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## Evaluation of the Rural Tourism Potential of a Taurus Highland: The Case of Ağla, Köyceğiz

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### ABSTRACT

Tourism is among the key sectors prioritised in both developed and developing countries due to its positive economic impact. However, the adverse environmental and socio-cultural impacts of mass tourism led to a growing interest in alternative forms of tourism. In this context, rural tourism, which is well suited to rural areas and offers various advantages in terms of environmental sustainability, is one of the most outstanding types of tourism. Located at an altitude of 800 meters, Ağla is a highland that maintains traditional rural characteristics in the Taurus Mountains in Türkiye. Alongside its natural beauty, Ağla stands out as an authentic rural area in Muğla due to its socio-cultural attributes dating back to ancient times. This study aims to evaluate the current status and potential of rural tourism in the Ağla Plateau in Muğla. Employing a qualitative research design, data were gathered through on-site observation and interviews. The data were subsequently analyzed using a SWOT analysis to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in relation to rural tourism. The findings were assessed with a focus on sustainable rural tourism development. It has been evaluated that the limitation of rural tourism entrepreneurship of the local people is one of the weaknesses, while original cultural events, especially the Mahya festival held in Ağla

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Highland, have the potential to create significant opportunities for the development of rural tourism. The study was concluded with the suggestion to similar destinations and practitioners who give importance the sustainable development of rural tourism. In conclusion, it is recommended to give importance to rural tourism throughout the year by eliminating infrastructure deficiency, improving transportation facilities, improving accommodation and social facilities in Ađla, Kyceđiz.

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## 1. Introduction

Tourism is a significant contributor to the economic growth and development of nations. However, the adverse environmental and socio-cultural impacts of mass tourism have led to a growing interest in alternative forms of tourism. The need for diverse tourism options has been underscored not only by the increasing number of tourists over the years but also by the dominance of sea-sun-sand tourism. Rural tourism, which offers numerous benefits for rural development, has emerged as one of the most prominent types of tourism in response to these shifts in tourism preferences. This form of tourism not only supports local economies but also preserves cultural heritage and natural landscapes, making it a more sustainable and enriching experience for both visitors and host communities.

In recent years, plateaus with significant tourism potential have emerged as key destinations within the rural tourism sector. These areas, often blessed with stunning natural beauty and a wealth of cultural offerings, are increasingly recognized for their ability to provide authentic and enriching experiences for visitors. In conclusion, rural tourism is a multifaceted phenomenon that enriches rural areas economically, culturally, and socially. It not only supports local livelihoods but also ensures the survival of rural heritage in an increasingly globalized world. As the tourism industry continues to evolve, the importance of rural tourism as a sustainable and community-driven form of travel cannot be overstated. In this context, this study aims to examine the current situation and potential of the Ađla Plateau in Muđla, in terms of rural tourism. It is predicted that the findings of the study will contribute to the limited literature and guide local government in sustainable rural development.

## 2. Literature Review

Since development in general is concerned with the improvement of people's economic and socio-cultural possibilities, rural development in particular aims at the welfare and development of people living in rural areas. For this reason, rural tourism is respected as an alternative or complementary to traditional/mass tourism types due

to its contribution to rural development, elimination of regional differences, etc. Rural tourism has been developing as a type of tourism, which is of great importance in terms of providing an additional income to the agricultural producer, whose income level is low compared to other sectors. Rural tourism addresses the economic, socio-cultural, and psychological problems caused by the density of tourists in the region. It also provides opportunities to “rescue” tourism from the hegemony of traditional mass coastal tourism and to benefit from the tranquil atmosphere of rural areas (Olalı & Timur, 1988).

Rural tourism serves as a cornerstone for the economic vitality and cultural preservation of rural areas. It not only generates employment opportunities for local inhabitants but also spurs investment in essential infrastructure, thereby fostering sustainable development. On the socio-cultural front, rural tourism plays a crucial role in safeguarding local heritage. It helps preserve traditional architecture, archaeological sites, and cultural landmarks, ensuring that these treasures are not lost to the sands of time. Moreover, it promotes the revival of cultural values and handicrafts, which are often integral to the identity of rural communities (McAreavey & McDonagh, (2011). The spectrum of rural tourism is broad, encompassing a variety of sub-branches such as agritourism, which allows visitors to experience farm life firsthand; farm tourism, offering stays on working farms; cave tourism, exploring natural and historical caverns; bird-watching tourism, attracting enthusiasts with its rich avian biodiversity; adventure tourism, providing thrilling outdoor activities; and highland/plateau tourism, which highlights the unique landscapes and climates of elevated regions (Uçar et al., 2017).

Plateaus are places where people generally live from the beginning of June to the end of August, geographically above sea level, with extraordinary natural environmental features (Gökçe, 2020). Plateaus have great potential for tourism with their natural beauty and clean air. Especially the intense pace, noise and polluted air of city life direct people to natural environments and plateaus become attractive destinations for those looking for such an escape. The virgin nature, mountains, lakes, forests and clean water sources offered in plateaus have an important place in areas such as nature tourism or ecotourism (Bilici & Işık, 2018). Plateaus are considered as a type of ecotourism in scientific studies (Yılmaz, 2010; Ijeomah et al., 2011; Anzaku et al., 2021) for people who escape from the noise of the city and want to be intertwined with a clean nature. There are also studies (Aytuğ, 2016; Bălan & Burghelea, 2015; Yılmaz & Gürol, 2012; Ahipaşaoğlu & Çeltek, 2006) that consider highland tourism as one of the rural tourism types.

Rural tourism, especially with the concept of sustainability tourism, has been a subject that has started to attract attention by researchers in the last decades. Although there are various studies that deal with the perspectives and attitudes of local people in rural tourism (Çeken et al., 2012; Uçar et al., 2012; Rahmani et al., 2013; Chuang, 2013; Falak et al., 2014; Mureşan et al., 2016; Ünal & Yücel, 2018; Baykal & Ataberk, 2020) the number of studies examining the subject in terms of plateaus included in rural tourism is limited (Dalgıç & Birdir, 2015; Dönmez & Topaloğlu, 2018; Lun et al., 2021; Qi et al., 2022). Therefore, it is important to carry out research on plateaus as rural settlements through various analyses in order to support plateaus to benefit from sustainable rural tourism development.

### **3. Methodology**

This research is aimed at determining the current situation and evaluating potential of the rural tourism of Ağla Plateau in Muğla. In accordance with this purpose, a qualitative research design was adopted in the study as the main purpose of qualitative research is to reveal the knowledge hidden in social reality (Özdemir, 2010). The qualitative data of the research were collected by on-site observation and interview techniques. As stated by Briggs (1986), the interview technique is the most common data collection tool in the social science research field. Interview questions were based on a literature review (Uçar et al., 2012; Rahmani et al., 2013; Akbaş & Koday, 2020) and refined in discussions between researchers.

İslamoğlu and Altınaçık (2013) point out that in qualitative research, the sample selection should not be representative of a larger sample, but it should be deliberately selected in order to collect more information about the topic. In this context, the sample selection in this qualitative study considered the relevance of the sample to the research topic rather than the quantitative representation and representativeness of the sample. In this regard, field trips to the Ağla Plateau were carried out by the researchers to collect the research data between April and May 2023. Within the field trips, several stakeholders were interviewed: one representative at the municipality, the headman of the plateau, five residents, one owner of cafeteria and one owner of the market. The research data were examined through SWOT analysis to reveal strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in terms of rural tourism.

#### **3.1. Field study**

The study has been carried out in Ağla village of Köyceğiz district of Muğla province in Türkiye. According to the data of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism

(2022), Muğla hosted 4,429,781 domestic and foreign tourists in 2021 and was the third most visited province in Türkiye after Antalya and Istanbul. The most well-known tourist destinations in Muğla are Bodrum, Marmaris, Fethiye. However, Köyceğiz cannot get enough share from tourism, despite the natural beauties it has. Indicating the current situation and potential of different types of tourism in the region is crucial for the development of tourism in this district. The location of Köyceğiz district in Muğla in Türkiye is shown on Fig. 1.



**Fig. 1.** Location of Köyceğiz  
Source: Muğla Map

Köyceğiz is in a special environmental protection zone and is known for the lake it gives its name to. In addition to Köyceğiz Lake, Sultaniye Hot Springs, Ekincik Beach, Sandras Mountain, Yuvarlakçay, Toplarlar Waterfall, Ölemez Mountain, Topgöz Canyon and Ağla Plateau stand out among the natural tourist attractions of the district (Uslu & Avcı, 2020). Ağla Plateau is located 11 km from Köyceğiz, and 67 km from Muğla city center. The plateau, which has an area of 17 thousand hectares is at an altitude of 800 meters (Fig. 2). Thanks to its location and natural vegetation, it is free from the typical summer heat and humidity of the Mediterranean Region (Karaağaç, 2006). In 2022, its population is an average of 467 people (TUİK, 2022). In this respect Ağla seems to have a potential for the rural tourism in terms of its location, rural society, natural beauties.





**Fig. 2.** Ağla Plateau

Source: Demir (2021)

### **3.2. Data collection**

The semi-structured questionnaire form was used to collect data in this qualitative research study. In the semi-structured interview technique, the researcher prepares the interview form with the questions he/she intends to ask in advance. However, the researcher can influence the direction of the interview as it progresses by asking different side or sub-questions to allow the person to broaden and refine their answers. A major asset of semi-structured interviews is that they provide more organised and comparable information, as the interview proceeds according to a previously prepared interview form (Şimşek & Yıldırım 2006). The questions were determined in accordance with the topics discussed in the previous studies and the questions asked to the local people were examined in the relevant literature (Uçar et al., 2012; Rahmani et al., 2013; Akbaş & Koday, 2020). The semi-structured interview form consists of two parts: demographic information and open-ended questions to reveal the rural tourism potential of the region.

The interviews were held face to face in Ağla Plateau between April and May 2023. Snowball sampling method was applied to determine the interviewees. Accordingly, the first individual or institution to be included in the universe was selected by judgment or randomly, then the second person was selected with the guidance of the first interviewee, thus increasing the sample (Gegez, 2010). First, the headman of the region was contacted, and then the people he recommended were interviewed. In total 9 participants, namely, the headman of the plateau, 6 residents, a cafeteria owner, and a market owner) were interviewed. The interviews lasted between 25 minutes and 1 hour 15 minutes and average duration was calculated as 40 minutes. In the interviews, firstly, the study team and why this study was carried out were explained, and after a short conversation, study questions were asked to the

participants. Five participants gave permission for the interview to be recorded, and the interviews with the other 4 participants were noted on the interview form by the researchers without being recorded. Table 1 shows the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents in the study.

**Table 1.** The socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents

Code	Age	Gender	Education	Status Occupation
P1	70	Female	Primary School	Housewife
P2	76	Male	Primary School	Headman
P3	41	Female	Master's Degree	Teacher
P4	44	Male	Master's Degree	Entrepreneur
P5	35	Male	University	Operator
P6	47	Female	Primary School	Operator
P7	69	Male	High School	Farmer
P8	71	Female	Primary School	Housewife
P9	43	Female	University	Entrepreneur

Source: Authors' elaboration

The participants are people who live in the Ağla Plateau and work in different professions and positions. When the professions of the participants are examined, it is seen that they are housewives (two people), mukhtars (one person), business owners (two people), entrepreneurs (two people), farmers (one person) and teachers (one person). It can be said that there is a balanced gender distribution of male (4 people) and female (5 people) participants. The level of education of the participants is quite wide and varies between primary school and master's degree. However, there are more primary school graduates (4 people). The age of the participants varies between 35 and 76 years, with an average age of 55 years.

### 3.3. Analysis

All interviews (audio recorded and noted) were transcribed in computer environment. The data were subjected to content analysis (Krippendorf, 2004), which is considered a useful method for making meaningful inferences from the text and establishing connections between concepts. Then, the obtained data were evaluated by SWOT analysis. The SWOT analysis is a strategic planning method used to evaluate strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in a project, firm or sector's performance (Akca, 2006; Ritonga et al., 2018). In this context, firstly, the *awareness and interest level of rural tourism in Ağla Plateau and its natural beauties and different features were evaluated through content analysis*. In addition, the *social, cultural and economic attractiveness and different features of Ağla Plateau and what needs to be*

done to develop rural tourism in Ağla were examined. Furthermore, the study evaluated the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of Ağla Plateau in terms of rural tourism.

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

##### **4.1. The awareness and interest level of rural tourism**

The participants are from the Ağla Plateau and are residents there, with the exception of three participants. However, the concept of rural tourism is not known to people born and living in Ağla plateau while people who settled and live in Ağla plateau from outside are aware of the concept. Although the participants stated that they did not know about rural tourism, it was seen that the tourism model they wanted to develop in their region was exactly rural tourism. In this context the statements of some participants are as follows:

P2: “I have never heard of the concept of rural tourism before, but what I understand from tourism is that if there is no tourism that I will generate income, if someone else will come to here outside and earn money from tourism, I don't want like that tourism.”

P8: “I have not heard of rural tourism before, but if this place will stay like this, if lots of tourists will not come and disturb us, of course tourism should improve here.”

The participants, especially those who have settled in the region from outside, see the development of tourism as a way out because the livelihood in the region is very limited. Others did not express a clear opinion. Some of the opinions are as follows:

P4: “We prepared two tents in our garden and started to host tourists here. The villagers who saw us started to build such structures in the garden of their houses.”

P2: “I don't know if tourism should be developed here. Someone came from outside and made our village coffee as a cafe. It hasn't been good.”

##### **4.2. Natural attractions and different features of Ağla Plateau**

All participants agreed on the richness and uniqueness of the natural beauties of the Ağla Plateau. Among the natural attractions of Ağla Plateau, the participants highlighted the rich and high-quality water resources, the beauty of its geographical structure, the silence, the diversity of flora and seen it as a difference compared to other places. Some of the opinions are as follows:

P7: “You will not find the taste of water here anywhere.”



P4: “There is no humidity and if you have your own vehicle, you can easily reach many seas.”

P1: “You are both quiet and calm, in the forests and alone with nature, the waters flowing beautifully. Everyone really wants to live here.”



**Fig. 3.** Natural beauties of Ağla Plateau

Source: Authors' own collection

#### ***4.3. Social, cultural, and economic attractiveness and different features of Ağla Plateau***

It was observed that participants' views on the social, cultural and economic attractiveness and characteristics of the Ağla Plateau were more hesitant / unclear than their views on other topics. According to the participants, the most important cultural event in the region is the Mahya festival. Mahya festival is consisted of the celebrations which are held every year on the second Thursday of August in the Plateau of Ağla. The participants stated that even though sackcloth weaving is very important in the region, there is lack of sackcloth weaving craftsman in recent years. In addition, they stated that while the region used to make a living from agriculture and animal husbandry, they are now looking for different livelihoods.

P6: “The Mahya festival is still going on, but it used to be much better. Votives are cut, everyone is eating, no one is going back to home hungry.”

P3: “In fact, sackcloth weaving is a value that is about to disappear. It would be nice to show this to tourists. But in the absence of tourism, there is no one who takes care of cultural values.”

#### ***4.4. Things to do for the development of rural tourism in Ağla***

Participants provided some suggestions for the development of rural tourism. Especially the improvement of internet and sewerage infrastructure was expressed by all participants. It is among the suggestions that there should be a restaurant where

local dishes such as keskek, casseroles, yoghurt and local herbs are served, the village coffeehouse should be run as it used to be, and the limited number of accommodation opportunities should be developed by alternative means such as lodges and tents. Another point emphasized by the participants is the lack of personnel. The prominent issues related to the development of rural tourism in the opinions were expressed as follows:

P9: “If rural tourism is to develop, the personnel shortage must first be resolved. Because we can't even find a worker to work in the garden.”

P5: “If you give tourism training to the local people, you will not only stay away from the naturalness of this place, but also prevent migration.”

P1: “It would be nice if there was a shuttle that would go to the center at least once a week. Those without a car cannot come here.”

P2: “If tourists come here, who will show them around, there is no one knows the foreign language. Also, there is no restaurant here.”

#### 4.5. SWOT analysis results

Considering the findings of the interviews, SWOT analysis was conducted. The SWOT analysis results for rural tourism development in Ađla Plateau are given in Table 2.

**Table 2.** SWOT analysis for rural tourism development of Ađla Plateau

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Suitability of climatic conditions and lack of humidity;</li> <li>▪ Diversity of the primary supports of rural tourism such as local food culture (keskek, yoghurt, stew, etc.), traditional handicrafts (Sackcloth weaving) and natural areas;</li> <li>▪ Silence environment without any noises;</li> <li>▪ Located half an hour from the airport;</li> <li>▪ A large number of very old trees and rich flora attracting tourists;</li> <li>▪ Plentiful and flowing water resources;</li> <li>▪ Trekking routes;</li> <li>▪ Rich and high-quality water resources;</li> <li>▪ Clear view of the sky;</li> <li>▪ Festivities known as <i>Mahya</i> (popularly <i>Maya</i>) and/or <i>Eren Day</i>;</li> <li>▪ Geographical advantage.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Lack of trained and experienced labor force;</li> <li>▪ Lack of urban transportation;</li> <li>▪ Lack of rural tourism awareness;</li> <li>▪ Limited number of accommodation facilities;</li> <li>▪ Lack of strategic planning and public investment in the region;</li> <li>▪ Lack of willingness of people to investment in tourism sector;</li> <li>▪ Lack of tourism infrastructures (such as internet and sewage);</li> <li>▪ Lack of information and conscious local people about highland (plateau) tourism;</li> <li>▪ Lack of tourism businesses (restaurants, souvenir shops, etc.).</li> </ul>

Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Development of home staying;</li> <li>▪ Opportunities for tourism throughout Muğla in four seasons;</li> <li>▪ Friendly society;</li> <li>▪ Business areas, especially for housewives.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Rural traditions gradually disappearing;</li> <li>▪ Entrepreneurial spirit throughout the province is only among those who settle in the region from outside;</li> <li>▪ High average age, lack of young population.</li> </ul>

*Source: Authors' elaboration*

As shown in the table, strengths are mainly consist of natural beauties such as a large number of very old trees and rich flora attracting tourists, rich and high-quality water resources, clear view of the sky etc. The advantageous geographical location is also a major strength for Ağla Plateau, not only because of the climatic conditions, but also because of the closeness of the international airport. In addition, socio-cultural activities such as the Mahya Festival and inclusion in trekking routes also support the development of rural tourism in Ağla Plateau.

Considering the rural tourism potential of Ağla Plateau, important points stands out in the SWOT analysis at the point of development of Ağla Plateau as a rural tourism region. The lack of accommodation facilities, trained and experienced labor force and tourism infrastructures are among the important weaknesses. At this point, more sustainable accommodation models such as house staying and glamping facilities should be preferred in accordance with rural tourism rather than the construction of new buildings and hotels. Regions' weaknesses should be developed, and strengths should be highlighted with the support of local governments.

The freindly society who can be local tourism stakeholders with an authentic hospitality is an important opportunity for Ağla Plateau. The development of home staying and business areas, especially for the women may offer great opportunity for the rural tourism development. However it should be respected that rural traditions and local involvement is very important for the sustainable rural tourism, therefore some predictions should be made to prevent disappearance of the rural traditions, and the local youth leaving the Ağla Plateau.

## 5. Conclusion

This study revealed that Ağla Plateau, with its historical, natural, and cultural values, can be an important destination in the context of rural tourism. Although there are natural, cultural, and authentic supply sources in the region, it is of great importance to plan and develop tourism in a sustainable and comprehensive way due to reasons such as insufficient infrastructure, inadequacy of accommodation facilities, lack of personnel, and unconsciousness of the local people.

The fact that the rural tourism potential of Ađla Plateau has not been developed so far can be considered as a loss in terms of regional and country tourism. With the development of rural tourism, the structure in the region, the forgotten values, and its authentic structure will be protected and added value will be created by turning it into a tourism product. In this context, the strengths and opportunities of the region can be evaluated, and the weaknesses can be developed by acting together with the local government, local people, and entrepreneurs. Since the point that all the participants focus on is the lack of personnel, training to the local people about tourism will also support to solution of the employment problem in the region.

It is notable that there is great potential for tourism because the plateaus can be used in all four seasons. Although plateaus attract great attention especially in the summer months by offering the opportunity to be in touch with nature, they are often not used efficiently in terms of tourism due to the high altitude regions covered with snow in the winter season. However, making the plateaus open to tourism activities throughout all four seasons can create a great opportunity for the economic development of the region and sustainable tourism (Gülpınar Sekban et al., 2018). Suggestions for using Ađla Plateau in all four seasons are as follows:

- *Eliminating infrastructure deficiency.* The most important factor for the use of plateaus throughout the year is infrastructure investments. Basic infrastructure services such as roads, transportation networks, energy and water supply must be strong (Pirselimoglu & Demirel, 2012). In plateaus where snowfall is especially heavy in the winter season, measures such as snow-fighting equipment, salting and cleaning systems should be taken to prevent roads from being closed and to ensure that transportation continues in a healthy manner. In addition, strengthening the energy infrastructure is essential for hotels, restaurants and other tourist facilities in plateau regions to be able to provide service.

- *Improving transportation facilities.* It is very important for the transportation in the plateaus to be uninterrupted throughout the four seasons so that tourists and locals can easily access them. In high altitude regions, transportation problems can be experienced in the winter months due to heavy snowfall and blizzards. Therefore, opening snow roads, improving road transportation, creating alternative transportation routes such as cable cars and slope climbing routes will make the plateaus more preferred. In addition, opportunities such as ski slopes and walking paths in snowy areas can be provided for winter tourism.

- *Improving accommodation and social facilities.* The sufficient level of accommodation and social facilities in the plateaus is a critical factor in encouraging tourism throughout the year. Especially in the winter season, there should be

facilities built on the basis of sustainability that have strong heating systems and provide suitable shelter for the winter. It is extremely important that each facility is built without harming the environmental supply sources of the region.

The use of plateaus in all four seasons is possible not only by developing infrastructure and transportation facilities, but also by planning social, cultural and economic factors correctly. In order to be an attractive tourism destination throughout all four seasons, plateaus should develop a structure that presents their natural beauty, local culture and sustainable tourism principles in a balanced way. In this way, they can attract tourists throughout the year, strengthen the livelihood of the local people and create economic, social and cultural added value to the region by preserving the natural heritage.

The main limitation of this study is the data was obtained only from local people, entrepreneurs, and administrations due to time, duration, and financial constraints. Therefore, the results represent only the viewpoint of local people living in this area. It is recommended that further research on the subject consider not only the opinions of local people, but also those of tourists as another important stakeholder. Hence more comprehensive results may be obtained with research in which tourists are also included in the research.

Another limitation of the study is the obtaining of research data in April and May, i.e. in the spring months. Some of the local people living in the region come to the plateau during the warmer seasons (June, July, August). For this reason, collecting data in these seasons in future studies and determining the time interval when the plateau is dense in the studies to be carried out will provide convenience in reaching the data.

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