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Sustainable desert tourism in Algeria: Causes of its failure and means of support

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Abstract--Tourism is a social and human phenomenon that has been known to mankind since its existence on the surface of the earth. It has gained significant economic importance due to the economic returns it provides to the concerned state. Desert tourism, as a type of tourism, includes various touristic components that attract tourists. This is particularly true when we talk about desert tourism in Algeria, which is characterized by diverse components, whether it be ancient civilizational relics represented by old castles, climatic diversity, sandy beaches, or rock engravings, among others. However, many obstacles have led to the failure of this sector, despite the policies adopted to ensure its success. Through this research paper, we aim to address the importance of desert tourism in Algeria, which stands out with a distinctive touristic character compared to other touristic areas, and the obstacles that have led to the deterioration of this field, in addition to the efforts exerted by the relevant authorities to make it successful.

Keywords---tourism, desert tourism, tourism obstacles, tourism support programs.

Introduction

Tourism is considered one of the important fields upon which many countries rely to secure their financial resources and their needs for hard currency, especially as it is one of the vital economic sectors that has become an increasingly attractive industry due to the growing role it plays year after year. This is indicated by statistical evidence and economic indicators. Therefore, many

countries have increased their interest in this activity as it is one of the key activities in mobilizing societal resources and creating competitive advantages.

The regional and natural (climatic), civilizational, and cultural diversity in the Algerian desert has contributed to the diversification of its tourism industries and its various and diverse products, represented in different drawings that document historical periods of human civilization, in addition to the peace and tranquility found in an open-air museum where nature displays various paintings of dunes, strangely shaped mountains, etc. However, despite this, there have been many obstacles that prevented the success of the sector in the desert area. Nonetheless, the authorities did not remain idle but rather developed plans to revive this desert tourism in order to sustain it. Therefore, in this research paper, we seek to answer the following question:

- **What are the reasons behind the failure of desert tourism in Algeria, and what are the means of supporting it?**

To answer this question and to better grasp the different aspects of the subject, we have chosen to divide and address it through five main points:

- The theoretical framework of sustainable desert tourism;
- The natural and cultural tourism potentials in the Algerian desert;
- The reasons behind the stagnation of Algerian desert tourism;
- Supporting sustainable desert tourism through the Master Plan for Tourism Development by 2025;
- The components of its success and the requirements for its implementation.

Through these points, we can present a clear picture of what is meant by tourism and desert tourism in order to understand its conceptual framework before tackling the subject. We then study its relationship with sustainable tourism from the social and cultural aspects, etc., and finally address the reasons for its failure as well as the support measures taken by the relevant authorities during the latest five-year plan up to 2025.

First: The Theoretical Framework Of Sustainable Desert Tourism

The first definition of tourism dates back to the German Guyer Freuler in 1905, who defined it as “a modern phenomenon that arises from the growing need for rest, recreation, change of atmosphere, the sensation and appreciation of the beauty of nature, and the feeling of joy and pleasure from staying in areas with a distinctive nature. It is the result of advancements in transportation.”¹

It is also defined as the stay of individuals who do not reside or work permanently in the destination, with their stay lasting for at least one night and at most one year. It includes forms of travel related to profession (work) and treatment (professional tourism and wellness tourism), and it also includes forms of free travel aimed at relaxation and leisure.²

It is further defined as a travel activity aimed at leisure and providing services related to this activity. It also refers to movement from one place to another and

from one time to another for multiple purposes for a period exceeding 24 hours and less than one year. ³

From the previous definitions, the following tourism characteristics can be concluded: ⁴

- It is one of the most important service sectors, which has become a main source of national income in modern economies, as it represents an integrated system of activities.
- The scope of competition in which the tourism sector operates extends beyond the regional scope of a single state; thus, it is affected by changes occurring in the global environment.
- The components of the tourism supply are characterized by extreme scarcity and high sensitivity to changes that occur in other sectors of human activity in society, whether it concerns the natural features that the state possesses, the ancient and modern civilizational heritage, or the contemporary civilizational assets such as basic infrastructure and complementary services.

In conclusion, tourism in the broad and general sense is considered the essential pivotal branch of a country's or a unique region's economy, which exercises control over the development of other sectors and effectively contributes to the formation of the total national (or regional) product.

2- The Importance and Role of Tourism:

Tourism occupies an important position in the global economy and has experienced continuous growth since the end of World War II. Tourism offers several benefits, the most notable of which are: ⁵

- It contributes to providing foreign currency for the state, as existing experiences indicate a high percentage of participation in the formation of state revenues from foreign currency;
- It contributes to the creation of new job opportunities, thus serving as a supporting sector in the fight against unemployment;
- It contributes to increasing national income and improving the balance of payments, not only through the amount spent by tourists and travelers during their trips, but also through what is economically referred to as the "economic multiplier";
- It helps achieve rapprochement and understanding among peoples around the world;
- It aids in the preservation and enhancement of historical monuments.

3- Definition of Desert Tourism

Desert tourism is considered a type of tourism that aims at visiting desert and archaeological areas, exploring natural reserves, and discovering the culture of local communities in these desert regions. It therefore attracts specific categories of tourists who are interested in visiting such areas.

This type of tourism is associated with safari tourism, trekking, observing the movement of sand dunes and desert mountains, as well as watching sunsets. One

of the most distinctive features of this kind of tourism is its high capacity to facilitate interaction between tourists and local residents, making it easy to become acquainted with one another. ⁶

The Algerian legislator defined desert tourism through Law No. 03/01 on sustainable tourism development as: "Any tourist stay in a desert region based on the exploitation of various natural, historical, and cultural potentials of this environment, accompanied by activities related to leisure, entertainment, and exploration." According to this definition, desert tourism varies according to the desires and preferences of each person, ranging from exploratory tourism to recreational tourism and others. ⁷

Desert tourism includes several types, which can be outlined as follows: ⁸

- **Historical and cultural tourism:** Historical monuments are an important factor in attracting tourists, especially when accompanied by entertainment and comfort facilities. This type of tourism mainly attracts the elderly, scholars, intellectuals, and researchers;
- **Climatic tourism:** A distinctive climate is an important factor in attracting tourists to visit a specific region. The desert region is characterized by low rainfall, extremely high temperatures during the day and low temperatures at night. It also has a dry climate with a long season;
- **Nature tourism:** Nature plays an important role in attracting tourists, especially when it features a clean environment, diverse vegetation, and mountains, etc. The desert region is characterized by vast open spaces and towering mountains.

4- Sustainable Desert Tourism

Sustainable desert tourism is a term composed of three concepts: tourism, desert, and sustainability. Here, sustainable tourism is linked to the desert. Therefore, if we are to define sustainable desert tourism, it would mean applying the concept of sustainable tourism to desert regions.

Thus, sustainable desert tourism is "the rational and optimal exploitation of the desert tourism areas that the country abounds in. This exploitation should cover all aspects, representing a meeting point between the needs of tourists and the host region. It meets tourists' needs while preserving the touristic areas of the desert and increases job opportunities for the local community. In addition, it manages all economic, social, natural, and aesthetic resources, maintains the desert's environmental balance, biodiversity, and urban reality, and satisfies the tourists' knowledge-related desires." ⁹

It represents the rational and optimal use of the available desert tourism areas. It is the meeting point between tourists' needs and the preservation of the touristic sites in the desert. It increases job opportunities for the local community and raises their environmental awareness. Moreover, it manages all economic, social, natural, and aesthetic resources and works to maintain the desert environmental balance in order to achieve sustainability. ¹⁰

5- Principles of Implementing Sustainable Desert Tourism

Sustainable desert tourism is based on a set of principles, which are as follows: ¹¹

- The diversity of the Algerian desert's tourism assets has environmental, economic, and historical value and represents one of the pillars of sustainable development;
- The preservation of the Algerian desert's biodiversity is a tool for developing its natural resources in the present and future, in favor of comprehensive desert tourism development plans;
- Biodiversity is part of the natural heritage, and preserving it is a national and international obligation;
- The success of efforts to preserve desert tourism assets depends on scientific studies and tourism monitoring of its internal and external interactions and developments;
- Building national capacities, implementing sustainable development programs for desert tourism, managing it properly, and raising awareness and education about it;
- Activating tourism-related legislation and adhering to relevant international treaties.

6- The Importance of Sustainable Desert Tourism

The importance of desert tourism can be addressed in the following points: ¹²

- It generates significant revenue for the state: Several studies have confirmed that desert tourism represents a promising global niche market, with revenues estimated in the hundreds of millions of dollars as direct spending, in addition to other indirect revenues and the jobs created by this massive market.
- It contributes to boosting the gross national product: The travel and tourism industry has become a major contributor to the gross national product of several countries and a tool for marketing their products and tourist destinations. It is now widely recognized and practiced by both public and private sector institutions, thus significantly contributing to the country's economy and national output.
- It is desirable for a wide segment of tourists: Desert tourism is among the most important types of tourism due to its diversity on one hand, and the strong demand for it on the other hand across all social groups. It has fascinated Arabs in particular through hunting and exploration trips, forming a historical passion. Despite the availability of leisure and entertainment options, they never miss the opportunity to explore and learn about its uniqueness.
- It creates competitive capacity for the region: Tourist areas differ from one another in their natural, historical, or man-made features, making them attractive to various tourists with different interests and preferences. Some areas are distinguished by the beauty of their seas, others by the diversity of their elevations and mountains, others by waterfalls and rare wildlife and trees, etc. These differences reflect each region's uniqueness, which necessitates preserving, improving, and constantly developing them

in order to establish a strong tourism competitive advantage capable of attracting tourists from all over the world.

7- The Role of Desert Tourism in Economic, Social, and Environmental Development

Tourism in desert regions effectively contributes to the economic, social, cultural, and environmental development of these areas through the following: ¹³

- Providing numerous job opportunities for desert youth, due to its reliance on offering services in various fields to tourists, which requires a high labor density in different locations;
- Diversifying national income sources and reducing dependency on oil, as it attracts revenues from incoming tourists and preserves the resources of local tourists by reducing their travel abroad;
- Developing infrastructure in various desert areas, as it contributes to improving connectivity between desert regions and with other areas through the establishment of new road and railway networks and the addition of airline companies;
- Providing a source of individual income for residents of remote desert areas, thereby reducing population migration to non-desert areas;
- Offering promising opportunities for commercial and service businesses for those with limited capital, as most of its activities depend on small and medium-sized enterprises;
- Reducing the outflow of national currency abroad by attracting tourists to internal desert regions instead of overseas tourism, in addition to creating jobs and reducing emigration abroad;
- Preserving the cultural and natural heritage in desert areas, as they are tourism assets that must be protected and sustained for future generations;
- Increasing citizens' awareness and familiarizing them with their country, thus strengthening a sense of belonging and supporting nation-building;
- Creating a positive image of desert countries among other peoples;
- Improving the living standards of desert inhabitants through access to services provided to both tourists and residents.

Second: The Natural And Cultural Tourism Potentials In The Algerian Desert

The Algerian desert is part of the greater African Sahara and is the second-largest desert in the world. It extends over a vast area estimated at 1,987,600 km², thus covering 84% of Algeria's total surface area. Its landscapes vary between fertile and rich oases, sand dunes, rocky plateaus, plains, and stone mountains. In its northeast lies a low area (Chott Melrhir, 31 meters below sea level) where the most important oases are concentrated, followed by the sandy dune regions of the Grand Erg Oriental and the Grand Erg Occidental, with dune heights ranging from 200 to 500 meters. Then comes the plateau area in Tadmaït, and finally, the mountainous region in the southeast and far south, such as the towering Tassili and Hoggar mountains, where Algeria's highest peak is located (Mount Tahat, 3,003 meters).

Its climate is continental, with little rainfall and intense heat. The desert climate gradually transitions starting from the southern slopes of the Saharan Atlas, presenting a unique climatic profile: the northern slopes are forested and snow-covered at the peaks due to the influence of cold, humid marine air, while the southern slopes, facing the desert, are affected by the arid desert climate. Thus, pine and jujube forests coexist with palm oases just 30 km apart.

The Saharan regions have long been home to various tribes for thousands of years and are rich in historical evidence that forms part of the region's preserved memory. They narrate to visitors the successive historical periods and the human civilization that developed there, evident in petrified forests dating back to ancient geological times and in Berber inscriptions that carry coded messages used as means of communication between trade caravans.

The desert was a major transit point linking North Africa with its southern regions. Therefore, it holds immense tourism potential due to the vastness of its land and its diverse natural and cultural richness. In addition to being the richest region in terms of energy-related natural resources, the Algerian desert is also a reservoir of human treasures and heritage. Many of its sites are even classified as heritage of all humanity. Hence, the desert in Algeria offers attractive tourism potential, whether natural such as its geographical location and climate or historical, such as its archaeological landmarks. ¹⁴

Its tourist areas vary according to the diversity of its geographical features and are classified into the following regions:

1- The Premium South-Eastern Tourism Pole (Oases):

This pole includes Ghardaïa, Biskra, and El Oued, covering an area of 160,000 km² with a population of 1.5 million inhabitants. It has a hot desert climate and comprises four areas designated for tourism expansion. It contains 26 hotels with a total accommodation capacity of 2,092 beds across the three provinces. It is home to important tourist landmarks such as the M'zab Valley, the Souf Valley, and the Ziban region, including the Mosque of Uqba ibn Nafi'.
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2- The Hoggar Tourism Pole:

The city of Tamanrasset (Hoggar region) is located in the deep south of the Algerian Sahara, with an area estimated at 557,906 km². It was established as a province under the administrative division of 1974. It comprises 7 districts and 10 municipalities and is located approximately 2,000 km from the capital. It borders the provinces of Ghardaïa and Ouargla to the north, Illizi to the east, Adrar to the west, and the countries of Niger and Mali to the south.

It is characterized by its unique climate and predominantly mountainous terrain. The provincial capital lies at an altitude of 1,400 meters above sea level. The region includes the Hoggar mountain range, which contains the highest peak in Algeria, Mount Tahat Atakor, at 3,303 meters. ¹⁶

It also includes the Tassili of Hoggar. , the region has been administratively divided into three provinces: Tamanrasset, In Salah, and In Guezzam.

3- The Tassili Tourism Pole:

The premium tourism pole of the deep south, "Tassili N'Ajjer," is primarily located in the province of Illizi. It is bordered to the north by Ouargla and Ghardaïa, to the east by Libya, to the west by Tamanrasset, and to the south by Niger and Mali. It extends over an area estimated at approximately 284,618 km² and is home to about 40,000 inhabitants.

It is a heritage pole of global significance, renowned for its unique archaeological sites of high cultural value, including rock art shelters protected by the Tassili National Park and listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This makes it a strong asset for genuine tourism offerings that attract significant interest, especially from foreign visitors.

Its natural, cultural, and archaeological wealth represents three key assets that can enable its future development provided that the fragility of the sites, particularly on the Tassili plateau, is taken into consideration during tourism development operations to ensure their protection, preservation, and environmental safeguarding.¹⁷

4- The Cultural Park of Tiout–Gourara–Tidikelt:

Established by Decree No. 08-158 dated May 28, 2008, this park covers an area of 38,740 km² and belongs to the territory of the province of Adrar. It is characterized by the presence of numerous plant species that have adapted to the desert climate, such as acacia, cranka, oleander, wormwood, rosemary, and lavender.

As for the animal species, the region is home primarily to small-sized animals, such as the fennec fox and rodents, in addition to reptiles and birds. The region stands out from other desert territories and oases due to the presence of the "foggara," a highly precise traditional irrigation system. More than 900 foggaras have been recorded, of which 600 are still operational today.

The area is also notable for its large number of Saharan ksour (fortified villages), with between 400 and 500 ksour and oases spread over 400 km in the Touat–Gourara region. It also includes a significant number of prehistoric archaeological sites.

Regarding intangible heritage, the region is home to "Ahellil," a musical and vocal tradition of the Gourara region, which is listed on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list.¹⁸

Third: Reasons Behind The Stagnation Of Algerian Desert Tourism

There are several reasons behind the stagnation of desert tourism in Algeria, which can be summarized as follows:¹⁹

- The ongoing security tensions on the southern and western borders, along with threats from armed groups. Since 2009, tourism in the Sahara has entered a dark tunnel and has remained in a state of decline in recent years, affected by the shocks of wars in neighboring countries.
- The desert tourism season, which usually runs from October to April each year, is no longer what it used to be. During the period between 2000 and 2009, each travel agency alone was able to bring in between 3,000 and 4,000 tourists per season using its own means and without state assistance. Half of these agencies have ceased operations, and those that

remain cannot attract more than 400 tourists for the entire season (six full months).

- Despite the significant efforts made by the Algerian state to promote and develop desert tourism, the reality on the ground confirms a severe lack of accommodation and entertainment facilities in the deep south, which continues to hinder the progress of this vital sector.

Fourth: Supporting Sustainable Desert Tourism Through The Master Plan For Tourism Development – Horizon 2025

Algeria has sought to develop the Master Plan for Tourism Development – Horizon 2025 (SDAT), under the supervision of the Ministry of Spatial Planning and Environment (MATET). It is part of the National Spatial Planning Scheme (SNAT 2025) and serves as the strategic reference framework for tourism policy in Algeria. It is distributed as follows: ²⁰

- **Tourism poles in the North:** Located in the northern part of the country, this includes three premium tourism poles: the premium tourism pole of the Northwest, the premium tourism pole of the Central North, and the Northeast.
- **Tourism poles in the South:** In the northern part of the southern region, there are two premium tourism poles: the premium tourism pole (South-East) – Oases, and the premium tourism pole of the South-West.
- **Tourism poles in the Deep South:** This includes two additional premium tourism poles: the premium tourism pole of the Deep South – Tassili N'Ajjer, and the premium tourism pole of the Deep South – Hoggar. These include the southern provinces of Illizi and Tamanrasset.

The share of desert tourism in the projects of the Master Plan – Horizon 2025 can be summarized as follows:

Table No. (01): Share of Tourism Poles in Hotel Projects and Beds within the Master Plan for Tourism Development – 2025

Projects Under Construction in the Premium Tourism Poles		Number of Hotels and Beds in the Premium Tourism Poles		
Tourism Poles	Number of Projects	Tourism Poles	Number of Hotels	Number of Beds
North-East	23	North-East	86	5965
Central-North	32	Central-North	49	9295
North-West	18	North-West	85	10.146
South-East – Oases	04	South-East – Oases	26	2092
South-West – Touat	02	South-West – Touat	23	1513
Deep South – Hoggar	01	Deep South – Tassili	01	150
-	-	Deep South	04	225
Total	80	-	274	29386

Source: Yahia JAAFARI, Malek ALIANE, Redha BENBOURICHE, Desert Tourism as a Driver of Tourism Development in Algeria, Journal of Strategy and Development, Vol. 10, Special Issue, April 2020, p. 45

From the above table, it is clear that the share of desert tourism, according to the vision of the Master Plan, still lags behind its counterparts in the north, east, and

center in terms of quantity, despite the vastness of the Algerian desert and its uniqueness as a pole with strong tourism attraction potential.

Fifth: Components Of Its Success And Requirements For Its Implementation

1- Success Factors for Desert Tourism in Algeria

The desert tourism sector in Algeria requires the following components: ²¹

- A rich and distinctive desert nature and environment.
- Security, peace of mind, and absolute comfort.
- Advanced and adapted means of transport, along with traffic safety and road security.
- Helpful, kind, and hospitable individuals, and a welcoming and cheerful population.
- The appeal of authentic traditional reception facilities.
- Rich cultural and recreational tourism programs, including:
 - Religious historical landmarks.
 - Human historical landmarks.
 - Unique natural landscapes.
 - Revolutionary and political historical landmarks.
 - Local folklore, literature, and traditional songs.
- Effective and successful satellite tourism advertising.
- A distinctive desert economic infrastructure.
- Professionally experienced, culturally competent, and logistically efficient tourism bodies, institutions, and agencies.

2- Requirements for Activating Sustainable Desert Tourism in Algeria

Tourism development is not a unilateral task assigned solely to the Ministry of Tourism; rather, it is a national responsibility involving multiple ministries and institutions that form interconnected links, all working within the framework of tourism development and its promotion to increase investment. Official tourism bodies collaborate with non-governmental entities and coordinate efforts to achieve tourism development goals and provide all necessary facilities and services to tourists to increase their numbers and attract more of them.

Therefore, the development of the desert tourism industry in particular, and domestic tourism in general, is governed by several considerations that must be taken into account, including the following: ²²

- Training the human resources required by the desert tourism sector so that tourism establishments can fulfill their roles effectively;
- Preserving the authenticity of desert tourism sites, as attracting tourists to these areas relies primarily on the desert climate and nature, in addition to historical or other unique features of the area;
- Properly utilizing the available desert tourism resources, while ensuring flexibility to meet both local and global tourism demand;
- Conducting comprehensive studies to confirm the economic feasibility of proposed desert tourism investments, whether aimed at Algerian or foreign tourists;
- State support for the desert tourism sector by assisting private actors in implementing tourism programs, supported by a comprehensive advertising and marketing strategy;

- Linking desert tourism development plans with broader economic development strategies across other economic sectors to achieve balanced growth, not merely focusing on desert tourism alone;
- Identifying potential issues that may hinder the development of the desert tourism industry and setting alternative plans in case of emergencies;
- Providing a network of hotels suitable for all income levels, with a focus on low-income individuals, as desert tourism is no longer exclusive to the wealthy;
- Raising the standards of cleanliness and tourism services, as both play a crucial role in developing desert tourism. Clean streets, historical sites, oases, and other attractions increase the likelihood that tourists will want to return to those areas.

Conclusion

Algeria possesses vast desert areas rich in various tourism components, whether natural, historical, or cultural, etc. Therefore, the tourism sector is considered promising and capable of contributing to the advancement of the national economy by providing foreign currency and stimulating several other fields and sectors.

However, as observed through this research paper, the sector faces numerous challenges that place it in urgent need of support from the relevant authorities to ensure its development. From this, we concluded a set of findings:

1. Tourism is an important sector that contributes to attracting foreign currency and supporting local development;
2. Algeria has desert resources that qualify it to succeed in the tourism field;
3. Security is one of the main obstacles hindering the success of this sector;
4. There is a deterioration in service coverage in Algerian desert hotels;
5. Algeria is working through implemented programs to ensure the success of the tourism sector.

Based on this study and the results obtained, we propose a set of points that could give a boost to the tourism sector in the Algerian desert:

1. Establishing a space for consultation and cooperation between various actors in the tourism sector to serve as a platform for proposals and effective action to revitalize tourism investment in the region;
2. Supporting desert regions with tourist villages, hotels, and camps designed according to international demand, especially in remote areas with scenic views and archaeological engravings;
3. The need to focus on local potentials and the optimal exploitation of available resources;
4. The need to promote media programs that encourage individuals to preserve the cultural and natural heritage in order to present a better image of the region.

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