

Ecotourism Importance of Sumela Monastery in Trabzon, Turkey

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Abstract: With the developing of the ecotourism concept worldwide, local and foreign tourists, individually and in small groups, wish to be away from the sea-sand-sun trio, in touch with nature and see natural and cultural assets in situ. Ecotourism, which is not limited to a certain season, includes rural and cultural tourism elements and is seen as the most appropriate tourism type that can be developed in natural and cultural areas. Sumela Monastery, also known as the Virgin Mary Monastery, has an important position in our country with its natural and cultural assets. The monastery is within the boundaries of Trabzon province, Maçka district. The site, which is approximately 300 meters above the valley, continues the tradition of building monasteries out of the city, in the forest, near caves and by the banks of waters. In this study, Sumela Monastery is assessed in terms of ecotourism, taking into account the contribution made to the country and consequently to the region in terms of economic input.

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1. Introduction

Ecotourism is the abbreviation for ecological tourism. Ecotourism means a tourism understanding which does not spoil, but preserves the nature. According to the definition of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), ecotourism means travels and visits supporting entertainment, understanding and conserving nature and cultural resources, having a low visitor effect and offering socio-economic benefits to the local population and having environmental responsibility for natural sites (Zaman, 2005). Turkey has a great potential in terms of ecotourism. Ecotourism, one of the tourism types as an alternative to sun-sand-sea tourism offers great advantage to our country and prepares the foundations for our country to become one of the limited countries in this area (Zaman, 2005). Diversifying Sumela Monastery's existing ecotourism and tourism potential and utilisation of it in terms of ecotourism rather than taking it as an archaeological site only will make great contributions to the country and consequently the region as an economic input (Figure 1).

1.1. The History of Virgin Mary (Sumela) Monastery:

Sumela Monastery, in Altındere village of Maçka district of Trabzon province, located on a precipice on the skirts of Karadağ Mountain overlooking Altındere valley, is also known as the "Virgin Mary" among the locals. The monastery was dedicated to Virgin Monastery and it is told that the name "Sumela" comes from the word "melas"

meaning "black". Although it is thought that this name comes from the dark Karadağ Mountain Range where the monastery lies, the word Sumela may also be linked to the black colour of the Virgin Mary illustration here (Canalıoğlu, 1985).

Word has it that the monastery was built by two priests named Barnabas and Sophranios who came from Athens during the reign of Byzantine Emperor Heodosius I (375-395) and repaired by General Belisarios in the 6th century upon Emperor Justinianus' command that the monastery be repaired and expanded. The monastery gained importance during the reign of Alexios III (1349-1390) and revenues were secured with ordinances (Tüfek, 1978; Şen, 1994).



Figure 1. General view of Sumela Monastery

Likewise, in the times of Manuel III, the son of Alexios III, and succeeding princes, Sumela prospered with new ordinances. Following domination of the Eastern Black Sea shores by the Turks, Ottoman sultans, as in the case of many monasteries, protected the rights of Sumela as well and granted some privileges. A many sections of Sumela Monastery were renovated in the 18th century and some walls were ornamented with frescoes. The monastery gained a magnificent view in the 19th century with the addition of big buildings, which marked its richest and brightest period. The monastery was finalised in this period and became a place visited by numerous foreign travellers and they wrote about it. During the Russian occupation of Trabzon in 1916-1918, the monastery was seized and it was totally evacuated after 1923 (Trabzon Provincial Culture and Tourism Directorate).



Figure 2. Former view of Sumela Monastery (ruined and wrecked) (habule.com; akgeziler.com)



Figure 3. Sumela Monastery today (fotokritik.com)



Figure 4. Trabzon-Sumela Monastery Access Map (www.turkeyarena.com)

Rich cultural heritage of various civilizations that survived to date constitutes a significant potential for Trabzon tourism. The work to develop winter tourism in the region has started to yield results. Along with culture tourism, nature tourism and winter tourism, Trabzon city hosts many national and international congresses and has become a city providing effective services in terms of trade, education and health in the region as well (Zaman, 2005). Altındere National Park, on the transport network of Sumela Monastery, plateau cities and natural beauties are just some of the natural wonders of the city. Trabzon has been a settlement since 2000 B.C. and great numbers of Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman and Republic works have survived to date. The most important of these is the Sumela (Virgin Mary) Monastery, a history and nature monument (Şen, 1994; Eyice, 1966).

2. Material and Method

Sumela Monastery is located within the boundaries of Altındere village of Maçka district of Trabzon province. The monastery is 17 km to Maçka and 47 km to Trabzon city (Figure 2). Its altitude is 1250 meters (Tandoğan, 1972). The monastery is 300 meters above Altındere Valley. It is the property of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and is operated by the General Directorate of Foundations.



Figure 5. Aerial view of Sumela Monastery (www.goztepeliler.com)

3. Research Findings

3.1. Sumela Monastery Access Route

Access to Sumela Monastery is via two ways. The first way, mostly used by foreign tourists, is the 1200 meter long footway from the base of the valley. This footway has a dense forest cover. Along the way, information labels are put on trees showing their Latin and Turkish names. This way, visitors climbing the footway have the chance to learn the names of various tree species around (Zaman, 2005; Trabzon Provincial Culture and Tourism Directorate). The second way is the 3 kilometre road opened in 2001. Tourists who use this route reach up to approximately 250-300 meters near the monastery. The road is asphalt in some parts and gravel in other parts. At the end of the road, a straight footway readily takes you to the monastery. However, as the slope on the side of the footway that overlooks the valley base is too much, there is a risk of accident. For this reason, it may possible to make the footway more secure with fences well-matched with the natural environment. It is not possible for large vehicles to use this road as the road used to reach the monastery is narrow and inclined. That's why, some of the visitors rent minibuses to reach the monastery (Doğanay, 2004).

3.2. Main sections of Sumela Monastery

Main sections of the monastery are the bedrock church, some chapels, the kitchen, student rooms, the guest house, the library and the holy water. All these structures are built on a quite wide area. At the entrance of the monastery, a big aqueduct that seems to bring water to the monastery leans towards the slope (Eyice, 1966). A narrow and long staircase takes you to the gateway of the monastery and guard rooms are located on the sides of the gateway (Figure 9). From here, another staircase takes you to the inner court. On the left, in front of the cave which is the base of the monastery and which was turned into a church, there are various monastery buildings (Eyice,

1966; Koç et al., 2004). There is the library on the right side. Again on the right, the section with the big balcony that covers the front of the slope was used for priest rooms and guest rooms and dates back to as early as 1860.



Figure 6. General view of the monastery (tarihiyerler.site90.net)



Figure 7. Inside of monastery (The chapel) (karadenizgezi.com)

The frescoes in the chapel date back to the early 18th century and three layers made in three different periods are seen. The frescoes of the lowest layer are of superior nature. The frescoes in Sumela Monastery were removed in patches and look quite dilapidated and the main topics covered are scenes from the Bible and illustrations from the lives of Jesus Christ and Virgin Mary (Figure 13). In the cave church, on the wall adjacent to the courtyard, frescoes from the period of Alexios III were also found. However, today there is not even a single trace from these portraits (karadenizgezi.net). Outside, underneath the falling coating of a big judgement day scene drawn on the surface of the rock and only upper bands of which survive today, other scenes are revealed (Figure 12).

On the wall of a small chapel on which a dragon and two riding saints (Georgios and Demetrios) are

illustrated, underneath the top layer, it was found that three more layers of illustrations also exist. As a matter of fact, on the lowest layer, a figure in emperor's clothes with a diadem; above it, another figure with a diadem; and above it metamorphosis, that is Jesus Christ changing his appearance are illustrated. Sumela Monastery's old but equally valuable frescoes are also found on lower layers where the coatings have not totally fallen (www.karadenizgezi.net).

3.3. Characteristics of the Natural Environment around Sumela Monastery

The area where Sumela Monastery is located, as in all the Eastern Black Sea Region, has a dense forest formation due to favourable precipitation and temperature conditions. This is one of the main reasons for the Altundere Valley hosting the monastery is declared a National Park site. The park site is around 4800 hectares, 901 hectares of which are forests. In 1981, Sumela Monastery was declared a natural site. The species within the national park site are abundant. The species which are most commonly seen in the area are listed in Table 1 (Menteş, 1992; İnandık, 1969).

3.4. Economic Assessment of Sumela Monastery

Sumela Monastery built within the forest, in a geographical location quite steep and green, is a touristic attraction with its magnificent landscape. Therefore, it was opened for tourism purposes in 1972. Paid visits against receipt were first started in 1986. In 1973, the year Sumela Monastery was opened to tourism, 8000 foreign, 6000 local, a total of 14000 visitors visited the monastery. The total revenue in 1986, the year paid entrance was started, was 22.275 TL. In 2004, there were 14.963 foreign, 148.003 local visitors and the total revenue was 211,257 TL. As of 1972, excluding some exceptions such as 1979, there were significant increases in both local and foreign tourist numbers. Undoubtedly, the visitor numbers were low in 1979 because of the political turmoil Turkey was in (Canalioğlu, 1985). Likewise, the fall in especially foreign tourist numbers in 1990-1991 compared to the previous year was due to the negative effect of the Gulf War on Turkey's tourism (Table 2). The high rates of inflation seen in Turkey for approximately 30 years led to denomination of some economic values in billions, trillions and even quadrillions, figures with a lot of zeros created problems in cashier transactions in the first place and in accounting and statistics records, data processing programmes and payment systems.



Figure 8. The library section (forokritik.com)



Figure 9. Inside (Entrance to the guard rooms) (gencyolcu.com)



Figure 10. Holy chapel outside view (myturkeytravel.com)

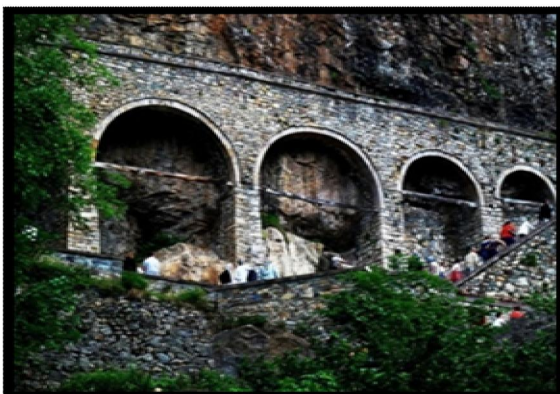


Figure 11. Aqueduct (forokritik.com)



Figure 13. Virgin Mary frescoes (karadenizgezi.net)



Figure 12. The judgement day frescoes (trabzongold.com)

In this framework, pursuant to the “Act No 5083 on the Currency of the Republic of Turkey” promulgated on the Official Journal of 31 January 2004, six zeros were removed from Turkish Lira and the New TL banknotes and coins were issued on 1 January 2005, which marked the completion of the first stage of the monetary reform. The dollar exchange rates in table are given according to the currency (TL) in the years 1990-2004 and the New Turkish Lira in 2005 (Table 2).

Table 1. Some plant species which are most commonly seen in the national park (Menteş,1992)

Latin Name	English Name	Latin Name	English Name
<i>Acer cappadocicum</i>	Cappadocian maple	<i>Festuca ovina</i>	Sheep fescue
<i>Acer campestre</i>	Field maple	<i>Juglans regia</i>	Common walnut
<i>Acer platanoides</i>	Norway maple	<i>Laurus cerasus officinalis</i>	Cherry laurel
<i>Abies nordmanniana</i>	Nordmann fir	<i>Nardus stricta</i>	Mat grass
<i>Agrostis taldurenuis</i>	Bentgrass	<i>Picea orientalis</i>	Oriental spruce
<i>Alnus barbata</i>	Beard alder	<i>Populus tremula</i>	Quaking aspen
<i>Betula litwinowii</i>	Birch	<i>Rhododendron luteum</i>	Yellow azalea
<i>Carpinus betulus</i>	Common hornbeam	<i>Rhododendron ponticum</i>	Common rhododendron
<i>Cestaneasativa</i>	Sweet chestnut	<i>Tilia rubra</i>	Red stem lime
<i>Corylus avellana</i>	Common hazel	<i>Trisetum hygroides</i>	
<i>Fagus orientalis</i>	Oriental beech	<i>Trisetum hygropurpureum</i>	Clover varieties
		<i>Ulmus glabra</i>	Wych elm

Table 2. Dollar Exchange Rates in Years 1990-2012

Year	Dollar Exc. Rate	Year	Dollar Exc. Rate
1990	0.02,607	2001	1.231,84
1991	0.04,169	2002	1.512,18
1992	0.06,887	2003	1.502,84
1993	0.010,986	2004	1.347,47
1994	0.029,704	2005	1.436,50
1995	0.046,604	2006	1.306,57
1996	0.081,60	2007	1.305,68
1997	0.151,429	2009	1.554,02
1998	0.260,040	2010	1.505,82
1999	0.420,618	2011	1.680,54
2000	0.627,033	2012	1.800,41

Table 3. Sumela Ruins 1987-2012 Visitor Statistics (Trabzon Provincial Culture and Tourism Directorate)

Year	Number of local tourists	Number of foreign tourists	Total number of tourists	Revenue (TL)
1990	29813	25920	7127	253,05
1991	45064	10486	8521	399,03
1992	53384	12311	8675	219,600
1993	45436	10331	6656	250,92
1994	42252	8375	5685	650,52
1995	38085	6366	2944	1,460,51
1996	49969	7581	2043	3,365,25
1997	60122	7943	4042	8,236,55
1998	31482	3172	4381	12,956,00
1999	34449	7505	6066	14,852,50
2000	60018	13754	8820	60,547,50
2001	84184	16147	12015	78,190,00
2002	113.978	20.403	130.481	109,150,00
2003	116.081	22.279	138.360	165,520,00
2004	148.003	14.963	162.966	211,257,00
2005	157.827	18.560	176.387	280.531.00
2006	131.041	27.431	158.472	290.326,00
2007	175.301	17.240	192.541	373,535,00
2008	174.532	19.977	194.500	483.590,00
2009	215.622	21.415	237.037	847.750,00
2010	374.432	29.271	403.703	1.266.430,00
2011	191.525	29.651	221.176	1.082,328.00
2012	210.420	28.234	238.654	1.190.420.00

From 1986 to 2001, the highest number of local tourists is seen in 2001 with 84.184 visitors. The year when the foreign tourists visited most is 1989, where the year the least foreign visitors are seen is 1998 with 3172 visitors. In 2010, Sumela hosted 374.432 local and 29.271 foreign tourists, where in 2011, it was 191.525 for local tourists and 29.651 for foreign tourists. The revenue in 2010 was 1.266.430,00 TL, whereas it was 1.082,238.00TL in 2011. From these figures, it is seen that the revenues increase with the increasing numbers of tourists.



Figure 14. Local and foreign tourist numbers in 2002-2012 for Sumela Monastery

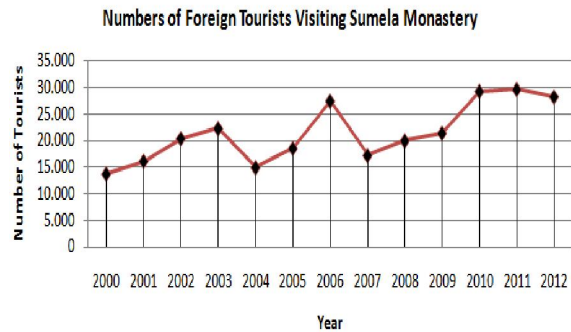


Figure 15. Numbers of Foreign Tourists Visiting Sumela Monastery by Year

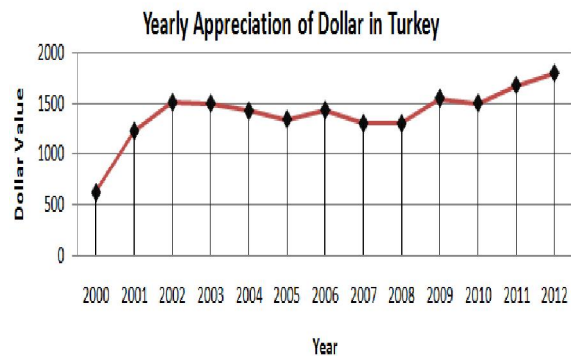


Figure 16. Numbers of Foreign Tourists and Yearly Appreciation of Dollar

In Figure 15, it is seen that our currency continually depreciates due to the economic crises in our country. Dollar appreciated 100 % due to the economic crisis in 2000. While it is expected that depreciation in Turkish Lira will make Turkey more attractive for tourists, it is observed that the increases in the number of incoming tourists are lower than expected. This stems from the deadlocks in domestic politics (instabilities) and, consequently, the lack of confidence of tourists in the country (Figure 14).

The highest numbers of visitors are seen in 2006 due to completion of the restoration of Sumela Monastery in that year. In addition, another increase in tourist numbers is seen in 2010 due to performance of the first religious services. It was found out that the tradesmen in the Sumela site made 31 % more revenues in the religious service season (year 2010) compared to previous years (haber61.net). This continued in 2012 in terms of higher revenues despite the lack of expected increase in tourist numbers. In 2003, US intervention to Iraq considerably affected the domestic agenda in Turkey. The turmoil in the political arena reflected to the tourist numbers in Sumela as decreases in the years 2003-2004. Although Sumela Monastery was restored in 2006, there was not any expected increase in tourist numbers in the following years. On the contrary, decreases in tourist

numbers were seen. In brief, the continued war on Iraq, the fear of diseases transmitted from different countries such as the epidemic avian flu, etc. have negatively affected the tourist numbers in the years following 2006 (iktisat.wordpress.com).

4. Conclusion and Suggestions

Due to the ever changing tourism concept, there is, though less, a trend towards getting away from conventional tourism centers that have reached a somewhat saturation limit. It must not be neglected that particularly foreign tourists are increasingly interested in areas with unspoiled nature in recent years. For this reason, when reviving tourism activity in the region, care must be taken that this is in harmony with the natural environment. Unplanned housing must be avoided and activities must be undertaken for housing in harmony with the nature. Therefore, changes in both the tourist profile and consumption patterns lead to new concepts as ecotourism and sustainable tourism foreseeing utilization of the natural and cultural environment in conservation-utilization balance.

Sumela Monastery has an important potential for ecotourism as the monastery site is an extraordinarily beautiful piece of nature, for historical tourism as it has a history dating back to the 4th century B.C. and for faith tourism as it is an open air museum for Christianity. Ecotourism, on one side makes great contribution to the country and therefore the region as economic input and, on the other side, ensures that tourism spans the whole year. Nevertheless, this magnificent piece of history has a lot of problems due to both the natural environment and the human environment. Transportation is one of the most important factors in ecotourism. Access to the site increases both the number of tourists and the commercial potential of the site. The 3 kilometre road on the Sumela Monastery route must be extended with nature considerations in mind (Zaman, 2005).

Predominantly, the visitors of Sumela Monastery are the locals of Trabzon and local day trippers coming from neighboring cities. The monastery, one of the centers in Anatolia of the Orthodox sect of Christianity, would undoubtedly receive many more foreign tourists if new strategies are developed to increase foreign tourist numbers and promotion activities are undertaken. Also, brochures introducing the monastery and the environs must be prepared for foreign tourists. Taking into consideration the countries and languages of foreign tourists, these brochures must be printed in English, German, French, Arabic, Russian and Japanese and handed out to the tourists. International promotion must be given higher importance.

Sumela Monastery's one of the most important problems is its position. As it is on a highly dip slope ground, frequent landslide and falling rocks are inevitable. Repairs are made in the area with steel nets and sprinkled cement method. Along with this, the applications in the restorations which took 16 years with a cost of 1.5 million Liras have unfortunately failed to reflect its essence. The original grass ground of the monastery was replaced with concrete and historical fabric was spoiled. On the doors of the rooms of the monastery, unauthentic knobs were used. The outer facades of the guest house and the student rooms were plastered inconsistent with the original structure. White stones were brought from Bayburt and Ankara instead of stones found in the region. The works in Sumela were more of construction works than restoration works. Along with this, the main section of the monastery was covered with an upper roof, the frescoes in the Bedrock Church were cleaned and reinforced. The footway was extended without spoiling nature and rearranged for the tourists to reach the site easily and safely.

In short, utilization of Sumela Monastery in terms of ecotourism will bring significant economic benefits to the region and, consequently, the country and positively affect unemployment and give the foreign tourists an image of a love and tolerance country. Thus, with these people having positive attitudes in the name of love and peace, world peace will also be served. Furthermore, conserving this cultural asset and passing it on to future generations within the tourism concept is extremely important for the region and the country. For the next generations, this importance is not only an economic return, but rather a cultural faith and responsibility.

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