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PRIORITY DEVELOPMENT AREAS OF NATURE TOURISM RESOURCES IN SHAKI-ZAGATALA ECONOMIC AND GEOGRAPHIC REGION

Zaur Tahir IMRANI*
Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Institute of Geography named after academician H.A. Aliyev, Baku, Azerbaijan, e-mail: zaur_imrani@mail.ru

Aynur Ilgar HUSEYNZADE
Azerbaijan Tourism and Management University, Tourism and Hospitality Faculty, Department of Tourism Business, Baku, Azerbaijan, e-mail: aynur.huseynzade@atmu.edu.az

Bahadur Anver BILALOV
Azerbaijan Tourism and Management University, Tourism and Hospitality Faculty, Department of Tourism Business, Baku, Azerbaijan, e-mail: b.bilalov@atmu.edu.az

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Abstract: Nature-based tourism makes individual tourist trips attractive. In this regard, when its scale becomes massive, it stimulates the socio-economic development of the region and significantly contributes to the gross domestic product. In this regard, tourism, considered a priority area of regional sustainable development, should be constantly developed. In addition, its sustainability should be measured mainly by nature tourism resources. Purpose. The main purpose of the research is the comprehensive analysis of the Shaki-Zagatala economic-geographic region, being considered one of the regions with the richest natural and tourism resources of Azerbaijan, the current problems and the priority directions that stimulate development. Research method. Analysis of nature tourism resources includes historical, comparative analysis, and descriptive observation methods. Result. The research process studied the natural conditions of the region from the tourism attractiveness point of view, determined the advantage of the relief factor during nature tourism trips, studied the indicators of climate comfort for the efficient organisation of tourists' recreation, evaluated the tourism importance of forest resources, and analysed the hydro-tourism potential of water resources in recreation and health. Finally. The materials provided in the research process can be used in preparing regional development programs.

Keywords: tourism, nature tourism, wildlife tourism, ecotourism, adventure tourism, hydro-tourism.

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INTRODUCTION

Human-nature relations develop in a constantly changing context. Human intervention in nature leads to the emergence of several ecological problems. In such a situation, human-nature relations are approached from a creative functional perspective in the process of organising tourism work. Thus, nature-based tourism is considered a strong point of sustainable development as it performs functions such as understanding nature, protecting it, and involving it in the economic cycle. Nature tourism is aimed at developing people's ability to understand nature. In a strict sense, nature tourism is called "tourism based on natural attractions". In a roundabout sense, nature tourism requires maximum use of all its components without damaging nature (Brockington et al., 2008). Nature tourism has become very sensitive, which includes such opportunities as organising environmental education for tourists during the organisation of trips, promoting nature conservation, getting to know the traditions and culture of the local population, achieving economic efficiency, and contributing to the sustainable development of the visited regions.

The research aims at comprehensively studying the natural and tourism resources of the Shaki-Zagatala economic and geographic region and attracting its advantages to the tourism cycle. Achieving the goal requires the solution of the following tasks:

- explaining the concept of nature tourism on scientific grounds;
- explaining the advantages of nature tourism resources;
- compiling a distribution map of nature tourism resources; and
- determining the degree of use of nature tourism resources.

Several scientists and specialists have conducted research on the scientific-theoretical basis of nature tourism resources, their important features, distribution areas, degree of use, potential natural monuments, and other important components. For example, D.M.Olson sees the development of nature based tourism in biodiversity, equating it with

* Corresponding author

ecotourism, while Ch.R.Goeldner and J.R.B.Ritchie state the idea that tourism can be developed in different directions and explain its advantages from a theoretical point of view. Sh.S. Shimova equates nature tourism with wild nature, considering the ecosystem to be its important component. In this regard, Z.T.Imrani values the geographical environment as the leading force of nature tourism, states that recreation resources play an important role in the development of human health and socio-economic activity, seeing its effectiveness in the planning of nature tourism resources. K.Z. Zeynalova defines natural tourism resources the most optimal way of sustainable development.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

During the research process, scientific expeditions and field studies conducted in 2010-2023, as well as analytical fund materials related to the topic were used. In addition to these, historical and comparative analysis, and descriptive observation methods, which are different approaches to developing and improving tourism based on the natural environment and the surrounding world, were applied in the analysis of nature tourism resources.

Actual data and events were improved according to the requirements of different periods and the advantages of development were taken into account, using the historical method. Thus, the logical unity of the historicity principle serves to achieve a more realistic effect (Mammadov, 2013). The method of comparative analysis includes understanding reality, comparing unknown data, and determining reality by comparing the quality of one phenomenon with the quality of another one. This method allows deeper analysis of the practical activity (Tille, 1978). The descriptive observation method helps to better understand the nature of the research based on the collection of visual empirical data, monitoring the dynamics of the development and activity of the object, process, and event (Gurbanzade, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The concept of nature tourism

Tourism development is mainly biodiversity-based "nature-based" tourism (Olson et al., 2001). Therefore, the object of nature tourism is living and non-living nature (Kosolapoe, 2005). Its thematic areas include nature tourism, wildlife tourism, bio-tourism, ecotourism, adventure tourism, etc.

Nature tourism is described as an implementation of various types of activities based on nature (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2011), while wildlife tourism features the non-consumptive and environmentally positive impacts of visiting wildlife (Newsome et al., 2012). Bio-tourism is tourism that is a manifestation of the natural life of both individual species of plants and biocenoses (Tikhomirov, 2007); ecotourism is promoted as a way for people to have a positive impact on the environment (Mckinney, 2016), while adventure tourism is intended for those with a high degree of risk-taking and physical endurance during trips related to nature tourism (Buckley, 2006).

The concept of geographical environment in nature tourism combines climatology, geomorphology, soil science, biogeography, and other fields of science (Imrani and Kazimova, 2023). The World Wildlife Fund for Nature calls nature tourism the promotion of nature conservation (Shimova, 2014). Thus, nature tourism does not cause the physical destruction of biological resources, which is one of the most critical problems of sustainable development. In addition to preserving rare and endangered species of flora and fauna, nature tourism has a positive effect on the ecosystem, while it is sometimes valued as an economic activity for the local population.

In a general sense, it could be stated that nature tourism is a type of tourism related to the care of the environment. It has specific potential opportunities that require a caring approach to nature, effective use of natural resources, their protection, as well as improving the well-being of the local population. In addition to these, nature tourism serves to improve the economic and social lifestyles of the local population and to form an ecological culture by organising nature tourism trips.

2. Research object

The Shaki-Zagatala economic-geographic region is bordered by the Republic of Dagestan of the Russian Federation to the north, the Republic of Georgia (the Mazim River) to the west, the Girdmanchay River valley to the east, and the Ganikh-Ayrichay depression to the south. According to its natural conditions, the territory is divided into three places: the southern slope of the Greater Caucasus, the Ganikh-Haftaran valley, and the foothills of the Orta Kura (Ajinohur and Turud-Sarija plains - the mountainous part of Shaki) (Mammadov et al., 2012).

The territory of the economic-geographic region includes the administrative regions of Gabala, Oghuz, Shaki, Gakh, Zagatala, and Balakan. The distance between administrative district centres within the region is at least 30 km, at most 194 km, and the distance between them and the capital city of Baku equals 225-419 km. The territory of the economic-geographic region is 8.84 thousand km^2, which makes up 10.2% of the country's territory. The population of the area is 623.6 thousand people (2022), which makes up 6.2% of the country's population. The population density is 71 people per km^2. The settlement system in the economic-geographic region is represented by six administrative regions, six cities, eight settlements, and 336 rural settlements (Regions of Azerbaijan, 2023). Shaki-Zagatala economic-geographical region borders the Republic of Dagestan of the Russian Federation at 185 km and the Republic of Georgia at 150 km. This plays an exceptional role in the formation of the geopolitical situation of the region.

3. Analysis and discussion

Being one of the rapidly developing areas in our modern era, tourism has a mechanism of impact on nature and its resources. Effective use of nature tourism resources (recreational resources) and their management requires optimisation of socio-economic activity and related infrastructure of any region (Imrani and Veliyeva, 2023). Thus, along with stimulating

the socio-economic situation, tourism has a positive effect on the development of transport, trade, construction, healthcare, agriculture, production of consumer goods, and many other areas (Imrani et al., 2021). However, several important issues need to be resolved to develop the tourism sector. These include determining the more attractive areas from the tourism perspective, conducting their assessment, and determining the existing potential. The potential opportunities of nature-based tourism include the relief factor, climate comfort, forest resources, and water resources.

One of the most optimal ways of sustainable development in the Shaki-Zagatala economic-geographical region, located in the northwestern part of Azerbaijan, on the southern slope of the Great Caucasus Mountains, is related to the involvement of nature tourism resources in the economic cycle (Zeynalova, 2020). It is known that one of the main ways to achieve the development of a sustainable tourism economy is related to the presence of nature tourism resources and settlements in that area. Thus, settlements play a significant role in organising tourists' reception, lodging, feeding, use of guide services and other activities before organising trips to the more attractive areas of nature tourism resources.

Compared to other regions of Azerbaijan, the Shaki-Zagatala economic-geographical region has a low level of urbanisation. Only 3.3% of the urban population of the republic lives in the territory of the economic-geographic region. This indicator is almost two times lower than the republican level. Unlike cities, the distribution areas of rural settlements are wider. They can be divided into three groups: villages in plain areas (72.4%), villages in foothills (21.8%), and villages in mountainous areas (16%). It can be concluded that tours related to nature tourism resources are mainly related to plains and lowlands. However, it should not be forgotten that tourists mainly prefer the foothills and mountainous areas, which are more attractive places for nature tourism resources.

Relief is one of the main components of nature tourism resources that stand out for its attractiveness. Thus, relief is one of the main tools in developing nature tourism and stimulates its development. The territory of the Shaki-Zagatala economic-geographic region is distinguished by its unique relief conditions. The mountainous zone of the area includes the northern part of the Main Caucasus range between the Mazimchay River and the Goychay River. Here, sharply divided relief forms take a better position. The middle and low mountain belts are mostly covered with forests; however, erosion, landslides, hill-creeps, and floods have become intensive in these areas stemming from deforestation. The Ganikh-Ayrichay Valley, which surrounds the southern part, is composed of young sediments and river deposits of the fourth period; the plain parts are of alluvial and alluvial-prolluvial origin.

The main Caucasus Range, covering the northern zone, has altitudes of more than 3000 m. The southern slopes, divided by narrow valleys, fall into the Ganikh-Ayrichay Valley and pass to the foothills in the southwestern part. The sloping plain of the Ganikh-Ayrichay foothills stretches 120 km from northwest to southeast (Geography of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2014). The Shaki-Zagatala economic-geographic region is mainly represented by altitude belts such as mountain-steppe, mountain-forest, subalpine and alpine meadows, and nival area. 54% of its territory is located in areas with a slope of 5^o, 18% in 5-10^o, 22.4% in 10-15^o, and 5.6% in areas with a slope of 15^o and higher. The highest peak of the area is the Guton Mountain (3648 m) between the Balakan and Zagatala administrative regions (Budagov, 2003). Since the area is mainly mountainous, it has very favourable conditions and potential opportunities for organising hiking and trekking trips as a nature tourism reserve. In high mountain areas, it is possible to develop such types of tourism as mountaineering and ice climbing. In addition to these, river valleys also play the role of the primary means of transportation and collection of erosion and washout materials, which are rich in valuable components in the form of scattering, in all stages of development of the modern relief. Therefore, river valleys and terraces have a magnificent view. In this regard, riverbanks enjoy vast potential opportunities to organise nature tourism recreation places.

One of the main components of nature tourism resources is related to the climate factor. A favourable climate stimulates tourist trips and promotes mass tourism. This, in turn, serves as a source of income.

The climate of the Shaki-Zagatala economic-geographical region is primarily mild and humid, and it receives a lot of solar energy and radiation throughout the year. The number of sunny hours is 2200-2300 per year, and the total solar radiation fluctuates between 120-148 kcal/cm^2. The subtropical climate prevails in areas up to 500-700 m above sea level. The average annual temperature is 6-14^oC in Balakan and fluctuates between 0-14^oC in the rest of the regions.

Table 1. Main climate indicators of the Shaki-Zagatala economic-geographic region (Hajiyev, 1977)

City and administrative districts	during the year						
	Total solar radiation, kcal/cm^2	Average temperature ^{o}C	Absolute minimum temperature ^{o}C	Absolute maximum temperature ^{o}C	Amount of precipitation, mm	Possible evaporation, mm	Number of snowy days
Zagatala	124.1	12.5	-23	38	1036	850	22
Balakan	124.1	13.2	-21	37	943	871	22
Gakh	123.0	12.2	-23	38	920	837	24
Shaki	122.0	12.0	-23	37	803	824	26
Oghuz	123.6	11.9	-23	38	1128	769	45
Gabala	123.6	10.6	-26	37	1027	680	45

The annual amount of precipitation is 300-350 mm around Ajinohur, 500-700 mm in Ganikh-Ayrichay, and 900-1300 mm in other areas (Budagov, 2003). Although the indicators of total solar radiation (122.0-124.1 kcal/cm^2) are close to each other throughout the year, the average temperature (10.6-13.2^{o}C) is slightly different (Hajiyev, 1977). Thus, the lowest indicator of average air temperature (10.6^{o}C) was recorded in Gabala, while the highest indicator (13.2^{o}C) was recorded in Balakan regions. The absolute minimum air temperature varies between -21-26^{o}C, and the absolute maximum temperature

varies between 37-38°C. The annual amount of precipitation is relatively less in Shaki, Gakh, and Balakan, and more in Gabala, Zagatala, and Oghuz regions. Possible evaporation during the year is 680-871 mm. The number of snow-covered days was high in the Gabala and Oghuz regions (45 days), based on which the Tufandagh winter-summer tourism recreation complex operates in Gabala (Table 1). The comfort provided by the climate and the relief of the area create favourable conditions for the development of nature tourism resources in the economic-geographic region.

Forests are considered a unique component of nature tourism resources. Forests in the Shaki-Zagatala economic-geographic region make up 27% of the total area. Forests are more densely located in the middle and lower mountain zones: in the basins of Katekhchay, Mazimchay, and Balakanchay Rivers, as well as in the territory of the Zagatala state nature reserve (Figure 1, c). The oldest and largest trees of the area are the 300-year-old Celtis in "Gosha Ziyarat Piri", a pair of 350-year-old *Platanus orientalis* in front of the Shaki Khan Palace, a 500-year-old *Platanus orientalis* in front of the Shaki bus station, the famous "Babaratma Piri" 900-year-old *Platanus orientalis* located on the outskirts of Babaratma village, 1000-year-old *Platanus orientalis* in the village of Gudula, and 1000-year-old *Populus* near the city of Shaki (Soltanova, 2015). The forests in the territory of the Oghuz region of the Shaki-Zagatala economic-geographic region, which have the richest forest resources in Azerbaijan, are called the "Switzerland of Azerbaijan". The local population widely uses the pine forest in Kish village of the Shaki district to treat asthma. Therefore, forests are widely used as a nature tourism resource. For example, the fact that Jar village of the Zagatala district is surrounded by the Tala, Bekmez, and Zilban rivers, and a dense forest area in the heart of the mountains has given impetus to the development of tourism here. The fact that the nature tourism resources are so compact within one area has led the villagers to rent their houses to tourists in the summer months and to guide pedestrian tours and horseback trips.

a. Kurmukchay River and Ilisu Ulu Bridge, Ilisu state nature reserve in the background

b. Katekh waterfall on Katekhchay River

c. Zagatala State Nature Reserve

d. Hamambulag thermal water, used in an artisanal way

e. Nohur Lake or Nohurgishlaq reservoir

f. Tufandag winter-summer Tourism Recreation Complex

Figure 1. Natural monuments with higher potential for nature tourism resources in the Shaki-Zagatala economic-geographical region

Among the nature tourism resources, water resources can combine all components. Watersheds together with relief, climate, and forest resources serve to create sustainable tourism zones. The rivers of the Shaki-Zagatala economic-geographical region, that were studied, are the left tributaries of the Ganikh River and have a favourable water balance structure. However, there is a water shortage in the lower mountainous areas during the summer months. This creates an obstacle in the irrigation of agricultural fields, and the population mainly meets their needs at the expense of underground water. In mountainous areas, the residents use water from rivers and springs (Aliyev, 2000). There are Mazimchay, Kish, Shinchay, Balakenchay, Ayrichay, Kurmukchay (Figure 1, a), Katekh (Figure 1, b), Karachay, Demiraparanchay, and other rivers, as well as Tufan Lake, Nohur Lake (Figure 1, e), Ajinohur Lake, and the Ayrichay reservoir within the territory. However, they are not fully used as a nature tourism resource. Their efficient assimilation will enable the socio-economic development of the region, especially the economic potential of mountain villages.

As Oghlanbulag, Gizbulag, Hamambulag (Figure 1, d), Aghbulag, Bum, Khalkhal, Chimchimak, Moksu, Bugusshor, Alibeyli, Susken, and others are rich in thermal and mineral springs along the tectonic breaks and cracks in the

mountainous and plain belts of the Shaki-Zagatala economic-geographical region (mainly villages), the settlements are laid out in chain order. In some cases, this has led to the creation of rural agglomerations. Nature tourism is developed based on thermal and mineral waters. Especially in the summer months, tourists make mass visits to these areas and use traditional methods to treat diseases such as nerves, skin, cardiovascular, and musculoskeletal (Figure 2).

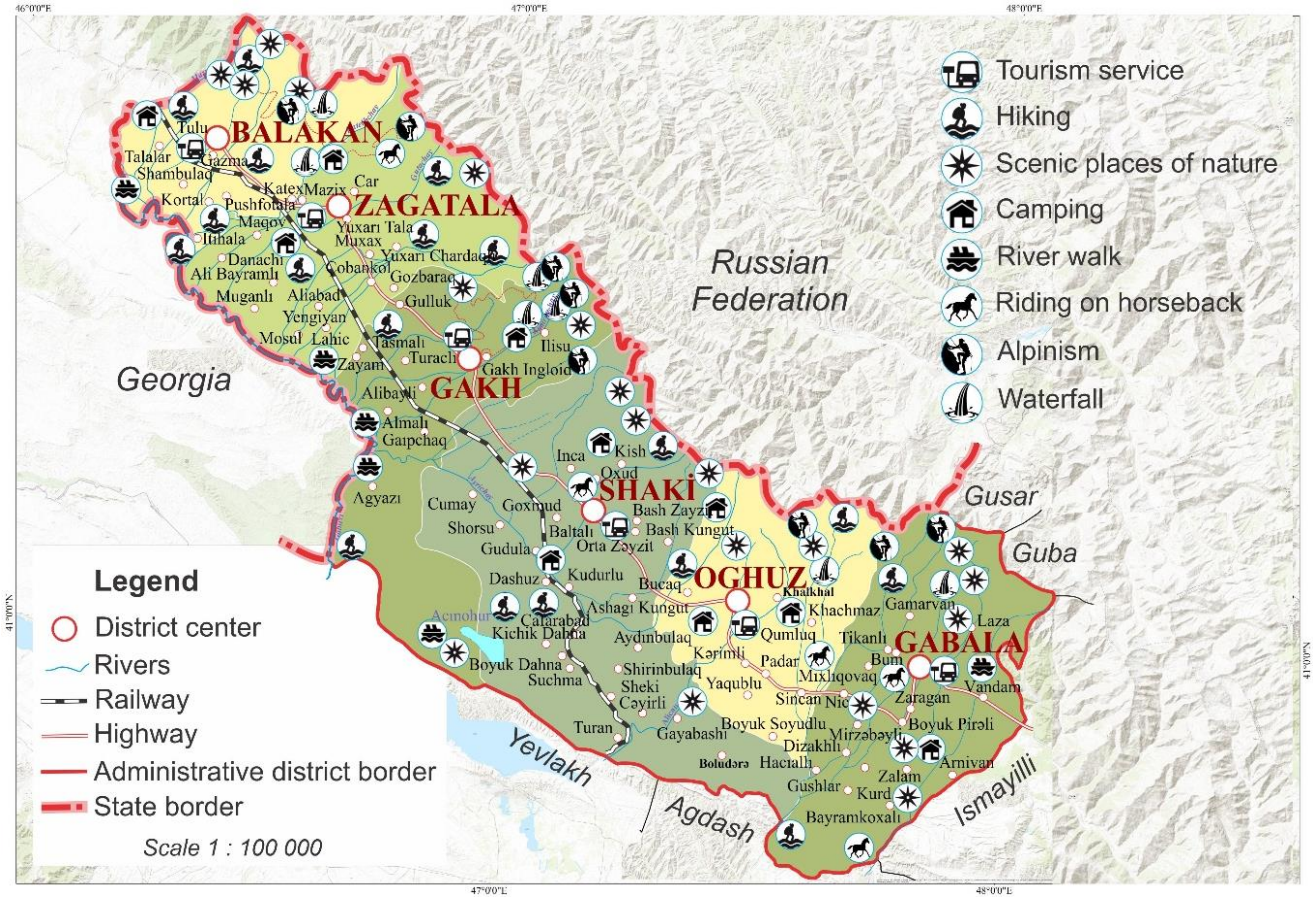

Figure 2. Distribution map of nature tourism resources in the Shaki-Zagatala economic-geographical region

CONCLUSIONS

Most of the settlements in the Shaki-Zagatala economic-geographic region are located between 200-500 m altitude. The population is more densely populated within the boundaries of this altitude zone, but the nature tourism resources are not used enough. Despite the predominance of steep slopes, steep rocks, landslides, and floods in the relief of the areas of the economic-geographical region located above 1500 m, the nature tourism resources here are more widely involved in the tourism cycle. The Shaki-Zagatala economic-geographical region has a wide variety of climate comfort, clean mountain air, forests, alpine and subalpine meadows, and thermal and mineral waters as a nature tourism resource.

However, this potential has yet to be fully used. Tourists visit the area only in the summer months to take advantage of the nature tourism resources. In the winter months, except for the Tufandagh winter-summer (Figure 1, f) tourism recreation complex, tourist visits to other areas are short-term (1-3 days).

The Shaki-Zagatala economic-geographical region has great potential for nature tourism resources. Effective use of these resources can stimulate regional socio-economic development and condition future prospects. In this connection, nature tourism resources with more favourable conditions should be identified, the economic advantages of nature tourism resources should be explained to rural communities, recommendations for the future sustainable development of nature tourism resources should be prepared for the villagers, and educational work should be carried out among the population.

Based on numerous expeditions and fund materials obtained in the research process in the Shaki-Zagatala economic and geographical region, it could be stated that the region has not been studied at any level in terms of nature tourism. In the future, it is necessary to conduct scientific-theoretical and practical-applied research in this direction.

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