside- in mind set". "The underlying intension of a strategic approach is to identity what is available in a place (both natural and man-made environments), qualities that should be protected and enhanced; and along with identifying these, to determine where negative factors could be removed or mitigated and to identify where the opportunities for enhancement lie" (Doratli *et al.* 1980). In this line, the SWOT model was recognized "the basis for virtually all formalized strategy formulation processes", where it provides the preliminary stage of decision making and possible strategies for intervention (Moughtin *et al.* 1999, Burton *et al.* 2002). This part has been summarized in the following table, which is based on the above review and some findings presented in the author's report (Alizadeh, 2007).

*Table 1. SWOT analysis of the Nawgoul village through Moughtin's approach*

The level of Analysis	Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats

<p>Natural setting</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Geophysical setting and climate condition which is attractive for tourism</li> <li>- Scenic beauty of the Nawgoul and surrounding areas which draws tourists away from the crowded and polluted towns and cities, mainly from plains areas.</li> <li>-The features of the terrain are ideally suited for various adventure activities</li> <li>- Some very well known tourist hills close to the site of the village. These hills are more attractive for climbers</li> <li>- Situated on Road to the Lake Zarivar and being among two main poles of tourist attraction: Sanandaj and Marivan</li> </ul>		<p>-mountainous landscape of the region is a great opportunity for different activities attractive for tourist all throughout the year</p>	<p>- Decay of natural beauty due to the <i>overuse</i> of traditional biomass as fuel and clearing the forests for agricultural activities</p>
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<p>Built environment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Terraced pattern of architecture which can allow tourists to have a wide view of the natural landscape. By this one can experience the distant and the close sceneries simultaneously</li> <li>- Existence of the strong reference point for the tourists, the place of holly Koran</li> <li>- Existence of stone architecture as the main character of the settlements</li> <li>- Rurality in general</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Relying on Holly Koran as a main attraction of the village (single attraction problem)</li> <li>- Limited area for development</li> <li>- Scarce amount of spaces for any change to supply other needs</li> <li>- Car parking problems</li> <li>- Inadequate and inappropriate environmental and physical infrastructures (roads/streets and sewer)</li> <li>- Inadequate and inappropriate sanitary facilities</li> <li>- Inadequate and inappropriate accommodation and basic amenities</li> <li>- lack of sufficient recreational facilities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Terraced pattern of settlements and stone character</li> </ul> <p>Due to the single attraction problem, these along with other natural landscape can be an opportunity to diversify the village's attractions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- New Sanandaj-Marivan road, as the direction of this road is not along the village, it will be the main threat for village's future prospect on tourism development</li> <li>- More deterioration in the agricultural lands (especially terraced lands) due to the new constructions of the village</li> <li>- some visual misery due to the lack of maintenance and control on traditional building and new constructions</li> <li>- Loss of village character in new constructions borrowed from urban areas</li> <li>- New construction on the terraced lands due to the Limited area for development</li> </ul>
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Socio-economic environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Being the gateway to the special tourist attractions of the western Kurdistan province</li> <li>- Hospitable people and hospitable character of Kurdish culture</li> <li>- Responsiveness of Kurdish culture to the Genius Loci, to the setting of the village as a whole and to the dwelling in a particular relationship to the landscape</li> <li>- Existence of traditional way of life and relating features concerning the Kurdish culture</li> <li>- Rich history and culture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of commitment to the environment</li> <li>- Immigration of the people due to the Inadequate and inappropriate environmental and physical infrastructures and limited number of job Opportunities</li> <li>- Unfamiliarity of people with tourism industry and relating opportunities</li> <li>- Lack of formal planning and investment in the environmental and physical infrastructure as a base for tourism development</li> <li>- Insufficient capital and investment incentives</li> <li>- short season for tourism which is limited to nearly five months</li> <li>- Lack of qualified people in tourism industry</li> <li>- Lack of education and unfamiliarity among people dealing with tourists</li> <li>- Inadequacy of transport facilities</li> <li>- Lack of NGO relating to the tourism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Tourism potential from both cultural heritage and environmental resources</li> <li>- Existence of organization of tourism and cultural heritage</li> <li>- Increasing attention and support from government to creating more job opportunities in rural development</li> <li>- Cultural events</li> <li>- Increasing attention to tourism among people</li> <li>- Increasing attention to tourism as an industry</li> <li>- The Nawgoul's region contains many unexplored places of attraction for tourism</li> <li>- Existence of strong sense of place</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Loss of commitment to the place</li> <li>- More migration of the youths in search of new jobs and welfare in urban areas</li> <li>-Existence of different organizations dealing with rural development (means different approaches towards the rural development)</li> </ul>
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## **7. CONCLUSION**

As explained in the first part of this paper, tourism is allocated a central role in rural development policy in areas undergoing economic restructuring in third world countries. The comparative advantage of such areas is often closely rooted in features of the physical, cultural, and social environments, and it is recognized that sustainable use should form part of any effective development strategy, as should the empowerment of local people (Pearce 1994; Saarinen 2006). Regarding this leading notion, this paper presented the results of a study through SWOT analysis which sought to be the millstone of strategic approach to embrace the quality of place. Qualities were defined as including natural setting, built and socio-economic environments. Within this assessment, it became clear that the main strength of tourism attraction is mainly lies on the existence of Holy Koran in this village. This, along with its location close to the Sanandaj-Marivan Road (being in between two poles of attraction of the province) was recognized, on the one hand, as the main attraction of the village and, on the other hand, as the main weakness as well. Its weakness point can be defined in line with single attraction problem. As clarified, the visitors mainly stay in this village to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Koran on their journey to the city of Marivan. This resulted in short stay of the visitors. To extend the time of staying and getting more benefit from them, it needs to facilitate the possibility of using other natural and socio-economical resources has been defined as strengths and opportunities. This means diversification of the tourism products to gives people more reasons to come and stay more. To do this and to relieve the village from its single product, it is government involvement that will help to provide the required groundwork. Apart from this, the main threat of the village was recognized in relation to the new variant of the road from Sanandaj to Marivan. As explained, the direction of this road will not include the Nawgoul village. This means diverting the visitors' way from the village. To cope with this threat, the government needs to launch some basic works concerning the location of the village as gateway to other tourist attractions of the region, namely the gateway to Hawrāmān. Apart from some symbolic construction in defining this gateway, the media has an important role in introducing the Nawgoul village. This should be as introduction to the Nawgoul's tourism development. By this, the ground will be paved for other socio-cultural and environmental potentials.

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