

ORIGINAL ARTICLE**Identifying of Barriers to the Development of Natural Sports in Ardabil Province****Hamed Hashemi Shooshbolagh^{1*}, Farzad Nobakht², Abbas Naghizadeh-Baghi³** 

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EXTENDED A B S T R A C T**Introduction**

Nature-based sports have attracted increasing attention over the past decade as an important component of public sport participation and sustainable tourism development. These activities provide opportunities to improve physical and mental health while encouraging environmental awareness, social interaction, and regional economic development. Countries with rich natural resources have increasingly incorporated nature-based sports into their development strategies, recognizing their capacity to stimulate tourism, create employment opportunities, and improve the quality of life of local communities. Achieving these outcomes, however, requires appropriate infrastructure, effective management, environmental protection, and coordinated planning among the organizations involved.

Iran enjoys considerable natural diversity, creating favorable conditions for the expansion of nature-based sports. Ardabil Province, with its mountains, forests, rivers, hot springs, and protected natural areas, possesses substantial potential for developing a wide range of outdoor sport activities. Despite these advantages, the province has not experienced development proportional to its environmental capacity. Although participation in outdoor recreation has increased in recent years, many structural and managerial challenges continue to limit the effective utilization of existing resources.

Most previous studies have emphasized the tourism potential or recreational benefits of natural environments, while relatively few have examined the barriers that restrict the development of nature-based sports from the perspective of those directly engaged in this field. Since successful development depends on understanding these challenges before implementing policies and investment programs, identifying the existing barriers appears to be an essential step toward sustainable development. Therefore, the present study sought to identify the barriers to the development of nature-based sports in Ardabil Province using a qualitative phenomenological approach.

Methodology

The present study adopted a qualitative research design using phenomenology to explore the experiences and perceptions of individuals actively involved in nature-based sports in Ardabil Province. The study population consisted of specialists in nature-based sports, experienced athletes, tourism experts, managers of sport and tourism organizations, and leaders of nature tourism tours.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling because of their professional experience and familiarity with the research topic. Interviews

continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, resulting in the participation of sixteen individuals. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data, allowing participants to explain their experiences and viewpoints in detail while maintaining consistency across the interview process.

Before conducting the interviews, participants were informed about the objectives of the study and assured that all information would remain confidential. With their consent, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently analyzed using MAXQDA 20 software.

Data analysis was conducted through open and axial coding. Following repeated examination of the interview transcripts, 102 initial open codes were extracted. Similar concepts were then grouped according to their conceptual relationships, resulting in the identification of nine major categories representing the principal barriers to the development of nature-based sports in Ardabil Province.

Findings

Analysis of the interview data revealed that the barriers affecting the development of nature-based sports in Ardabil Province are multidimensional and closely interconnected. Although each barrier influences development independently, participants believed that many of these challenges reinforce one another and therefore require integrated solutions.

Among all identified categories, economic barriers were considered the most influential. Participants consistently referred to inadequate financial support, limited public investment, insufficient private-sector participation, and the high costs associated with developing and maintaining outdoor sport facilities. According to many interviewees, financial constraints have slowed infrastructure development and reduced opportunities for expanding nature-based sport activities.

Organizational barriers represented the second major category. Participants highlighted fragmented management structures, weak coordination among governmental organizations, overlapping responsibilities, lengthy administrative procedures, and the absence of comprehensive long-term planning. These issues have reduced the effectiveness of existing development programs and limited cooperation between the sport, tourism, and environmental sectors.

Cultural barriers also emerged as an important challenge. Interviewees noted that public awareness of the benefits of nature-based sports remains limited, while educational and promotional programs are insufficient to encourage broader participation. They further emphasized that outdoor recreation has not yet become an integral component of everyday lifestyle for many people in the province.

Environmental barriers constituted another major concern. Participants pointed to environmental degradation, inadequate conservation practices, seasonal weather conditions, and increasing pressure on natural ecosystems as factors limiting the sustainable development of outdoor sport activities. They stressed that environmental protection should accompany any future development strategy.

Infrastructure-related problems were also repeatedly mentioned during the interviews. Limited access roads, inadequate transportation systems, shortages of specialized facilities and equipment, insufficient accommodation services, and poor communication infrastructure were identified as important obstacles affecting both participants and organizers of nature-based sport events.

Social barriers included limited participation of local communities, insufficient cooperation among stakeholders, and inadequate community support for sport development initiatives. Participants believed that stronger community involvement could facilitate both environmental conservation and sport tourism development.

Safety issues also represented a significant challenge. The absence of well-equipped rescue teams, limited emergency response services, inadequate safety equipment, and insufficient risk management procedures reduce participants' confidence and may discourage wider participation in outdoor activities.

Individual barriers mainly reflected shortages of qualified instructors, insufficient professional training, limited technical knowledge, and inadequate

experience among some practitioners responsible for organizing nature-based sport programs.

Finally, legal barriers were associated with complicated licensing procedures, overlapping regulations, administrative bureaucracy, and the absence of comprehensive legal frameworks capable of supporting investment and facilitating sustainable development.

Overall, the participants ranked the identified barriers in the following order of importance: economic, organizational, cultural, environmental, infrastructural, social, safety, individual, and legal barriers.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the development of nature-based sports in Ardabil Province is influenced by a network of interrelated barriers rather than by a single limiting factor. Financial constraints appear to affect many other dimensions by reducing investment in infrastructure, human resources, environmental protection, and organizational capacity. Consequently, improving financial support should be considered a priority for future development policies.

The results also underline the importance of organizational coordination. Since several governmental institutions are involved in managing sport, tourism, and natural resources, greater cooperation and integrated planning are necessary to avoid duplication of responsibilities and improve the efficiency of development programs.

Another important implication concerns public awareness and community participation. Expanding educational initiatives, strengthening media promotion, and encouraging local communities to participate in planning and implementation processes could improve both participation rates and public support for nature-based sports.

The study further suggests that sustainable development requires simultaneous investment in transportation infrastructure, sport facilities, accommodation services, safety systems, and environmental conservation. These elements should not be considered independently because deficiencies in one area may reduce the effectiveness of improvements in others.

Finally, simplifying legal procedures, encouraging private investment, and establishing supportive regulations may create a more favorable environment for developing nature-based sports across the province.

Overall, the findings indicate that realizing the considerable natural potential of Ardabil Province requires an integrated policy framework combining financial investment, organizational reform, environmental protection, infrastructure development, and community participation. Such an approach would not only facilitate the sustainable growth of nature-based sports but also strengthen sport tourism and contribute to the province's long-term social and economic development.

KEY WORDS

Obstacles, Development, Natural Sports, Ardabil.

