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REGIONALIZATION

OF RESORT-RECREATIONAL ZONES OF AZERBAIJAN AND POSSIBILITIES OF USING THEM. STUDIOS CASE: GUSAR TOURISM-RECREATIONAL ZONE

REGIONALIZACIÓN DE LAS ZONAS TURÍSTICAS-RECREATIVAS DE AZERBAIYÁN Y POSIBILIDADES DE UTILIZARLAS. ESTUDIO DE CASO: ZONA TURÍSTICA-RECREATIVA DE GUSAR

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ABSTRACT

Tourism is one of the rapidly developing fields in our modern times since it has mechanisms to influence nature and its resources. Tourism utilizes both natural and anthropogenic resources and provides the opportunity to satisfy the recreational needs of people in tourist resorts. In recent years, recreation and resort resources have become a participant in regional development. Tourist facilities and infrastructure created on the basis of recreation-resort resources have an impact on the preservation and development of natural, cultural and spiritual values of the territories, as well as increase the level of employment of the local population. Therefore, recreation-resort areas are considered a critical activity system, sometimes mandatory, to recover people's lost health. The natural, cultural and spiritual heritage of the area and its potential are the main resources for the creation and development of tourist-recreation zones. In a period when the use of this potential is rapidly increasing, various systems and structures have been created to improve health. Considering this, the aim of this paper is to analyze the regionalization of tourist-recreational areas of Azerbaijan and the possibilities of using them, taking Gusar tourist-recreational area as a case study.

Keywords: Tourism in Azerbaijan, resort-recreation zones, natural and anthropogenic resources, SWOT analysis.

RESUMEN

El turismo, uno de los campos de rápido desarrollo en tiempos modernos, tiene un mecanismo para influir en la naturaleza y sus recursos. El turismo utiliza recursos tanto naturales como antropogénicos y brinda la oportunidad de satisfacer las necesidades recreativas de las personas en los centros turísticos. En los últimos años, los recursos de recreación y resort se han convertido en un participante en el desarrollo regional como un campo de turismo. Las instalaciones e infraestructuras turísticas creadas a partir de los recursos recreativos-resort inciden en la preservación y desarrollo de los valores naturales, culturales y espirituales de los territorios, así como aumentan el nivel de empleo de la población local. Por lo tanto, las zonas de recreación-resort se consideran un sistema de actividad crítico, en ocasiones obligatorio, para recuperar la salud perdida de las personas. El patrimonio natural, cultural y espiritual del área y su potencial son los principales recursos para la creación y desarrollo de zonas turísticas-recreativas. En un período en el que el uso de este potencial está aumentando rápidamente, se han creado varios sistemas y estructuras para mejorar la salud.

Palabras clave: Turismo en Azerbaiyán, zonas turísticas y recreativas, recursos naturales y antropogénicos, análisis FODA.

INTRODUCTION

According to Hasanli (2021) tourism is considered one of the main and most profitable sectors of the global economy of the 21st century. It is developing dynamically and plays an important role in the socio-economic development of the state. Tourism is not only an indicator of social welfare in society, but also a source of income, new jobs, modern infrastructure, and protection of historical and cultural monuments (Hasanov, 2012). However, tourism can also have detrimental effects on the ecosystem, including soil erosion, pollution, habitat loss, and pressure on threatened and endangered species. Therefore, the need to safeguard the environment and natural resources must be balanced with the economic advantages of tourism. Then, although they generate economic benefits, tourism practices should be sustainable to help reduce the negative effects of tourism on the environment (Rahmanov et al., 2020; Tahir & Rafiq, 2021).

Although it has never been the most prominent industry in Azerbaijan, the potential of tourism for the diversification of the economy has not gone unnoticed (Akhundova & Zayed, 2021). According to the WTTC the total contribution of tourism to the GDP of Azerbaijan in 2013 was 8.8% and it was forecasted to rise by 5.3% in 2024 (Ricapito, 2015). But, as point out by Rahmanov et al. (2020), the events caused by the COVID- 19 pandemic dramatically changed the situation in world tourism in all geographical regions of the world, including middle east countries. However, despite the changes in tourist mobility after the pandemic, the tourism industry seems to be slowly recovering which may mean an opportunity for Azerbaijan, especially in medical tourism (Momeni et al., 2018), although there are still some barriers to its development.

Among others, Gandilova (2019) highlights as the most serious problems for tourism sector in the country:

1. The inadequate representation of tourist potential of the country.
2. Lack of qualified staff. The surveys conducted in the tourism industry, especially in regions, showed a lack of qualified staff and the inadequacy of their market needs.
3. Improperly organized tourist propaganda among local population.
4. The imbalance of price and services.
5. The inadequate information about tourism services in the regions.
6. Low level of cooperation among government, commercial and non-profit organizations.
7. Non-access to tourist organizations in regions of the country, as well as to the international information networks.

Potential solutions for these and other factors have been addressed in the (Tahir & Rafiq, 2021) literature although much work remains to be done. At present, one of the most interesting and necessary issues for tourism development in Azerbaijan is related to the proper planned location of tourism facilities and their formation in relation to the natural and social conditions of the area, district or region where they will be located (Hasanli & Aleskerov, 2022). In this sense, some tourism-recreational complexes and resort-recreational establishments have operated in Azerbaijan since the Soviet era. Most of these enterprises based on natural sources have stopped their activities during the transition period, while large health centres such as Naftalan and Galaalti have slightly changed their status. They are busier with receiving guests and spending their free time efficiently than with treatment. These enterprises strive to implement public and private sector partnerships and ensure the sustainable development of tourism in the region, and also strive to improve the quality of tourism service infrastructure and stimulate existing demand.

At the current stage, the impact of the tourism industry on the country's economy is almost insignificant in our republic, even though it is in its development stage. The lack of tourism zoning with competitive tourism and recreation potential in the regions does not allow the country to take a decent place in the world market. From a regional point of view, developing the tourism industry is considered a priority area for our country, but the partnership of private companies and state bodies is observed only during the implementation of economic projects. From this point of view, studying the tourism potential of the Gusar is important, especially focusing on tourism-recreational zoning based on its resort-recreational resources.

Considering this, the objective of this work is to analyze the regionalization of the tourist-recreation areas of Azerbaijan and the possibilities of using them, taking the tourist-recreation area of Gusar as a case study. To accomplish this, regionalization, systematic-statistical approach and SWOT analysis methods were used in the research. Regionalization made it possible to analyze the problem scientifically, and the systematic-statistical approach involved the hotel industry in a case study. In addition, the strengths and weaknesses of the resort-recreation zones were studied, and the tasks to be done related to threats and opportunities were revealed through SWOT analysis.

METHODOLOGY

In modern times, various methodical approaches are used to develop regional tourism, zoning of resort-recreation zones is carried out, and their future activity is stimulated. For this purpose, the natural tourism resources of the regions are studied, and the tourism infrastructure is analyzed. Because effective use of natural tourism resources (recreational resources) and their management requires optimizing socio-economic activity and related infrastructure of any region. Tourism-recreation zones show the need to create a standard system for the territory identified within the geographical space. This is also possible by carrying out complex regionalization such as territorial structure or functional dependence. Then, the criteria and boundaries of the tourism zone are determined depending on the scale of the area and the intended purpose.

The process of regionalization is carried out in the science of geography, considering the most important specific features of the research object. The rules and methodology of this process are mainly implemented by considering territorial concepts determined by physical and economic geography. The concept of geographic regionalization justifies the extrapolation of many processes and events based on various statistical and field data.

Regionalization of tourism-recreational zones is carried out mainly in developed countries, and the advantages of regionalization are applied in the process of zone activity. At this time, the scientific-theoretical basis of zoning is worked out by applying different approaches and criteria, and the first stage is to clarify the ways of its development.

It is known that the essence and importance of zoning is a purposeful activity related to planning and using geographical space (Golubchik et al., 2015). The high intensity of internal connections and the formation of stable spatial interaction structures between elements determines regionalization. Thus, regionalization requests act as one of the ways of studying the heterogeneous nature of the geographical environment within the region (Evdokimov et al., 2017). Zoning of tourism-recreational zones is based on the elements that determine tourism content, i.e. tourist resources, service infrastructure, material and technical base, number of tourists, income and expenses from tourism, investment activity in tourism, etc.

Tourism-recreational zoning is sectoral zoning (Fedotov, 2013). Each region's socio-economic activity and specialization are considered when regionalization is carried out. When the territorial organization and zoning of tourism-recreational zones are carried out, the development indicators of the tourism industry in the area are determined. From the point of view of the scale of space, the set goal

and the definition of criteria, the process of tourist division of the territory largely depends on the number, volume, configuration, name, specialization and boundaries of the identified tourist areas (Krystev, 2019).

Physical-geographical zoning is based on the laws of nature, and economic-geographical zoning is based on the laws of society, taking into account the efficient use of nature (T. G. Hasanov, 2012). Tourism-recreational zoning is called a process formed within the territory and is considered only as one of the manifestations of the socio-economic development of the place (Kruzhalin et al., 2014); Toschi (1957) considers the territorial-structural elements of tourism regionalization in three aspects:

1. the role played by the territory in the tourism movement.
2. the economic activity of tourism.
3. The traditional advantage of tourism, distinguished by its unique characteristics.

According to the research of Imrani (2018), when tourism-recreational zoning is carried out, prospective tourism-recreational zones of the region, natural conditions of the area, historical and cultural characteristics, population settlement areas and density, characteristics of hotels and recreation centres that receive tourists should also be taken into account. When tourism-recreational zoning is carried out, the main focus is identifying more attractive tourist areas. Most of the world's buyers prioritize natural and economic factors when conducting tourism zoning. These indicators allow us to correctly reflect the face of each region and reveal its characteristics.

According to Baklanov (2012) the application of tourism-recreational zoning aims to determine regularities in the spatial organization of tourism. In most cases, some experts consider tourism-recreational zoning a branch of the economy. This idea needs to be corrected. Because in the system of territorial organization and management of tourism, it is necessary to determine the direct and indirect relations between the types of economic and social activities and the service infrastructure. This will ensure the comprehensive use of zoning schemes and interaction. At this time, tourism-recreational zoning will play an auxiliary role not only in the interaction of the elements of the territorial system of tourism with each other but also in other areas related to the organization of tourism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Gusar sloping plain tourism zone and the Shahdag mountain-sports tourism zone are included in the Gusar tourism-recreation zone. It is important to mention that the tourist zone of the Gusar sloping plain extends from the

southwestern part of the Gusar sloping plain to the Lateral Range and is rich in mineral and thermal waters. This creates the basis for the development of resort-recreational tourism in the area. In addition, the area's climate is moderately hot in the plains and foothills. The average temperature is 10C in January, and 24C in July, and the annual precipitation is 350-1500 mm. The climate factor has led to a denser settlement of the population here and a large-scale appropriation of the territory (Imrani & Jafarovam, 2020).

The zone is one of the more promising areas for tourists. All conditions for tourism development exist in the zone rich in natural and historical-cultural monuments. The central part of the Shahdag mountain-sports tourism zone consists of the Lateral Range and the Main Caucasian Range and covers the mountainous and foothill areas of Gusar and partially Guba regions. This area with a mountain tundra climate is more favourable for the development of mountain sports tourism. At the same time, it should be noted that its current opportunities are poorly used. However, the zone is characterized by many tourism-recreational resources (natural and anthropogenic). For example, the development of resort-recreational tourism here could be more robust than in other regions of our republic. However, although tourism in our republic is not directly related to resort-recreational tourism, the "Shahdag" Winter-Summer Tourism Recreation Center, which is being developed and considered one of the broad infrastructure projects, was built within this zone.

The need to create functional tourism-recreational zoning is explained by the diversity of natural-geographical conditions within the region and the need to fulfil economic and social-democratic management decisions. Therefore, when drawing up the functional tourism-recreational zoning map of the Gusar tourism-recreation zone, the main issue is the definition of boundaries, which should be maximally compatible with the contours of the land use and management of the territory. Therefore, functional tourism-recreational zoning should be detailed, and the zone's boundaries should be drawn within the defined objects.

Zoning of the Gusar tourism-recreation zone was carried out by applying several specialized and comparative methods. The main approaches of the tourism-recreation zone include the following:

- research of resources based on quantitative and qualitative indicators of natural conditions and resources (natural and anthropogenic).
- consideration of authenticity among the factors that determine the nature of tourism activity.
- determination of socio-geographical factors that take into account the motivation for using tourist services and the degree of mobility.
- to reveal their potential opportunities by researching resort-recreational resources.
- to take into account the territorial system of tourism in other areas.

Tourism-recreational zoning helps to more accurately present the tourist image and brand of the regions. This is done in connection with the organization of marketing work in tourism. Furthermore, because the attractiveness of the regional market determines the specialization of recreation and tourism activities in the tourism zone, this increases the potential of the investment environment in the tourism zone and helps in the organization of competitive services. The regional territorial organization of tourism-recreational zoning should be understood as its economic base because the tourism zone is a socio-economic system that operates in connection with other areas. Tourists, tourism resources, service infrastructure, labour resources and government bodies are part of this system.

One of the important conditions for the development of tourism in Gusar region is the availability of hotel complexes by international standards. Although the natural and historical-cultural tourism potential of the region is attractive to tourists, it will not be possible to develop the tourism sector at any level without modern hotel complexes. Unlike other areas of the tourism sector, hotels have a wide range of organizational structures, which has a significant impact on economic performance (Imrani & Veliyeva, 2021).

In 2014, 14 hotels were operating in the Gusar tourism-recreation zone for the overnight stay of tourists, and most of them were concentrated in the city of Gusar. The number of rooms in the hotels is 991 rooms, and the one-time capacity is 2289 places. If we compare the years 2014-2020, we will see that growth has been recorded in all areas. However, this trend has changed in some years. Thus, in 2014-2017, the number of hotels, the number of rooms in them, and the one-time capacity increased, and in 2018, it decreased, and in 2018-2020, an increase was re-recorded (Table 1).

Table 1. Main indicators of hotels in the Gusar tourism-recreation zone

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Number of hotels, unit	14	17	16	19	17	18	18
Number of rooms in hotels	434	770	910	984	981	991	991
The one-time capacity of hotels, place	961	1625	1721	2352	2253	2289	2289
Number of overnight stays in hotels, person-night	28452	37625	70495	101581	107496	94547	54651
Number of citizens of the country	25341	32067	50223	65040	41163	56412	29143
Number of foreigners	3111	5558	20272	36541	66333	38135	25508

Source: owner elaboration

Despite the changing trend, the increase in the number of overnight stays in hotels has been noticeable every year, reaching 107,496 people in 2018, but the number of overnight stays decreased due to the pandemic in 2019 and 2020 and was 94,547 and 54,651, respectively. Changes in the number of overnights stays in hotels: of nationals and foreign nationals have also been observed over the years. Thus, even though the number of overnight stays in hotels has always been dominated by citizens of the country, this indicator decreased sharply in 2018 (41,163 person-nights) and the number of foreign citizens increased (66,333 person-nights). However, in the following year, the trend returned to its previous state. In 2020, a decrease in the number of overnight stays in hotels occurred both in the number of citizens of the country and in foreign countries.

Regionalization of resort-recreation tourism resources is often carried out based on specialized leading areas of the region. As a result, tourism-recreation indicators are reflected, which can be attributed to the area's socio-cultural and economic-geographical development. Thus, resort-recreation zoning, which reflects only the leading factor characterizing the organization of tourism activity, is in most cases attributed to the science of economics and geography. Considering the existing reserve potential of resort-recreational tourism in the Gusar zone, regionalization is one of the most critical issues. Therefore, when the resort-recreational tourism potential is assessed, similar features of the area or the connection of these features are determined.

In the Gusar zone, the classification and distribution principle of natural resources in the resort-recreational zoning, the characteristics of climate comfort as a tourism resource, the exoticism of landscapes, hydrology, natural monuments, as well as the provision of the material and technical base of tourism, should stand out more. Also, a deeper analysis of the financial, labour and socio-economic resources should be carried out. Established this, the potential of resort-recreational tourism resources of the territory is divided into three zones. The first zone includes areas with higher potential compared to other areas due to the development rate of the tourism sector, the second zone includes areas that are slow from the point of view of ecological tourism and have moderate development potential, and the third zone includes areas with relatively weak development potential despite the presence of tourism opportunities. Although it is possible to develop agro-tourism and rural-tourism in the remaining areas, there is almost no resort-recreational potential here (Figure 1).

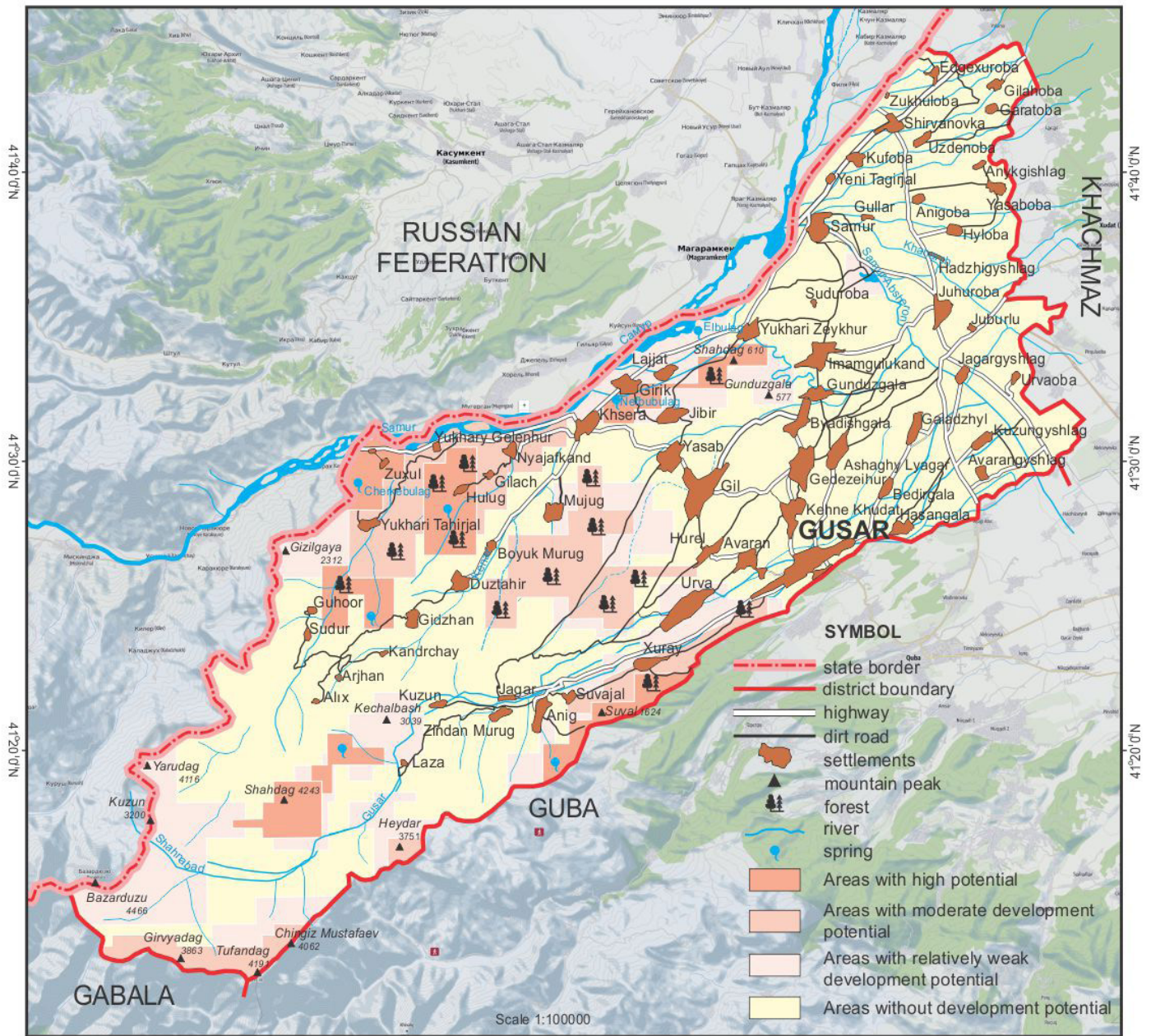


Figure 1. Resort-recreation zoning map in Gusar zone. Source: owner elaboration

Next, the different areas are unequivocally indicated:

1. **Areas with high potential.** These areas include areas with climate conditions more suitable for resort-recreational tourism, areas surrounded by forests, rich landscapes, clean air, rivers, waterfalls and mineral springs. These include Zukhul-Cherkabulag, Sudur-Tahirchay, Yukhari Gelankhur-Khulugbulag, Shahdag-Hefbubulag, Suval-Anigbulag, Shahdag-Kuzunbulag regions.
2. **Areas with moderate development potential.** These areas have pure mountain oases, forests, and mineral waters, where ecological tourism is combined with resort-recreational tourism. These include Tufandag, Girvedag, Chingiz Mustafayev, Heydar peaks and their surrounding areas, and Suvadcal-Khuray, and Duztahir-Mudjug regions.

3. Areas with relatively weak development potential. These are areas with natural and favourable climatic conditions. These include: Shahnabad, Gusarchay, Kizilgaya, Kechalbash, Gunduzgala, Khuray-Urva, Ladjat-Elbulag regions.

Finally, in the investigation a SWOT analysis was also conducted with the above-mentioned resort-recreational zoning within the Gusar tourism-recreation zone (Table 2). This analysis helps to identify the strengths and weaknesses as well as opportunities and threats for the development of the tourism cluster.

Table 2. SWOT analysis of Gusar resort-recreational zoning.

<p>Strengths:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - understanding of the territories distinguished by their geographical position and uniqueness; - the creation of new jobs for the local population to organize tourism services; - to develop small and medium businesses within the zone; - creating a calendar of events for the promotion of tourism (resort-recreational tourism); - protection, preservation and promotion of historical and cultural heritage; - ecological cleanliness of the zone, availability of ecotourism and rural tourism potential.
<p>Weaknesses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - poor promotion of tourism, except for the Shahdag Winter-Summer Tourism Complex; - lack of management and marketing strategy; - operation of most tourist facilities in summer months; - language barrier of guides and lack of qualified staff; - inconsistency between the price and quality of tourism services.
<p>Risks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - high prices and low purchasing power of local tourists; - uneven distribution of tourist flow by season; - the village population does not accept tourists in modern clothes; - lack of initiative at the local level (municipal level).
<p>Possibilities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - availability of natural conditions to eliminate seasonality; - elimination of disproportionality within the zone; - improvement of road and transport infrastructure, creation of new service facilities; - the creation of a new tourism brand; - development of alternative types of tourism.

Source: owner elaboration

CONCLUSIONS

The zoning of resort-recreational tourism resources in the Gusar zone creates an opportunity to choose while closely helping to determine the prospects of the development of the area and the areas that are more attractive to tourists. With this, tourists who visit the region for entertainment, sports, environmental, medical and other purposes can organize their vacations more effectively, having a wide range of information.

As a result of our research, in the future, based on the experience of SWOT analysis, it is possible to analyze the activity of tourist facilities within the Gusar tourism-recreation zone, learn about their work experience and achieve further improvement of mutual relations because the tourism cluster is implemented in a hierarchical order and helps to improve management principles at the last stage.

Based on the zoning and SWOT analysis conducted in the Gusar tourism-recreation zone, there are all kinds of favourable conditions for developing mountain tourism in the area. For this, geomorphological and relief studies of the zone should be carried out, and trips to these areas should be organized by identifying suitable and justified places for hiking or trekking to organize mountain tourism routes.

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