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## Environmental Performance Measurement of Tourism Accommodations in the Pilgrimage Urban Areas: The Case of the Holy City of Mashhad, Iran

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### Abstract

One of the main pillars of tourism industry is the accommodation sector with its obvious environmental impact. This is the justification for the present study in quest for a sustainable tourism destination, which is the city of Mashhad. Being a magnet for pilgrimage tourism and non-pilgrimage holidaymaking, the political economy of this urban landscape is intertwined with tourism in one hand, and its future sustainability, on the other. To achieve both sustainability and business success in this sector, hotels are responsible to invest on means and measures of internalizing environmental costs in short-term and to reduce environmental impact in the long-term.

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*Key words:* Environmental performance; sustainable tourism; hotels and environment; Mashhad, Iran; energy efficiency.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Study Site

Iran has been blessed by varieties of tourism attractions. Iran's vast land mass of 1,648,000 Km<sup>2</sup> (636,000 Sq. mi) makes it the sixteenth in size among the countries of the world. This quality along with its natural environment has potentially made Iran a prime tourist destination. With more than 2800 Km of coastline, as well as, high mountain ranges and 3 deserts, the country has a spectacular physiography. The supply of recreational and tourism opportunities is endless. Such geographical/topographical characteristics render Iran a four-season country.



Fig. 1. Map of Iran

The holy city of Mashhad, which is the focus of this study, is both a traditional pilgrimage destination and a metropolitan area with overwhelming VFR tourism. Mashhad metropolitan area has gained even more significance with the onset of the Islamic Revolution in 1979. The main factor attributed to the city is the shrine of Imam Reza who is a revered religious figure in Islam especially among the Shiites. Mashhad is the second biggest city in Iran, and it ranks among the top three destinations for domestic and international tourists. The highest percentage of the accommodation facilities is located in Mashhad with an extensive variation to cater to different income levels ([www.cho-khr.ir](http://www.cho-khr.ir)). The major hoteliers association in Iran belongs to Mashhad, which represents a powerful sector in tourism industry. According to the recent data, the city houses 2.5 million people and accommodates over 20 million tourists annually ([www.cho-khr.ir](http://www.cho-khr.ir)).



Fig. 2. Holy shrine of Imam Reza

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