

Hidden Treasures: The Potential of Geotourism in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Natural landscapes and geological wonders have inspired humans on a global scale and hence serve as a fundamental part of a culture's identity. Being a relatively new form of niche or science-based tourism with considerable growth potential, geotourism can act as a tool for the conservation of our geological heritage and community advancement through appropriate sustainability measures. Its definition has recently been refined by Newsome and Dowling (2010) and describes "*... a form of natural area tourism that specifically focuses on geology and landscape. It promotes tourism to geosites and the conservation of geo-diversity and an understanding of earth sciences through appreciation and learning. This is achieved through independent visits to geological features, use of geo-trails and view points, guided tours, geoactivities and patronage of geosite visitor centers*".

The evolution of the concept to safeguard and develop selected areas having significant geological features, rarity or aesthetic appeal as well as its placement within the sustainable development context comes in form of an UNESCO initiative, namely the Global Network of National Geoparks (Global Geoparks Network [GGN]). According to UNESCO (2010), a geopark is a voluntary quality label protected under the respective local, regional or national legislation that combines conservation with the promotion of sustainable development and the active involvement of the local communities who live there. These criteria include the objective to encourage rural development, by generating new job opportunities and additional sources of income to reduce the rate of unemployment and rural-urban migration trends. It should further foster the identification of the population with their locale, and stimulate next to cultural development a "pride of place". Moreover the initiative serves as a platform for an active cooperation between experts and practitioners in geological heritage. Yet for a country to earn the worldwide recognition for its

geological sites under UNESCO's umbrella is a challenging endeavor and while the GGN currently has 77 members in 25 countries, there is to date not a single accredited Global Geopark in the Arab world.

Indisputably, the development of geotourism is influenced by social and political factors and will thus act as an articulation of particular values which sometimes do not reflect the grassroots approach promoted by UNESCO or sustainable development principles per se. Especially the exploration of the geological tourism potential when primarily based and fostered by the economic component, can be predatory to the environment, putting under threat the geological heritage, the diversity and the local community itself. Such approaches are usually founded on practitioner and supply side led methodologies rather than the conservation requirements of the landscapes, geological sites or the region in general (e.g. water). Next to political interest groups, they come along with potential commercial stakeholders, who lack any significant academic or scientific engagement. Consequently as a result of an inadequately developed theoretical framework and awareness campaign, the rationale for conservation and the societal significance of the geological resource base is not always fully appreciated.

This analysis will study the potential of geotourism in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia by introducing the wide variety of natural landscapes and abundance of geological resources available. In this respect the Saudi Geological Survey (SGS) suggested 26 geological sites placed into six categories (caves, springs, deserts, beaches, rocky forms, in addition to open settings) for further development. It will further outline the theoretical underpinnings of geotourism, approaches to its sustainable management and the immense challenges involved. The paper concludes with suggestions for future policy priorities.