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## Identification and classification of nature-based tourism resources: western Lake Van basin, Turkey

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### Abstract

Today, nature-based tourism is one of the important export items of tourism industry in many countries such as Australia, Kenya, Nepal, and New Zealand. However, the nature-based tourism resources of Turkey cannot be promoted since they have not been identified and classified yet. The aim of this paper is to identify and assess the natural resources having tourism potential to be developed in the western part of Lake Van basin. The increasing environmental awareness among consumers has lead tourism managers and planners to satisfy this type of tourists' needs by searching new tourism resources. First step for the effective planning is to systematically determine the resources and assess the values of them. The assessment criteria in this paper are attraction levels, infrastructure, level of environmental degradation, and accessibility. The 23 natural resources in the research area were classified based on Priskin's control list approach by applying several experts' opinions and making journey to the sites. The places of nature-based tourism attractions were determined with Global Positioning System and this information were evaluated in the Geographic Information System based program of Mapinfo and hundreds of pictures were taken from all perspectives in the research area. The findings of research revealed that the sites have middle and high levels of attraction and low level of infrastructure. In addition to that, the results show that accessibility is not a inhibitory factor for the tourists to reach the destination and the level of degradation is very low in the area. Therefore, a planned research approach is necessary to investigate the areas with high tourism development potential and relatively untouched.

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### 1. Introduction

Tourism requires a search for the extraordinary when compared to an individual's daily life and environment [1]. Thus, in contrast to mass tourism where the sun, sand and sea constitute the only tourism resource, ecotourism or nature-based tourism activities respond to people's desire to participate in tours with different aims such as relaxation, discovery, learning and escaping to nature, and getting away from the routine of everyday life. These activities also form the main axis of sustainable tourism. Being a sub-branch of sustainable tourism, ecotourism has

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been defined by Weaver [2] as “a type of nature-based tourism which provides opportunities to learn and appreciate the natural environment and its elements, and also strives to be ecological, sociocultural and economical”. Ecotourism involves a trip to explore and learn about the nature and wildlife [3]. The term ecotourism was born in the late 1980s as a reaction to global economic practices and in search of sustainable practices [4]. Being an extension or off-shoot of alternative tourism, ecotourism grew out of the dissatisfaction with traditional tourism which generally prefers a stricter profit-oriented approach over one that places humans at the center of the universe, and ignores the social and ecological aspects of visited areas. Today, nature-based tourism is main revenue in many countries where tourism is an important export industry. These countries include Australia, Kenya, Nepal, New Zealand, Tanzania, Costa Rica and Botswana [3].

Tourism and its direct use play an important role in the encouragement of conservation as it contributes to the tourism industry and the national tourism economy [5,6]. Ecotourism is an incentive for conservation in general [7,8,9] and the protection of nature and threatened species in developing countries in particular [10]. At the same time, it is an effective tool with its contribution to the economy and development of a region/country [7,11,12,13,14], the employment opportunities it creates [15] and its role in rural development [16]. Tyler and Dangerfield [17] also emphasize the role of ecotourism in sociocultural development. Presenting an opportunity for tourism to reach geographically untouched areas [18], ecotourism creates awareness between travelers and hosts at the destination, and stresses the necessity of appreciating the value of ecosystem and conservation [19].

Nature-based tourism is defined in relation to places far away from settlements, in relatively natural places [20]. However, as mentioned by Gunn [21], the physical characteristics of land become a resource only if they are described by the society. Therefore, travelers’ perceptions can show regional features that are a tourism resource. This is directly related to the fact that a piece of land needs to serve people’s needs in order to be known as a tourism resource. As stated by Ayoo [21], if the local community makes use of certain natural resources, they develop a strong instinct about protecting and using them sustainably.

The sustainable use of natural resources is the main strategy for nature conservation in a city [11]. As natural resources create direct economic benefits, nature conservation is the key element which contributes to the life quality of all communities within a city. Nature-based tourism is an important component of this general approach. The management and development of visitor facilities near conserved areas directly adds to the budget of nature conservation, and ensures participation and benefit to neighboring communities [11]. If the tourism industry cannot in principle continue to use natural resources for the good of local cultures, there is little possibility of sustainable practices in destinations or coastal resorts where these are secondary resources [17].

Important natural resources, high market profile and high quality services are the three prerequisites for the successful use of the international tourism market [3]. Success in nature-based tourism lies in appropriate levels of consumer services [23], high environmental quality [24,3], conservation of environmental resources and cultural qualities as the tourism product [25]. In addition to these, transportation [26], accommodation, visitor facilities [20], effective interaction, power/authority and water infrastructure often need to be established in conserved areas where tourism is developing in order to increase the appeal of nature-based tourism [11]. A poorly-planned infrastructure stops future generations from benefiting from the resources, and damage to these resources has economic costs for the society. This also leads to failure in meeting tourist demands and a loss of opportunity for the future of tourism in the area [27]. Indeed, the findings of Hearne and Salinas [6] about visitors to Poas Volcano show that tourists prefer a developed infrastructure.

Even though Diamantis [4] states that ecotourism studies are still in their infancy stage, nature-based tourism has attracted the interest of academics and researchers in recent years. However, few studies in the literature have concerned themselves with the identification of tourism resources [28,29,30,20]. The present study aims to contribute to the filling of this niche in the literature. More precisely, the study aims to identify and grade the natural resources located in western Lake Van Basin, which has a potential for nature-based tourism development. Additionally, the study also aims to investigate whether graded natural resources are evaluated similarly by visitors, and reveal the distinguishing features of visited and unvisited natural resources.

## 2. Study Area

The study covers the area to the southwest, west and north of Lake Van, located in the Eastern Anatolian region of Turkey. Shaped fully by the country’s administrative boundaries, the study area covers the province of Bitlis and

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