Domestic Tourism Development in Asir Region, Saudi Arabia
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Abstract
Domestic tourism is supposed to compose the largest and most unaddressed proportion of the tourism ‘iceberg’, but has been overshadowed by the interest in international tourism on behalf ofacademics and policy makers. Unlike international tourism which depends greatly on global systems and mega-infrastructure, domestic tourism deems to have evolved and sustained itself in the absence of heavy investments and commercialization. It has also been suggested as an appropriate substitute to international tourism under the influence of external factors such as disasters and crises. In tourism studies, not many researchers have engaged themselves in the topic of domestic tourism in the Middle-east region especially in Saudi Arabia. The focus on domestic tourism is important in Saudi Arabia as the country is one of the biggest exporters of tourists going out of the kingdom, and the government is trying to retain a larger portion of tourism spending of its local tourists in the national tourism industry. In view of this, this paper attempts to discuss the potentials and challenges of developing domestic tourism in the Asir region, which is situated in the southwestern part of Saudi Arabia. The analysis is based on secondary data and supported by interviews with twelve tourism operators and hoteliers in the region. The findings revealed that Asir region is a unique tourist destination and has considerable unrealized potential, however, the growth of domestic tourism requires diversification in terms of product, market and geographical areas. As tourism development is a comprehensive undertaking involving many sectors and stakeholders, it is crucial for the government to come up with multi-hierarchical, all-inclusive and coordinated development strategy, and these are the challenges to which the country’s tourism industry should respond to promote domestic tourism.

Keywords: Domestic tourism; Tourism seasonality; Asir region

Introduction
Domestic tourism has been defined as a journey or travel inside someone’s country [1]. Many studies further define domestic overnight visitor as a person who stays one or more nights in one or several destinations during his or her domestic trips, while a domestic day visitor is referred to as the person who travels for a round trip distance of at least 50 kilometers and does not spend a night during the trip [2]. Each group of tourists can also be segregated into different purposes of travel such as leisure, visiting friends and relatives, business and others.

Domestic tourism is often promoted as a basis of international tourism, that is to say international tourism can be sustained over the long term once a culture of tourism has been developed among the local people [3]. In other words, if a destination desires to achieve a prosperous international tourism, it has to look at the growth of its domestic tourism sector and build strong economic structure within the country, which will eventually contribute to its international tourism. Hence, many countries develop domestic tourism for its positive economic consequences which include income and employment creation, inward investment and as a catalyst to growth and diversification [4].

Sinclair [5] argues that domestic tourism could further promote national unity and integration, enable local people to benefit from government investment in tourism infrastructure, and compensate for seasonal variations in international tourism. This is particularly true when international tourism is prone to product substitution, stiff competition in the region and external factors such as crises, disasters and bad publicity. Another distinct characteristic of domestic tourism is that it displays peoples’ ability to discuss interchanges based on their own value judgements without getting trapped in the formalized tourism system. In other words, domestic tourism is easy because of the existence of a common language, currency and the absence of documentation barriers ordinarily required for foreign travel [6]. Seckelmann [7] argues that domestic tourists are more independent, move freely in the destination area, as they often use their own cars or are familiar with the local transport system. They decide themselves where they want to shop and eat, and thus, they contribute to regional income without demanding a very special infrastructure.

In a related development, domestic tourism could be a substitute for foreign tourism undertaken by the local people which could lead to savings in foreign currency exchange. This is the case in Saudi Arabia as the country is one of the biggest exporters of tourists going out of the country, and the government is trying to retain a larger portion of tourism spending of its local tourists in the national tourism industry. This paper intends to investigate the development of domestic tourism in the country especially in the Asir region, and through this, the potentials and limitations of domestic tourism can be illuminated.

Literature Review
The tourism industry is one of the most important economic development factors in many countries, but many problems accompany today’s structure of tourism in many developing countries as the question arises as to whether the development of domestic tourism could be a supplement to existing tourism and an economic and socially healthier alternative to its further expansion [7]. It is common knowledge that in many countries domestic tourism is dominant with...
respect to international flows in terms of both size and economic contribution [8]. In spite of that, only recently researchers have started to concentrate on this phenomenon and its economic impact, as well as on its potential for reducing disparities in less developed world areas. Few publications such as edited works by Ghimire and Harrison [9,10] were initial attempts on domestic tourism since they typically concentrated on ‘less developed countries’ and ‘developing countries’, respectively. Other individual works pertaining to domestic tourism focused on the development and features of domestic tourism in different countries.

The reasons for such a dearth of literature on this topic are usually attributed to a paucity of hard and reliable data, which in turn, reflects serious issues namely lack of concurrence on a certain standard criteria, multifaceted colloquial terminology and contrasting socio-cultural contexts [11,12]. It also follows that studies on the determinants of tourist choices within national borders are still rare and mainly concentrate on the impact of economic variables [8]. Lim [13] similarly argues that the literature on domestic tourism determinants moves along the lines suggested by international tourism flow studies. There are, however, some recent contributions that have started to stress the potential role of non-economic factors in the domestic demand of a specific destination, in the steps of the international tourism literature. Such factors may concern both the quality of local endowment of natural and cultural resources, and the capability of a destination to manage and organize its resources according to competitive strategies.

In Middle-East region, the literature lacks substantial studies on domestic tourism because the region is regarded as ‘one of the least developed tourism regions of the world’ where leisure is rare and often seen as ‘culturally undesirable and economically unnecessary’ [14]. For many Middle Eastern societies, western style tourism is considered to be fundamentally incompatible with the Islamic religion and way of life [15]. Other barriers in operation are the absence of infrastructure, harsh climate, visa restrictions and a lack of commercial interest amongst tour operators and travel agents of major generating markets. Regional instability and the heightened threat of terrorism worldwide is another critical issue [4]. Recently, tourist arrivals in major destinations have been directly and indirectly impacted by the popular uprisings but there are some signs of recovery in parts of the region [16].

The Middle-East recorded 24.1 million arrivals in 2002, only 3.4 per cent of the world’s total, although this compares with 9 million in 1990, there was an average annual growth rate of 9.7 per cent throughout the 1990s [17]. In the last ten years, the region has become one of the fast-growing tourist destinations in the world and has in possession various world-class tourist attractions [18]. In countries such as UAE, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, tourism are being considered as a driving force that leads to progress and development. Several factors have influenced the boom of tourism in the region such as flourishing economy and support from national governments [18]. In Saudi Arabia, religious tourism is very important due to the location of the two holiest sites in Islam – Makkah and Madinah. 40 per cent of the total number of inbound trips in 2011 were for religious purposes, followed by visiting friends and relatives (20.5%), and business visits (14.2%). On the other hand, 45.4 per cent of the total domestic trips were leisure trips, and religious purposes (23%) and visiting friends and relatives (22%) ranked second and third, respectively [19].

Domestic tourism has been and will remain the primary focus of tourism development policy in the Kingdom. Although domestic tourism has traditionally been seasonal, the government is drawing full attention to its development to retain a larger portion of tourism spending for the national tourism industry [20]. According to a report by the Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency (SAMA), domestic tourism in Saudi Arabia is expected to record phenomenal growth rates with the total income to reach 19.5 billion in 2010 and 27.5 billion USD in 2020 [20]. To spur the growth, tourism authorities are persuading locals to holiday at home by establishing luxury hotels, high quality resorts and developing various destinations in the country. The Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities (SCTA) estimates that domestic tourism will be increased substantially due to huge investments in tourism infrastructure and emerging new attractions to cater for different market segments. The Saudi tourism industry also aims to raise the level of tourist expenditure through qualitative improvements to the product portfolio and diversify the range of tourism products and services. In a related development, SCTA supports a number of summer festivals in different parts of the country as events and tourism festivals have the ability to generate tourism demand and promote domestic tourism [21].

A Case Study of Asir Region

‘Asir’ or ‘Aseer’ is a province of Saudi Arabia located in the southwest of the country, named after the confederation of clans of the same name (Map 1). It has an area of 81,000 km² and an estimated population of 1,563,000 [22]. It shares a short border with Yemen. Its capital is Abha, and other towns include Kamis Mushayt, Qal’at Bishah and Bareg. Geographically, the Asir region is situated on a high plateau that receives more rainfall than the rest of the country and contains the country’s highest peaks, which rise to almost 3,000 meters at Mount Sawdah near Abu. Though data is exceedingly sparse and unreliable, the average annual rainfall in the highlands probably ranges from 300 to 500 millimeters (12 to 20 inches) falling in two rainy seasons, the chief one being in March and April with some rain in the summer. Temperatures are very extreme, with diurnal temperature ranges in the highlands the greatest in the world. It is common for afternoon temperatures are over 30°C (85°F), while mornings can be extremely frosty and fog can cut visibility to near zero percent [22]. As a result, there is much more natural vegetation in Asir than in any other part of Saudi Arabia, with sheltered areas even containing areas of dense coniferous forests, though more exposed ridges still are very dry. Asir is home to many farmers who chiefly grow wheat and fruit crops, though irrigation has greatly expanded production in modern times.
As mentioned above, the climate of Asir is semi-arid as it is influenced by its high elevation [23]. In stark contrast to a large portion of Saudi Arabia, the climate in this region is both cooler and wetter. Hence, the Saudi government has been promoting Asir as a tourist destination and has created events, such as the ‘Abha Festival’ during the summer each year, to draw people to the city and its surrounding attractions. Abha International Airport, that lies to the east of the city, receives direct flights from major cities in the country as well as international flights from cities in the Gulf region.

Research Methodology

This paper seeks to illuminate the potentials and challenges of developing domestic tourism in the Asir region, southwest of Saudi Arabia. The analysis is based on secondary data because this wealth of background work means that secondary data generally have a pre-established degree of validity and reliability, which need not be re-examined by the researchers who are re-using such data. Secondary data analysis also saves time that would otherwise be spent collecting data and, particularly in the case of quantitative data, provides larger and higher-quality databases derived from literature reviews, case studies, published texts and statistics from official publications. In addition to secondary data, qualitative interviews with twelve respondents among tourism operators and hoteliers in the region were conducted to probe further tourism development issues in the region. Asir region is selected as the case study entity for this research because it exists and functions within a context of the surrounding circumstances. The aim of the research is to provide an analysis of the context and processes involved in the phenomenon under study.

Findings and Discussion

With oil prices are currently at all time high, Saudi Arabia’s domestic tourism is benefiting by getting a serious revamp and upgrade. The kingdom may not have the reputation of a popular tourist destination, but this perception is slowly changing especially in highland destination such as in Asir region. This area, three thousand meters above the sea level, is distinguished with their moderate weather in summer and beautiful scenery. Asir region is distinct not only for its natural scenery, forests and wild trees which cover most of the area, but also is well known for its heritage attraction and beaches at the foot of the mountain.

The summer resorts in Asir are among the best resorts in the kingdom, and this region is well connected with the kingdom’s other areas by air through a regional airport in Abha and by land through a network of roads that extend across the valleys and mountains. In addition to the integration of their infrastructure which contains transportation, water, electricity and modern communications, the upper structure is also integrated into gardens and parks together with availability of various tourist services. A study prepared by the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Abha, in cooperation with the Geography Section at the Faculty of Education, stated that the number of summer vacations in Asir in 2007 summer reached 1,312,500 visitors and their estimated expenses exceeded SR 2.2 billion [24]. This in turn was reflected in higher involvement of Saudis in domestic travel trade and employment in tourism and hospitality industry.

Despite the strengths and positive strides as mentioned above, there are some issues that hold the progress of domestic tourism in this region. The most paramount is the region’s vulnerability to seasonal fluctuations of demand. These fluctuations are not only visible in Asir, but also observed in other highland destinations in the country.

The evaluation in this paper is based on the identification of a series of negative consequences, at diverse levels of analysis, concerning economic, environmental and social-cultural dimensions.

Interviews with twelve tourism operators and hoteliers in the region revealed that the negative impacts from seasonality were consistent with study findings of Kastenholz and Almeida in 2008. The impacts varied, from low levels of income associated with poor occupancy rates in the low season, inducing low level of profitability through inefficient use of resources, high cost of maintenance due to underutilization of resources in the low season, overcrowding and environmental risks resulting from excessive use of natural and cultural resources in the high season, seasonality in employment and its impacts for tourism enterprises revealing difficulties in hiring and retaining qualified human resources, and consequently in providing consistent service quality. As a result, hoteliers often received complaints from local Saudi tourists that the level of treatment and service quality did not meet their expectations and below international standard. Insufficient supply of four and five-star rated hotel rooms were also raised by respondents, and this was not complimenting the availability of air travel in the region. A few respondents felt that the cost of traveling within the kingdom is still high compared to traveling abroad, and they viewed that, with added charged and extortion from local destinations, domestic travels were relatively pricey.

It is also interesting to note that the country’s tourism flow sees a high degree of concentration of tourists in the capital city of Riyadh, the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah, and the eastern regions, which are home to almost seventy percent of the Saudi’s population [25]. Asir only receives 6 percent of the total domestic tourist trips in the Kingdom in 2011 [19]. In this sense, the reasons for seasonal demand for tourism products and services in this region as a peripheral location appears to be self-evident, which relate to natural climatic factor and makes the destination unattractive for specific, often traditional markets ‘out of season’. Hence, the contribution of tourism to alleviate economic disparity across the regions remains to be seen.

The above issues require a balanced seasonal distribution of demand in the region, permitting economic benefits all along the year and simultaneously avoiding excessive tourist flows in specific, more attractive seasons of the year. Kastenholz (2004) argues that the management of demand, with seasonally differentiated and more satisfactory offerings, can be considered as a tool within an integrated destination marketing that could contribute to sustainable tourism development at the destination. The understanding of seasonal differences may assist in a more effective and sustainable strategic planning and managing of its destination, its attractions and resources. It is also contested that the low season market is economically relevant, guaranteeing income in this period of the year, with this segment being apparently more loyal than the high season market, repeating visits for potentially different motives. The variety of interests of this low season market reveals the potential of developing new products such as tourism events. Special tourism events and festivals of any size with limited duration not only could create new tourism seasons but also could enhance the awareness, appeal and profitability of various destinations in Asir region.

Another issue worth mentioning is that one-day excursions are popular within the Saudi population, but often do not have a high economic value, because they are organized as picnics with food and beverages brought from home without consuming anything at the place of destination. Seckelmann [7] opines that to open the market for excursionists, places of interest need to be developed into sightseeing.$$
sites with attractive facilities, for which an entrance fee can be charged. Otherwise, the country’s domestic tourism market will not be able to generate significant economic benefits for host communities.

Conclusion

It is essential to analyze the status of tourism in Asir to ascertain the potential of domestic tourism for a sustainable regional development in Saudi Arabia. Domestic tourism is considered more suitable for a socially and economically sustainable regional development since it does not carry problems linked to international mass tourism. Despite the issues raised in this paper, Asir region is a unique tourist destination and has considerable unrealized potential. Government policy with regards to domestic tourism should be reviewed, and tourism diversification in this region can be undertaken in terms of product, market and geographical areas. As tourism development is a comprehensive undertaking involving many sectors and stakeholders, it is crucial for the government to come up with multi-hierarchical, all-inclusive and coordinated development strategy, and these are the challenges to which the country’s tourism industry should respond to promote domestic tourism.

References