

COVID-19 IMPACT ON ECO-TOURISM DESTINATIONS IN LEBANON: SHOUF BIOSPHERE RESERVE

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Abstract:

The Covid-19 pandemic has hit tourism industry, affecting the livelihoods of people and the whole economy. Tourism managers seek for recovery plans to attain more sustainable tourism destinations. Hence, investing in protected areas is considered a vital tool for rural development and for building greener and safer tourism destination. Lebanon has significant unexploited potentials of natural assets presenting a dynamic background for ecotourism investments. Boosting protected areas in Lebanon may contribute to the development of sustainable tourism and strengthen the tourism industry. Shouf Biosphere reserve presents a worthy background for improved eco-tourism management to lessen the impact of reduced tourists' influx to the region on locals living around. New niches in eco-tourism have been blossomed in the biosphere but still confronted with several challenges that require a sustainable strategy for eco-tourism to be implemented in the country. In this context, the present paper aims to observe the eco-tourism development in this biosphere region before and after the awake of Covid-19 and investigate the attitudes of tourists towards the evolvement of new niches of tourism in the region. Moreover, it suggests recommendations that may help to recover the losses of tourism industry and may contribute in further development of eco-tourism in protected areas in Lebanon..

Key words: *Eco-tourism, Covid-19, protected areas, sustainable tourism, Lebanon, Shouf Biosphere Reserve.*

JEL Classification: L83, Z32

I. INTRODUCTION

The global tourism industry, estimated at about 1,700 billion dollars in 2019, was among the most affected by the pandemic of COVID-19 that cancelled most holidays, especially the distant ones, closed borders (total or partial) and imposed travel conditions. Moreover, the impact of the pandemic is to be felt for a long time to come, with some travelers having to permanently change their consumer behavior when it comes to tourism.

In 2020, from the widespread unemployment and anti-racism movements to the restoration of natural habitats and the impact on ecosystems, the world has been re-invigorated to tackle social, environmental, and institutional sustainability. So, the specialists say this is the time for the sector to accelerate the meaningful changes that will make a lasting difference for future generations.

Recent studies on tourism industry amid Covid-19 pandemic revealed the significant of green tourism for the global recovery. As stated by the World Bank, one of the effective recovery strategies for post-Covid-19 is rising investments in nature protection and eco-tourism (World Bank, 2021). Protected areas have always been considered as a vital tool for rural development.

Tourism industry is the major contributor of Lebanese economy. It accounted for 19.5% of GDP and tourism receipts constituted 48% of total exports in 2019 (World Bank, 2020). The unexpected COVID-19 pandemic that caused a serious global recession, had affected the tourism industry in Lebanon. Government implemented strict restrictions on movement and closed borders, bringing the tourism industry to its knees and affecting the livelihoods of people working in this sector and other interrelated sectors.

According to the global restrictions on tourism, protected areas managers restrained tourists' visits to limit the spread of the virus in local communities (McGinlay et al., 2020). This had socioeconomic impact on for local people living around these areas (Bennett et al., 2020). Hence, promoting responsible tourism while managing visitors to PAs could improve locals' well-being while preserving eco-systems (Jones N, 2021).

In this contest, this crisis offers an opportunity to shift towards a more resilient industry that consider better interaction with our natural assets and ecosystems. Thus, it is essential to boost sustainable forms of tourism and encourage investments in protected areas, which may contribute to the development of more resistant industry.

Protected areas in Lebanon presents unexploited potentials holding valuable natural and cultural resources. Lebanon encompasses 15 protected areas that are legally established, from which six having management plan and have international recognition (MOE, 2020). Shouf Biosphere reserve is one of the precious protected areas in Lebanon that is declared as UNESCO biosphere in 2005. Reviving eco-tourism in this biosphere and other protected areas could offer an opportunity for tourism industry to recover after the fallout of the pandemic.

II. SHOUF BIOSPHERE RESERVE: POTENTIALS AND CHALLENGES AMID COVID-19

Shouf Biosphere Reserve (SBR) offers a substantial ecosystem for different kinds of species from which are endangered. Moreover, it embraces quarter of cedar trees of Lebanon, which provides it a vital role in conservation. Given its wide area which accounts for 50,000 hectares constituting around 5% of Lebanon area, this reserve is the largest protected area in the Mediterranean area of the Middle East. Around 70,000 people living around the core and buffer zone of the reserve (IUCN, 2018), receive direct and indirect benefits from the investments in this area including revenues generated of increased tourists' influxes.

The reserve hosts the largest stands of Lebanese Cedars, as well as rich flora and plenty of medicinal plants with high potential economic value. It is home to 520 species of plants, 25 internationally and nationally threatened species, and 48 plants endemic to Lebanon. It represents a crossroads for bird migration (over 250 species), strategically located on the routes between Europe, Africa, and West Asia (UNESCO, 2018).

The Shouf Reserve is a host of many cultures, religions, and historical events, all of which have left an imprint which makes the area's cultural heritage as rich as its ecosystems.

This reserve is a popular destination for practicing eco-tourism activities that include hiking with 250 km of walking trails, bird watching, mountain biking and snow shoeing. In recent years, eco-tourism in this reserve has experienced an annual steady rise accounted to an average of 20% through the period 2016-2019 as shown in figure1. However, as a result of the health pandemic and due to the restrictions imposed by government on public areas, tourism to protected areas has deteriorating by 45%. This was mainly due to the closure of the reserve thought several periods of 2020. Tourism have been promising in the region, with the emerging of rural tourism as a new niche of tourism. The management team of the reserve was aware of the importance of developing sustainable tourism that ensure the engagement of local communities living in and around the biosphere.

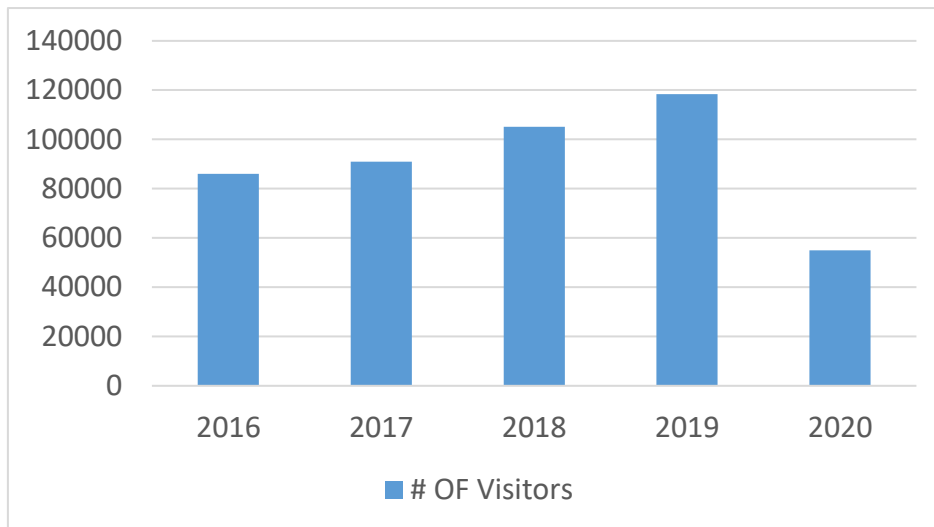


Figure no.1. Annual visitors to Shouf Biosphere Reserve

Source: SBR report 2021

A closer look to the monthly visitors throughout the years discloses that around 55% of tourism activities happens in April, July, August, September (see figure 2) illustrating the seasonality of tourism in the reserve and presenting pressure on natural resources in this period and may increase the risk of virus contamination. While the reserve offers a perfect site for snowshoeing and hiking due to its elevation that varies from 1000 to 2000 meters approximately, the tourism in winter season still developing and unpopular. December, January and February can be observed as low-season months in this site along the overall period of study.

However, these figures are opposed with increased number of tourists seeking rural experiences in their trips to the area. Whereas amid Covid-19 pandemic, eco-tourism services such as guesthouses accommodation and eco-restaurants become more popular and attract new visitors recording 50% rise, as stated by Mr. Abo Ali, the ecotourism coordinator of the biosphere. As tourists showed fatigue of site seeing in big crowded cities, reconnecting to nature and rural experiences have been observed in visitors seeking interactive activities with locals.

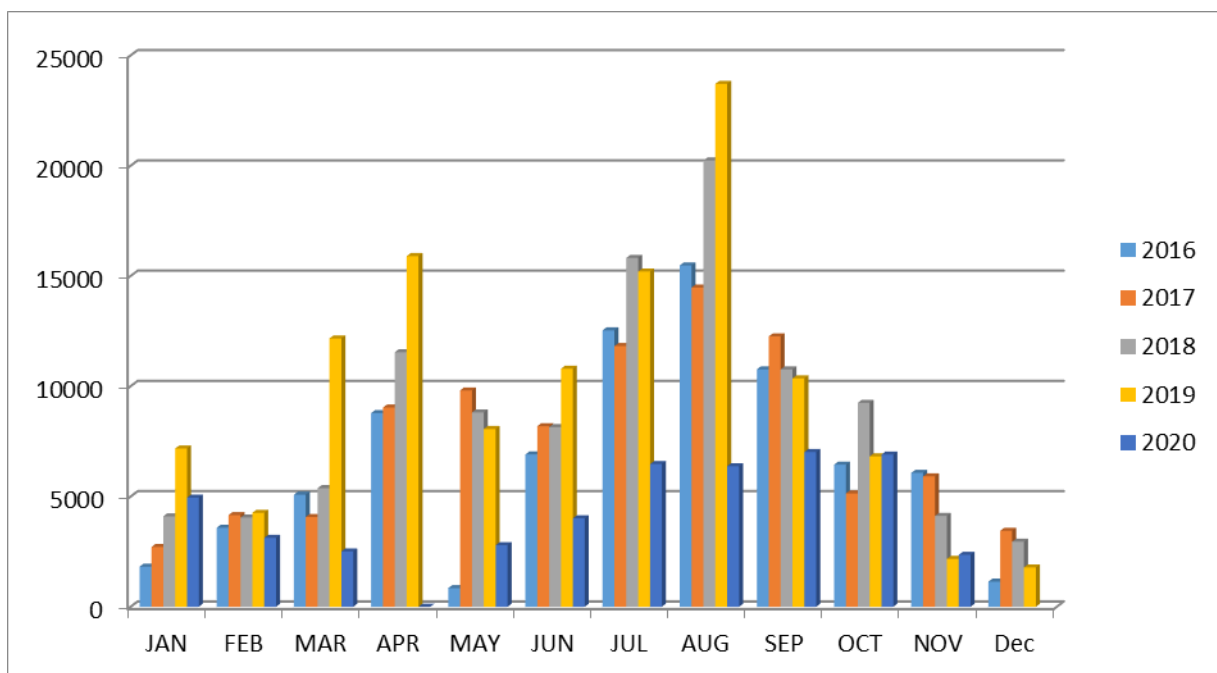


Figure no.2. Visitors’ insights to Shouf Biosphere Reserve

Source: SBR report 2021

III. NEW DEVELOPMENTS OF ECO-TOURISM DESTINATION OF SHOUF BIOSPHERE RESERVE

New behaviors have been also noticed in tourists to the area showing increased connection to land and nature, whereas tourists seeks participation in rural tourism activities offered in the reserve. As a result of consumer behavior change especially amid the health pandemic, new niche opportunities for tourism have been blossomed in this biosphere, providing unique experiences for visitors. The most sought segment within rural tourism niche is agro-tourism. This new trend targets the agricultural aspects of Shouf Biosphere and its surroundings, along with the cultural and social aspects of rural life that rural tourism encloses in the region such as the local arts, handicrafts, traditional cuisine and traditional wine making. Whereas tourists have the opportunity to live a real and authentic rural experience on the local farms that surround the reserve and participating in the agriculture activities with the local farmers enjoying the picking of food they want to cook.

However, this new form of tourism still shy in the region especially that 19.4% is abandoned. From this angle, many challenges are imposed when it comes to lack of governmental support and funding, weak marketing and environmental awareness deficiency.

Consequently, restrict visitors to protected areas (PAs) may limit the spread of the virus to the local community, but it will leave behind undesirable impacts on locals wellbeing as well as on the financing of PAs. However, diversifying tourism activities throughout the year may lessen the tourism density in specific periods and ease crowds and virus spreads.

Effective management of eco-tourism is required to keep PAs alive and ensure benefits for local community while retaining healthy and safe environment. Furthermore, Agro-tourism projects shall have progressive improvement to create services to market food products as well as local goods and handicrafts. Developing agro-tourism could support the rural economy (Canovi and Lyon, 2019) while contributing to the conservation of customs and culture of local people (Wilson et al., 2006).

IV. CONCLUSION

Tourism, one of the sectors most severely affected by the new coronavirus pandemic, but extremely beneficial for local communities in economic and socio-cultural terms, is about to regain its strength, as long as it develops on the principles of sustainability. Thus, ecotourism, tourism in natural areas, outdoor tourist activities, and rural tourism will be the most important forms of tourism, which can ensure the sustainability, but also the safety of tourists in destinations.

Unfortunately, the year 2021 does not yet prove the revival of tourism in a sustained way, but there are still signs of growth.

In Lebanon, in particular, tourism should be supported by a general economic recovery, but also by political stability in the region. Given the current difficult conditions, the recovery of tourism will probably be slower than worldwide. However, policies of public support for tourism, for the promotion of ecotourism destinations with which Lebanon can compete with countries in the region or even in the Mediterranean basin must not be abandoned. Domestic tourism, and especially international tourism, must be promoted as solutions for a sustainable economic and social recovery, the main objective being to bring back to life the destination that was once a brilliant one in the region.

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