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HISTORICAL CITIES AS DESTINATIONS OF URBAN ECOTOURISM; CASE OF BILECIK, TURKEY

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ABSTRACT

In today's tourism sector where natural, cultural and historical values are used as sources, ecotourism is recognized as one of the sustainable approaches, coming into open as an alternative method against the negative impacts on the environment in particular. Ecotourism is characterized as sustainable tourism within the scope of making use of the natural and cultural resources, as well as being oriented at the nature itself. Ensuring the sustainability of natural resources, while also enabling the economic development of the locals and protecting the socio-cultural values, ecotourism is a nature-based tourism activity bearing the liability of protecting the ecological system and handing the same down to the next generations. With its mountain ecosystems, forest landscapes, wild life and plantal diversity, geomorphological structures, tablelands, canyons, waterfalls, rural architecture that is harmony with the nature, cultural and history and structures of the villages and temperate climate, Bilecik provides the tourism opportunity for various nature-oriented events and activities. In the study, SWOT analysis ad questionnaire forms were used for examining the natural, historical and cultural values of the research area within the scope of ecotourism. Conducted on the locals and visitors is to form an opinion on the relation between environment and tourism, the main objective of the questionnaire forms is to analyze the recreational and touristic activities, experiences of the locals and visitors, and accordingly their effects on the environment. Additionally, it is aimed at set forth the attitudes towards the development of tourism and the protection of environment. In line with the findings obtained, it is suggested to analyze Bilecik in terms of ecotourism after carrying out researches on its natural and cultural characteristics, as well as developing alternative tourism activities.

Key words: Ecotourism, Historical towns, natural landscape, cultural landscape

1. ECOTOURISM

Ecotourism is both expanding and improving the link between tourism and conservation. It is based on the idea of using tourism to strengthen conservation while deepening its sustainability criteria and vice versa. It emerged in the late 1980s, in the dawn of sustainable development (Stronza et al. 2019). Ceballos-Lascurain is widely known for crafting the earliest definition of ecotourism. According to Ceballos-Lascurain (1987) ecotourism means: Traveling to relatively unspoiled or uncontaminated natural areas with a specific purpose, to study, admire and enjoy the landscape and wild plants and animals and the existing cultural manifestations found in these areas (Wondirad et al. 2020). According to the definition of the International Union for the Conservation Nature, ecotourism is environmentally responsible travel and visit to the unspoiled natural areas that support the conservation by understanding nature and cultural resources, have low visitor impact and provide socio-economic benefits to the local community. The International Ecotourism Society TIES has defined "ecotourism" as a travel nature conscious that protect the environment and protect the well-being of the local people (Kurdoğlu, 2001). Considering these definitions, ecotourism can be summarized as preserving natural and cultural values, and opening them to tourism. In the concept of ecotourism, terms such as green tourism, alternative tourism, nature tourism, wild tourism, adventure tourism, cultural tourism are used.

Ecotourism targets the use of traditional architecture and local resources, often in small groups, in small family-run facilities. Ecotourism, if implemented properly, is a tool that can create resources for the protection of sensitive ecosystems and socio-economic development of the population living in and around these regions. Considering the poverty of the people living in villages in the mountainous and forest areas with significant ecotourism potential, ecotourism can be considered as a factor that can reduce the imbalance between social classes (Altıparmak, 2002). Ecotourism provides the best solution to long-term needs to preserve and enhance

local natural and cultural diversity, benefiting the environment, society, culture and economy of attractions and local communities. (Tseng et al. 2019).

2. DEVELOPMENT OF ECOTOURISM IN TURKEY

Ecotourism is a sustainable form of tourism based on natural resources. It focuses primarily on experiencing and learning the nature, landscape, flora, fauna and habitat as well as cultural artifacts in the region (Kiper 2013). Ecotourism, which is now carried out with the aim of exploring in the world, in recent years has also come to the agenda in Turkey, but it is considered only as highland tourism. However, ecotourism, which should be approached as a whole, is an activity that includes social and cultural activities and includes many activities in wide range. Ministry of Tourism approaches ecotourism under the titles such as; tableland tourism, ornithology (bird watching) tourism, photo safari, river sports (canoe-rafting), agro-tourism, botanical (herborization) tourism, bicycle tours, horseback hiking, camper van tourism, cave tourism, mountain tourism and trekking (Özkan, 2005).

Tourism activities carried out in Turkey are particularly intensified among Aegean and Mediterranean coasts in the scope of mass tourism. Tourism in Turkey is mostly concentrated on coastal tourism and archeological site tourism, but the planning and the implementation of these plans have not reached the desired level of efficiency. Thus, mass tourism which concentrated on coastal tourism and archeological site tourism could not realize the desired level of protection of nature and environment. Some tourism activities carried out in the field of ecotourism in Turkey (Çelik, 2015):

- ✓ River sports (canoe-rafting),
- ✓ Trekking, hiking
- ✓ Horseback trekking,
- ✓ Bicycle tours,
- ✓ Cave tourism,
- ✓ Amateur fishing,
- ✓ Bird watching (ornithology),
- ✓ Botanical (herborization),
- ✓ National parks,
- ✓ Tableland tourism,
- ✓ Silk Road tourism,
- ✓ Faith tourism

3. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF BILECIK PROVINCE

According to the Bilecik Municipality 2015-2019 Strategic Plan and historical sources, Bilecik is located in the general history of the Bithynia region in Antiquity. The known history of the Bithynia region started with Thynler one of the Thracian tribes living here in the 1950s BC. The region was later ruled by Egypt, Hittite, Phrygian, Cimmerian, Lydian, Persian, Macedonian, Bithynian Kingdom, Roman Empire, Byzantine Empire and Ottoman Empire. The first name of Bilecik is Belekoma. Bilecik, which has witnessed the civilization and sovereignty of many tribes in history, is the place where Kayı (Kai) Tribe came from Central Asia with 400 tents and was the foundation of the Ottoman Empire in Söğüt (Bilecik Belediyesi 2015-2019 Stratejik Planı).

In addition to the fact that the history of the province dates back to very old times and was the place the Ottoman Empire was founded, it also played an important role in the foundation of the Republic of Turkey with its hard struggles and victories in the War of Independence. The city of Bilecik has many archaeological and historical values and these cultural properties are generally built in the Ottoman period, mosques, tombs, inns, baths, examples of civil architecture, imarets and similar structures.

4. MATERIAL AND METHOD

The main material of the research is the city of Bilecik. The most important features of the city reflected from its cultural heritage to date are its historical and cultural values, and its natural environment. These features are the main material that allows the cultural landscape texture of the city to be shaped. Within the scope of the research, it is examined that how can the natural and human potentials of the region be evaluated in terms of alternative tourism activities. Based on the principles of ecotourism, suggestions have been developed in order to highlight the natural and cultural potentials that can be evaluated in terms of tourism in the region and to ensure the sustainable use of these assets.

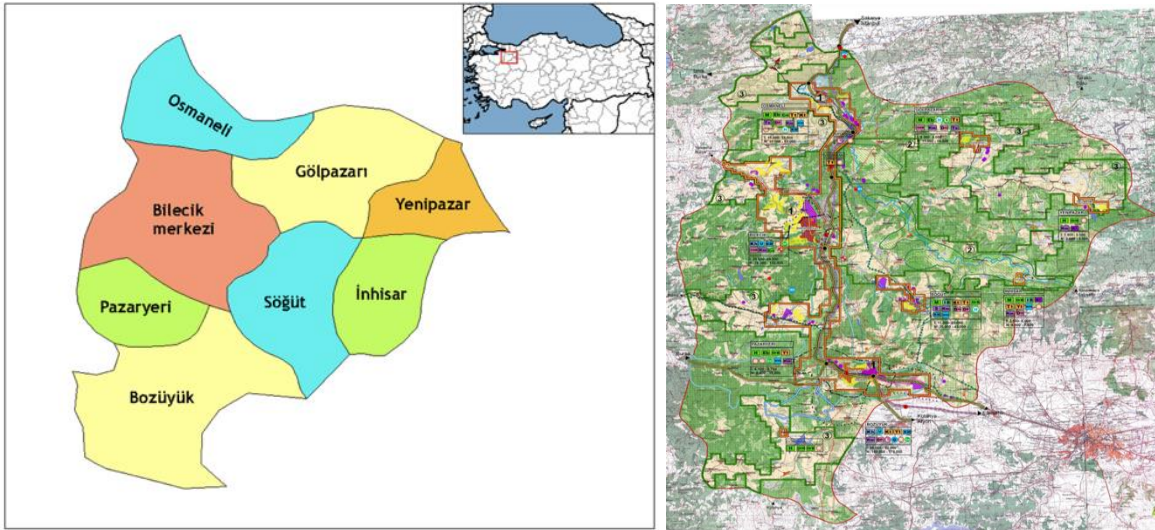


Figure 1. Bilecik Province Map (Göker, 2019)

5. SWOT ANALYSIS ON FIELD STUDIES

Spatial characteristics, recreational usage possibilities, cultural resource values and inventory of the problems of Bilecik city were examined and the cultural landscape values of the area were evaluated by SWOT analysis in line with the field studies. These elements; history, archeology, local architecture, handicrafts, religious places, festivals, environmental issues, monumental objects and areas that need to be preserved were examined (Table 1).

Table 1. SWOT analysis results (Prepared by Author)

SWOT ANALYSIS OF THE CITY OF BİLECİK	
STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Wetlands ✓ Suitable for creating camping areas around ponds ✓ Archeological sites ✓ Natural parks are suitable for camping ✓ Being away from city pollution and noise due to being away from the city ✓ Presence of protected areas in the city and its immediate surroundings ✓ Presence of historical buildings and sites in the city and its immediate surrounding ✓ Presence of publicity and icons for historical and archeological sites in the city ✓ Traditional events ✓ Various religious and cultural places 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Hydroelectric power plants ✓ Insufficient potentialities and services for ecotourism ✓ Lacking or insufficient accommodation facilities in natural parks ✓ Insufficient measures for areas to be protected ✓ Not being benefited from historical and cultural sources recreationally ✓ New settlement areas to put pressure on traditional urban fabric ✓ Unused religious places from different religions ✓ Insufficient green spaces and their bad aesthetics ✓ Recreation areas are inadequate ✓ Inadequate number and quality of parks and sports areas in the neighborhood scale
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The city has easy access and transportation ✓ Fishing can be done due to the lakes and ponds in the natural parks. ✓ There are some regions in the city whose historical-cultural texture is preserved. ✓ Historical sites constantly have visitors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Pollution of ponds and lakes ✓ Housing is threatening wetlands ✓ Uncontrolled use of culturally rich areas ✓ Irregular and unplanned urbanization ✓ Difficulty in renewing and expanding historic streets in the city center ✓ Religious structures lose their original texture
SOCIOECONOMY- HANDCRAFTS- EDUCATION	
STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Ceramics factory etc. in immediate surrounding ✓ Mining sites ✓ Local resources creating potential for tourism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Difficulty on creating new employment ✓ Inadequate public transportation system ✓ Insufficient design or projects that facilitate urban life for the disabled

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ University provides cultural diversity ✓ Continuous development of the university 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Lack of publicity for the city ✓ Badly planned aesthetics and designed spaces and constructions ✓ Insufficiency of historical and cultural organizations and lack of education on these areas ✓ Lack or inadequacy of local markets
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ There are some regions in the city whose historical-cultural texture is preserved ✓ Continuous visitors at historical sites ✓ Mass of people are using historical and religious places ✓ Potential for ecotourism ✓ Festivals and artistic events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Uncontrolled use of culturally rich areas ✓ Irregular and unplanned housing ✓ Difficulty in renewing and expanding historic streets in the city center ✓ Religious places lose their original texture ✓ Limited education opportunities in rural areas

In determining the ecotourism potential of the study area, questions about recreational areas, vegetation, picnic areas, cultural and natural places, tourism opportunities were asked and analyzes were made. In the survey questions, Tourism Activities were classified in three groups and analyzed.

✓ **Hiking**

Hikings are held in Bilecik Province and its districts and there are promenade areas open for improvement. In this context, information's about sample trekking routes, altitude of the walking area, walking distance and slope were relayed.

✓ **Bicycle Tourism Routes**

Bicycle tourism is a low-cost tourism type that contributes socially, environmentally and economically for participants and local people. The economic contributions of bicycle tourism, usually done in rural areas, are seen on a very local scale.

Bicycle activities, known as a type of tourism and a recreational activity, also differ within themselves. Bicycle tourism applications are described under two headings as hard and soft. Accordingly, mountain biking is a harsh adventure activity with high risk, physical and mental strain, requiring technical competence and carried out in remote, unusual terrain. Calm bicycle tourism can be diversified as using hobby bicycles, recreational tours in nature or commercial tours organized by small businesses. It is recommended that cycling activities should be handled in more detail in five sections: independent cycling tourists, recreational cyclist, participant events, competitor cyclist tourist and passive participation as spectators. In parallel with the type of event, cycling experiences are getting more complicated (Aşan & Kozan, 2015).

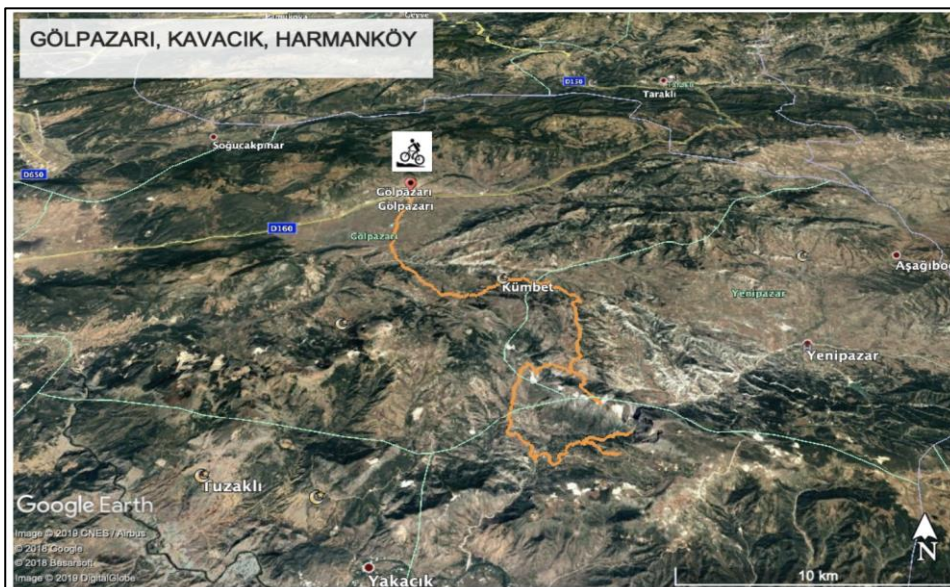


Figure 2. Bike Route Example (Earth pro, 2021)

✓ Camping and Picnic

Due to the natural values of the Bilecik province, it is an important reason for preference for visitors traveling by car and caravan. However, there are very simple camping sites in the region, their numbers and level of services are not sufficient. Among the camping areas in the region; we can give examples Bilecik Pelitözü pond, Bozca Armut Lake Camping Area, Harmankaya Canyon Camping Area, Kurtköy Camping Area, Küçükemalî Camping Area, Göl pazarı Kurşunlu village camping area.



Figure 3. Camping and Picnic Areas (Original, 2019)

✓ Faith Tourism

Emirler Mosque, Şeyh Edebalî Mausoleum, Orhangazi Mosque, Hamidiye Mosque in Söğüt district, Ertuğrul Gazi Mausoleum, Dursun Fakhî Mausoleum in the town of Bilecik, the Kasımpaşa Mosque in the Bozüyük district and the Rüstem Paşa Mosque in the Osmaneli district and the Hagios Georgios (Aya Yorgi) church, these are some of the important examples of religious architecture.

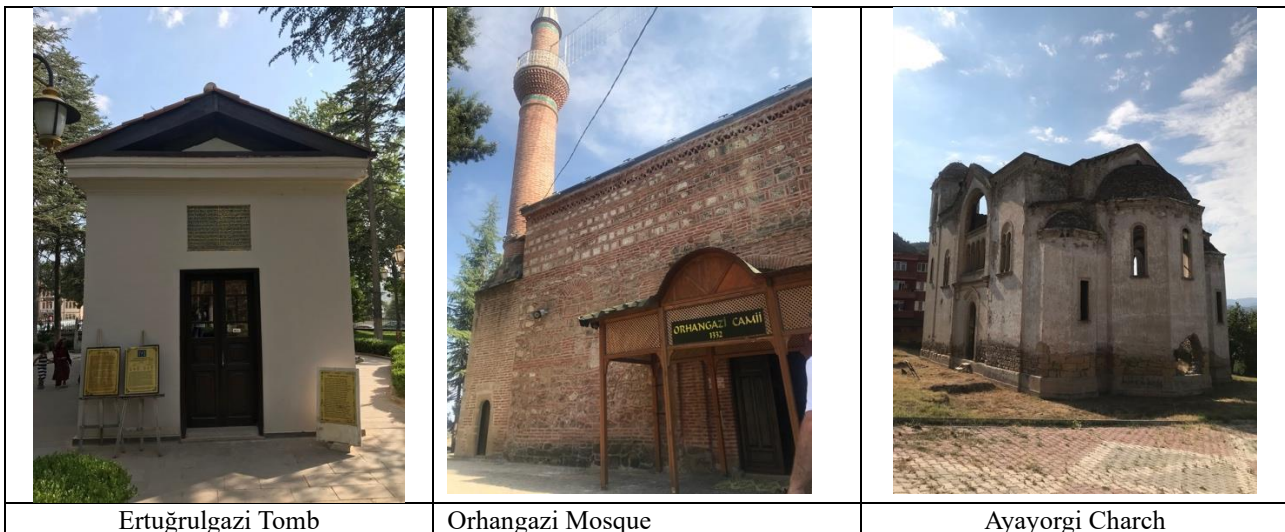


Figure 4. Faith Tourism (Original, 2019)

✓ Traditional Food Culture

Food culture in Bilecik city, its districts and villages is very rich, and local foods made with natural products are important symbols that make up the cultural infrastructure. Organic products and agricultural products are grown in many villages and they protect the culture of local tastes and local flavors left by their ancestors, without the use of pesticides, chemical fertilizers, hybrid seeds especially by Kurşunlu Village Women Producers.

✓ Handicraft and Gift Sales

Souvenir shopping is the most popular activity of tourists and it is in the most important spending category in accommodation and touristic visits. Handicrafts and souvenirs, which are an important source of income for the regional economy, carry special and symbolic travel memories for tourists. According to the information obtained from the portal of the Ministry of Culture; “Kınık Pottery, which is made in Kınık village of Pazaryeri district, has an important place in our ceramic handmade crafts. Thanks to the famous ceramic master Şakir

AĞA, who migrated from Bulgaria in the beginning of the last century, Kınık villagers, who have met with ceramic making, have been performing this art for 120 years in 45-50 workshops". There are souvenir sales places in Bilecik provinces and districts, but in the field-survey studies carried out within the scope of the research, it was found that the sales of handicrafts and souvenirs were not sufficient.



Kınık Village, Pottery Workshop

Söğüt, Souvenir Sale

Figure 5. Handicraft and Gift Sales (Original, 2019)

6. RESULT

Bilecik; It has an important geographic location with its proximity to big cities such as Ankara, Istanbul, Bursa and Eskişehir. For this reason, ecotourism strategies to be developed in Bilecik constitute an important tourism potential that will create development with people from the surrounding cities rather than a tourism activity fed by the people living in Bilecik. For this reason, ecological tourism activities will be integrated with agro tourism and nature tourism, allowing multiple activities and responding to different expectations.

It should be given importance to realize ecotourism activities in Bilecik provinces and districts due to the favorable views of the local people towards ecotourism activities for the purpose of economic development, favorable climate and geographical conditions, and presence of natural parks, forests, tablelands, lakes and ponds. Accordingly, "Ecotourism Action Programs" should be prepared for each activity in order to implement and develop social, cultural, natural, sportive and recreational activities within the scope of ecotourism in the region. The action plans to be prepared should be integrated into the tourism planning of the region and brought into a leading position.

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