

TO DO! 2013

Contest Socially Responsible Tourism



Award Winner

BOOMKOLBEH – TURKMEN ECOLODGE

represented by:

Forough Vahabzadeh and Kamran Anvari

Founder and General Manager of Boomkolbeh – Turkmen Ecolodge

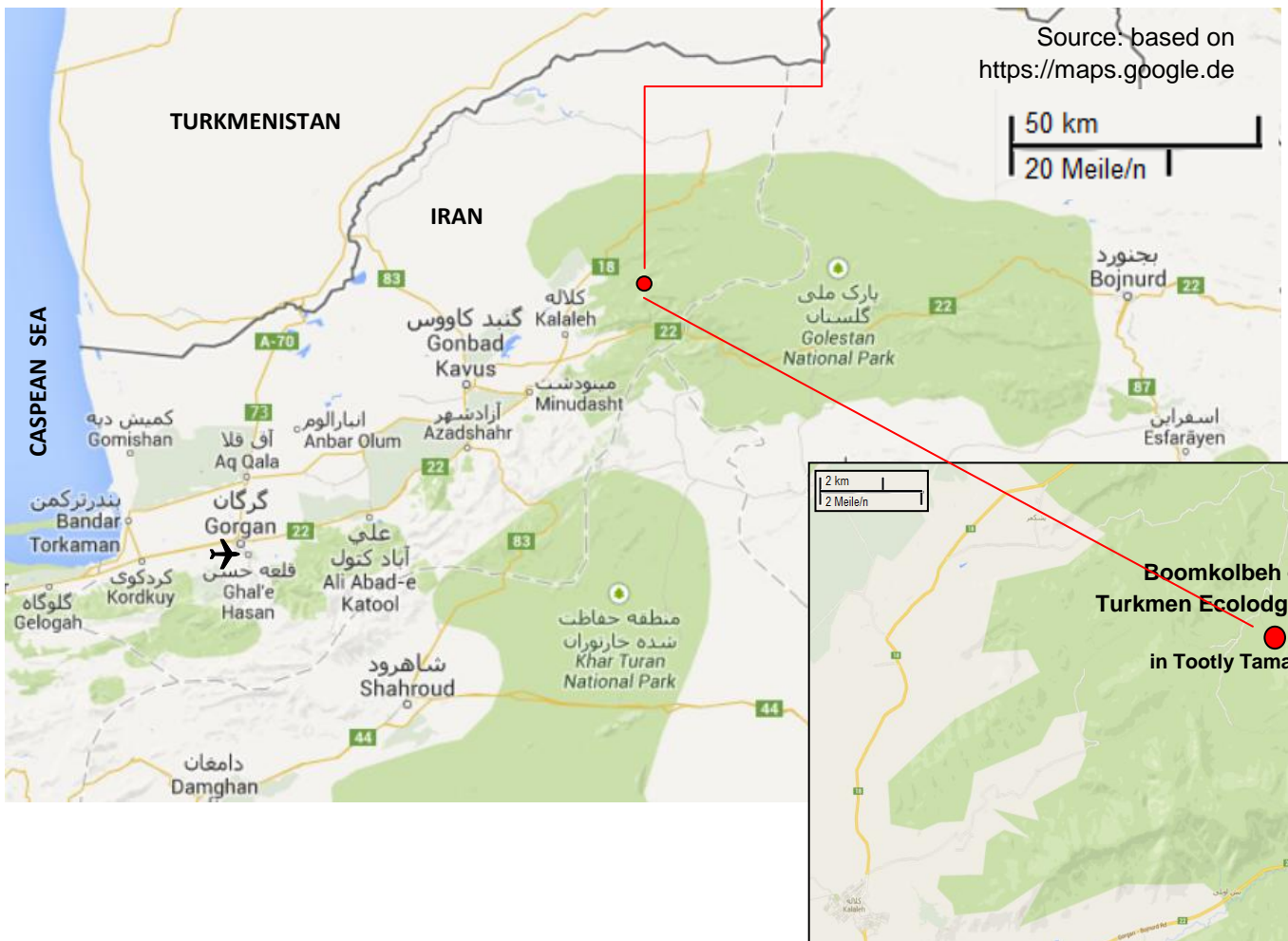
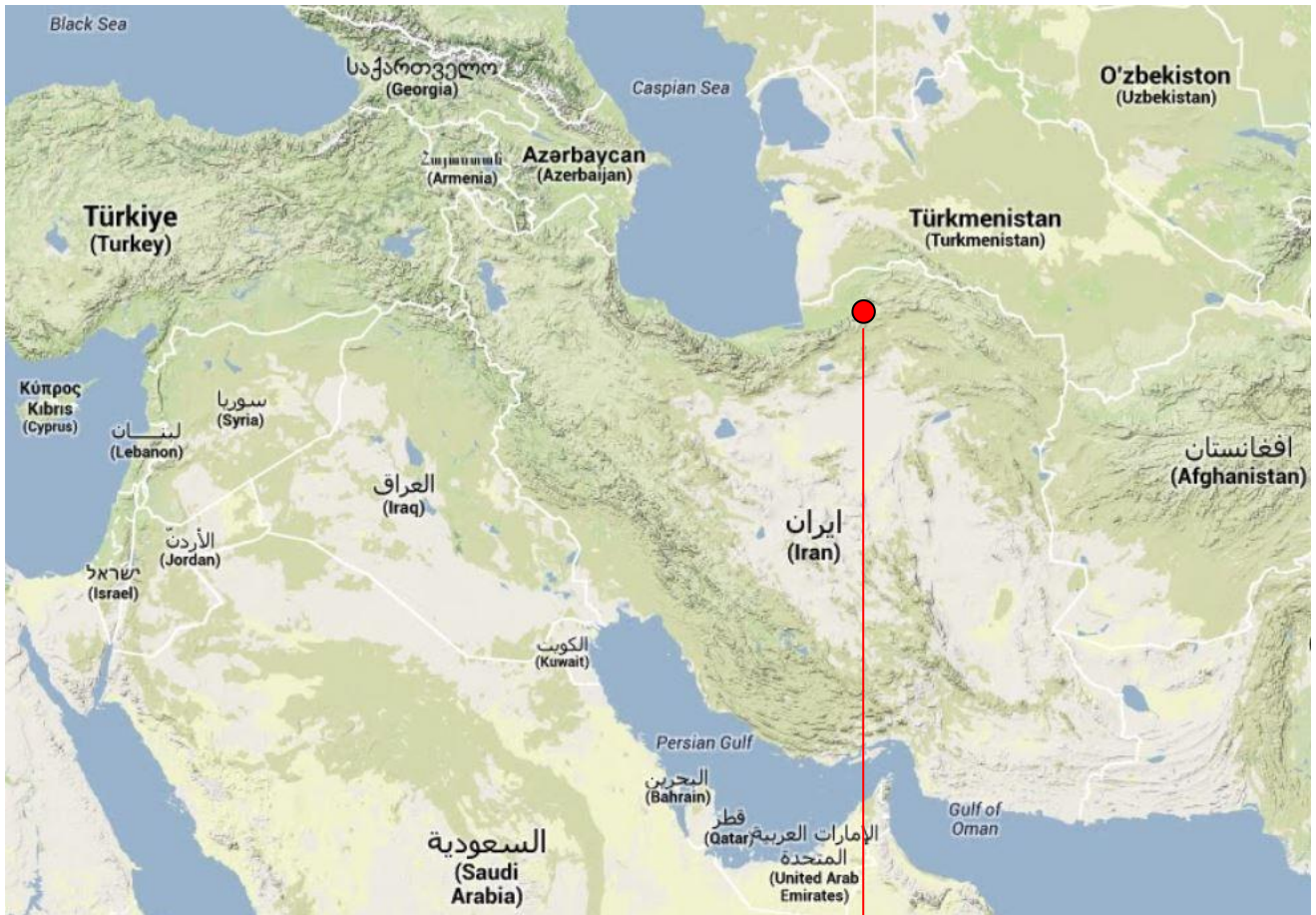
(Tootly Tamak, Golestan National Park)

Iran

Award Rationale

by

Klaus Betz



1 INTRODUCTION

The author commissioned by the Institute for Tourism and Development (Studienkreis für Tourismus und Entwicklung e.V.) visited the North-East of Iran (Province of Golestan) between 18th and 27th November, 2013, in order to check the TO DO! application submitted by Boomkolbeh – Turkmen Ecolodge¹ on location.

The area visited – close to the Turkmenistan border – lies in the Golestan National Park and on its rim. With a size of 92,000 hectares, the park is the oldest protected area in Iran (founded in 1976 on the basis of two already existing reserves). In the West lies the Caspian Sea, South-West the Elburs mountains, and Gorgan, the capital of Golestan with around 450,000 inhabitants.

The Boomkolbeh – Turkmen Ecolodge is located in Tootly Tamak, a village with about 140 inhabitants². The very small community of the Turkmen ethnic group of Gouklan lies North-East of the city of Kalaleh. The 200 m² rural clay house has more than 20 beds and is surrounded by 1,500 m² of (organic) garden. The lodge was rebuilt on the basis of a leased³ former farm building in Turkmen style and was renovated by its founders, the couple Vahabzadeh/Anvari (architect and interior designer), in line with ecological/sustainability criteria.

Going far beyond a merely touristic approach, the Boomkolbeh – Turkmen Ecolodge is a project that triggers and supports eco-social, local development processes and processes which preserve culture. A kind of "think tank" has been created in cooperation with the management of the Golestan National Park in nearby Tangrah. Within the given political framework, it aims at working to the benefit of the local population, while at the same time seeking to preserve the amazing biodiversity of the Golestan National Park (see 3.2).

Within the limited time available, the author in charge had been able to pursue all these aspects, get to know them without restrictions and clarify relevant questions regarding the project's concept and objectives with the management of Boomkolbeh – Turkmen Ecolodge. With the following result:

The author in charge recommends awarding the **BOOMKOLBEH – TURKMEN ECOLODGE** a TO DO! 2013.

2 BACKGROUND AND SETTING

From the people's point of view, in the most recent Iranian history two dates are of specific relevance: The election of the Iranian president Hassan Rohani on 14th June 2013, and the Geneva nuclear agreement (E3+3, often also called 5+1) of 24th November, 2013. The first event has triggered considerable optimism within the Iranian population, the second one almost a form of (cautiously displayed) euphoria. Against this backdrop, the Iranian society is in a tense phase awaiting change.

In Teheran (with 12 million inhabitants), two entirely different worlds may currently be observed simultaneously. On the one hand, it is possible to visit and watch the martyrdom of the Shia Imam Hossein⁴ as an "open air theatre", on the other hand the *Jeunesse dorée* of the Iranian capital live only a few hundred metres away, in and in front of the very posh looking coffee shops that spread a Western atmosphere; smoking and laughing, with quite a few female youths wearing their head scarves as if they were simply fashionable accessories.

¹ The lodge is officially registered in Iran as Boomkolbeh – Turkmen Ecolodge. Boomkolbeh is the Farsi (Persian) term for eco lodge. Internationally, only the English term "Turkmen Ecolodge" is used.

² Tootly means: "The place where mulberry trees flourish." Tamak is the word for a Turkmen subtribe within the Gouklan tribe.

³ Kamran Anvari: "I purposely did not buy the land, but took it on lease, so that the ownership rights remain with the people. Should the landlord not agree with the way we go about things, he may end the lease after six years, or otherwise he may extend the contract."

⁴ From a Shia perspective, Imam Hossein – as the rightful successor of caliph Ali – would have had the right to the caliphate (the leadership of the Islamic community), but in 680 he was defeated in the battle of Karbala and his followers were pushed underground. The division of the Islamic community into Sunni and Shia Muslims goes back to this event.

In rural areas, this simultaneousness is not visible in such a pronounced manner. As opposed to the big cities, the lifestyle here is rather dominated by traditions and Islam. But the youths living in the countryside know their possibilities (e.g. via internet) and make use of them in quite a cautious manner – also out of respect for the elder generation.

2.1 Economic Situation

According to data by the German Federal Foreign Office (AA), Iran's gross domestic product (GDP) was estimated at 490 billion US dollar in 2012 (Germany's at around 3,400 billion). "The Iranian economy mainly lies in the hands of the state and/or religious foundations. Their share is estimated to be more than 80 percent, according to the AA. "The most important economic sectors in Iran include the oil and gas industry, the petrochemical industry, agriculture, the metal industry, and the automobile industry".

For seven years, international sanctions have had a significant impact on foreign trade, with major consequences for the national economy.⁵ According to various sources, the rate of inflation is currently between 41 and 45 percent. In the past four years, this has altered the exchange rate between the US dollar and the Iranian Rial or Toman⁶ from 1:1 to 1:3, the euro rate to 1:4.

The infrastructure of the country – which is four times as large as Germany – is quite good (roads, bus connections, domestic flights to all major cities, partly also railways). A surprisingly large number of vehicles are equipped with gas tanks; a sufficient number of gas filling stations is established along the main traffic routes. Internet is also available in rural areas, and access is (apart from certain photo and film portals) more available than expected.

Tourism from Western countries is currently gaining importance. Apart from the already visible opening of the country, the easing of the rules of immigration also contributes (visas are now available at the airport). And while other countries in Northern Africa and the Middle East have become problematic destinations (civil war in Syria, the situation in Egypt), it seems that Iran, which is extremely interesting in terms of its cultural history, may be rediscovered.

Irrespective of this, one gets the impression that domestic Iranian tourism is of enormous importance. Among others, the two holiday weeks around 21st March – the annual New Year festival "Norouz" (similar to the Kurdish "Newroz") are considered as the peak season. More exact figures could not/cannot be obtained, but according to information given on the phone by the Department of Heritage in charge, 60 percent of a population of 77 million are traveling within Iran (on business, during their leisure time, and for pilgrimages).

With a population of 2.5 million inhabitants, Mashhad is the second largest city in the country. In Mashhad alone, 25 million pilgrims are said to have been counted annually. The reason: The eighth Shia Imam lies buried in Mashhad (he died in 818)⁷. The tomb or shrine of Imam Reza (Ali ar-Rida) is the most important Shia pilgrimage site in Iran.

⁵ Which currently still works in isolation and/or cut off from foreign trade. Also see: Thomas Avenarius in "Süddeutsche Zeitung" of 24 December, 2013: "Hungrig nach Investitionen".

⁶ Toman is the name of the old Persian currency. Ten Rial are one Toman.

⁷ http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ali_ar-Rida

3 BOOMKOLBEH – TURKMEN ECOLODGE

3.1 Project History

After a construction and modification phase, the Boomkolbeh – Turkmen Ecolodge has for more than three years been open all year round and has during that time received about 1,400 guests. So far, most of the visitors have been domestic tourists (Iranian tourists as well as guests from Western diplomatic representations, for example). Besides, NGO representatives working on nature conservation and individual foreign travellers are also coming to stay there. From 2014, the lodge will be cooperating with the German tour operator "Nomad – Reisen zu den Menschen", a member of the tour operators' association "Forum anders reisen".

The first part of the history of the development of Boomkolbeh – Turkmen Ecolodge can be traced back to the biophilia⁸ of the founding family and to their intellectual background shaped by international experiences. The "guiding spirit" in this family is the biology professor, book author and translator Hossein Vahabzadeh. The father/father in law of the couple who founded Boomkolbeh – Turkmen Ecolodge has for decades been regarded as one of the country's leading experts in the fields of biology, agriculture, and ecology.

Hossein Vahabzadeh studied in the United States. His daughter Forough was born there, but mainly grew up in Iran. Today she works as an architect with a focus on "sustainable architecture".⁹ Her husband Kamran Anvari, in turn, was born in Iran and grew up there. But at the age of 15 he went to study in the US. Until the outbreak of the financial crisis in 2008, he was working in the US as an interior designer as well as in the construction and real estate business. All three persons directly and indirectly involved in the project are at home in both Western and Eastern cultures and have a good intercultural understanding.

The second part of the history of the project is directly linked to the commitment of the Vahabzadeh/Anvari families to do something for the Golestan National Park and the people living there, and to also respect the Turkmen culture.

In this way, Hossein Vahabzadeh with his advice in the background (theory and strategy), his daughter Forough (planning, design, plus women) and his son in law Kamran Anvari (implementation, management, and representation to the outside) form a congenial trio and have gained a good reputation among the population in the region visited. This will be discussed in the following.

⁸ Biophilia describes (in brief) the love of human beings for life and every living being. According to Albert Schweitzer it is the "Reverence for Life". Edward O. Wilson explains: "Due to their inborn biophilia, human beings feel attracted to other living beings. They need to be in sufficient contact with nature to remain healthy, to find meaning in their lives, and for their self-actualisation. Human beings are thus part of nature".

⁹ With a study on sustainable design in Iran "The City as an Ecosystem", she was a guest lecturer and co-author at the Institute for urban and regional planning at the TU Berlin in 2007 – during the "International Conference and Summer School" which took place in the same year.

3.2 Golestan National Park

The Golestan National Park has an extremely diverse and at the same time multilayered biosphere. In a protected area of 920 square kilometres we find unique and very different types of landscapes and habitats: The mountain and rock formations are up to 2,400 m high (Divar Kaji summit: 2,411 m), there are extensive and untouched deciduous and mixed forests¹⁰, meadows with a wide variety of flowers, bushy steppe¹¹ as well as plain deserts – all of these in what is actually a very small area.

The animals inhabiting the area are equally diverse. Persian leopards, wolfs, brown bears, jackals, wild boars, urials, wild goats, marals, deer, and goitered gazelles live here. In addition, there is a large number of different bird species (almost 150), from falcons, buzzards, and bearded vultures to pheasants, spotted woodpeckers, and robins).

Earlier, the local population was denied access to the Golestan National Park (especially during Shah times it was reserved for hunting by the government). This is currently changing, as the national park will in the future be managed rather like a biosphere reserve (with a transition zone, a buffer zone, and a core zone being thought about). The rules for biosphere reserves which are common internationally have not yet been implemented¹² in national law. That's why the park is opened to the public in a very careful and controlled manner, especially in the transition zone (for example to meet the demand for wood, to collect acorns and mushrooms).

Eco-workshops and eco-camps with school groups or youth groups are already being conducted, and there is a junior ranger programme. This mainly takes place in cooperation with Boomkolbeh – Turkmen Ecolodge and with the educational and technical know-how available there.

Similarly, success has been achieved in curbing poaching which used to be common earlier. In the meantime, six of the former poachers have contracts as nature guides and trackers with Boomkolbeh – Turkmen Ecolodge. Instead of illegal hunting, they now guide visitors on exciting excursions through the national park and now make their money in legal ways – thanks to their vast knowledge of the wilderness.

That's why the management of the national park also seeks to increasingly promote and develop tourism, preferably in partnership with Boomkolbeh – Turkmen Ecolodge. Together, they want to show people the value of the national park – for example through the jobs generated.

Last but not least, the national park's manager Ali Rostaghi (38) hopes to use the income from tourism to increase the budget of the national park and to increase the number of park rangers (now 45, most of them holding a bachelor's of environment) significantly. Furthermore, he hopes that the cooperation with NGOs and the private sector will provide a budget from donations in order to establish a management for "wildlife" and "biodiversity" respectively, and to be able to conduct research.

¹⁰ In technical language, they are part of the so called "Hyrcanian forest" (the ancient Greek name for the ancient Persian *Varkāna* [wolf land]), a montane forest that ascends from the lowlands on the Caspian Sea in Iran and Azerbaijan. It covers an area of around 55,000 square kilometres. The speciality: As during the last ice age in the Northern hemisphere the Hyrcanian forest was largely spared of glaciation and thus represents a kind of pre-primeval forest, it today has "the quality of a so-called 'hot spot'". In the international biodiversity discussion this means a concentration of endemic species which exist only in one place and thus represent an irretrievable genetic pool". Sources: H. Akhani, Institut für Systematische Botanik der Universität München, Naturhistorisches Museum Wien (www.biologiezentrum.at) and http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kaspischer_Hyrcania-Mischwald

¹¹ H. Akhani, l.c. "It is too early to give a precise number of all the flowering plants in Golestan National Park, but the existence of over 1200 species has been well documented."

¹² Especially as the national park was divided and/or intersected by the important highway 22, belongs to the network of "Asian Highways", and is part of the "Silk Route".

3.3 The tourism product

In its tourist programmes, Boomkolbeh – Turkmen Ecolodge offers and combines two basic directions. On the one hand, as a lodge it is a kind of centre that welcomes visitors to the rural Turkmen culture. On the other hand, it advertises a whole range of different possibilities to experience and spend time in nature.

3.3.1 The cultural programme

Inside, the clay lodge looks like the farmstead of a wealthy Turkmen extended family – with a spacious central living room leading to four bed rooms of different sizes (with space for four to six persons respectively) as well as a kitchen.

Valuable traditional robes are put up on the walls (partly made of silk). Furthermore, there are handicraft items (silk embroideries, scarves), small items for daily use, and a few musical instruments. Everything has been arranged carefully and has been illuminated to create a nice atmosphere. The overall design clearly bears all the marks of Forough Vahabzadeh.

All the rooms have carpets and felt flooring. People live, sit, and eat together on the floor. A table cloth spread out on the floor replaces the table, there are no chairs, or only if needed. The same applies to the beds on the basis of mattresses. For elderly people and persons with handicaps the concept is changed according to their needs.

The food served has its origin in the Iranian-Turkmen cuisine and is as tasty as Turkish or Arabian food. For example Ghottab: stuffed pita bread with spinach, parsley, onions, mint, minced meat, and mashed potatoes.

Depending on the group of visitors, Boomkolbeh – Turkmen Ecolodge also engages the "ka-lifeh" Araz Mohamad Bakoshi who is known throughout the region. The musician and singer of Turkmen ballads is a master of the dotar, a traditional two string instrument, which if played correctly sounds as if several musicians were in the room at the same time.

Those who want to may during their stay also learn how to make pita bread, how to weave, do embroidery, or set up and furnish a yurt. This knowledge is being imparted by the Turkmen living in the area around the lodge. Earlier, they were nomad shepherds. Nowadays, however, their children and grandchildren are usually studying (for example business management, biology, agriculture, and environment).

3.3.2 The nature related programme

Under the heading "Wildlife Persia", Boomkolbeh – Turkmen Ecolodge offers a large number of tours and activities which are possible in the Golestan National Park.

The possibilities which are offered all year round include one-day hikes, trekking (with tents) for several days, or horse riding tours; wildlife watching, tracking, bird watching, photo safaris, and landscape painting. Besides, there are possibilities to visit the rangers' stations in the national park, or to participate in excursions during the mating season of deer or wild sheep (which are similar to mouflon).

In winter, walks in the snow can also be booked, just as ecology workshops, or various nature conservation activities – in cooperation with the management of the national park (planting trees, avoiding waste and disposing of garbage, protection of water bodies, etc.). On the other hand: as some paths on the rim of and around the national park are only accessible by off-road vehicles, four wheel drive tours are offered in some cases.

4. EVALUATION AGAINST THE TODO! CONTEST CRITERIA

4.1 Taking into account the different interests and needs of the local people through participation

Unlike in many other cases of tourism development, especially in developing countries, here nothing could and can be decided by bypassing the local population. In Tootly Tamak, a community of six extended families or clans (a total of 140 inhabitants), through a kind of "council of elders", decide what may or may not happen in this village. In this small community, which at first sight gives the impression of being cut off from the outside world, the people are nevertheless sufficiently open to "new things", if only these innovations really benefit the village and especially if they offer good perspectives for the young villagers. (Rural-urban migration is an increasing problem also in Iran). In addition – and that is a very decisive factor – the founders of Boomkolbeh – Turkmen Ecolodge were able to build on a trust bonus. Their interceder was a member of the community: a student of biology who is from Tootly Tamak and who met the families Vahabzadeh/Anvari via the university in Mashhad, could recommend them and could therefore also vouch for their genuine intentions.

The more the villagers were then given explanations – without building castles in the air – on what was intended with the renovation of the old farmstead and with the construction of Boomkolbeh – Turkmen Ecolodge, the more they agreed. Especially as from the beginning, many of the people who are employed there today were recruited from the village, and if necessary they were also educated and trained. In this way the villagers developed a high degree of identification with the project.

The best example is Araz Mohamad, called "Babash", who is now 28 years old. Four years ago he started to work on the construction site as an unskilled labourer and has developed so much talent and interest that he now almost acts as a vice manager. In the meantime, he has also been elected mayor of Tootly Tamak. Meanwhile, 64 villagers earn an income from the existence of the lodge in one way or the other (see 4.3.) – in addition to their basic income from agriculture.

Besides, on the medium term most of the management of Boomkolbeh – Turkmen Ecolodge is meant to be transferred into the hands of former employees because the families Vahabzadeh/Anvari are currently building up a second project (eco holiday camp) in the nearby neighbouring village of Tangrah – directly at the seat of the national park management. A third project concentrates on the re-establishment of olive plantations.

4.2 Enhancing the awareness of the local people with regard to the chances and risks of tourism development

This criterion is only applicable to a limited extent. Most of the inhabitants of Tootly Tamak know about the risks and opportunities of tourism development only from hearsay at best (from other places in Iran such as Kelardasht on the Caspian Sea, or from the Island of Kish in the Persian Gulf). Hardly any of them have ever stayed in a hotel or travelled outside of Kalaleh (the closest larger city in the area). Most of them have so far known only the kind of tourism generated by Boomkolbeh – Turkmen Ecolodge in the form of respectful visitors who are interested in nature and culture.

Besides, it has been agreed with the council of elders that the guests of the lodge may not just wander around the village as they please, disturbing the privacy of the inhabitants, let alone their ceremonies. For such "walks to get to know the village", the lodge has its own local guides. Furthermore, at the beginning of their stay, visitors are handed out a kind of "Dos and don'ts list" (see 4.5).

4.3 Participation of broad local population strata in the positive economic, social and cultural effects of tourism

With an occupancy rate of about 50 percent, Boomkolbeh – Turkmen Ecolodge generates an annual turnover of about 60,000 euro. 90 percent of this money goes back to the local and regional economic cycle (through purchases, salaries of employees, workmen, etc.). In addition, there are sales proceeds from handicraft activities (woven fabrics, embroidered bracelets, needlepoint, silk embroideries), which are being passed on to the women who made the items.

A total of 64 persons currently work with Boomkolbeh – Turkmen Ecolodge, directly and indirectly, locally and regionally: the staff of the lodge includes 14 employees (working in two shifts if necessary). 29 women are involved in handicraft production. Ten of the people involved supply local produce such as eggs, milk, cheese, vegetables, fruits, etc., another five are traders or workmen, and for wilderness tours the lodge has contracts with six nature guides (so called wildlife trackers).

In one case, a villager was even successfully encouraged to begin collecting plastic and glass bottles. In the meantime, he has become self-employed, he has his own small van, now collects the bottles in all the villages of the region and takes the material to the provincial capital of Gorgan for recycling.

4.4 Guarantee of the attractiveness of jobs in tourism or of income opportunities for the local people

First of all, it must be noted that it is a remarkable exception that in a village like Tootly Tamak there have lately been jobs at all, which allow for an income or additional income beyond agriculture. At the same time, this offers a perspective, especially for young adults (male and female) who will/would, after finishing their studies, otherwise migrate to the cities. Young people assured the author several times in various discussions that they have a strong bond with their parents and/or families and actually don't want to leave their native village for a long time. Seen in this way, the job opportunities created by Boomkolbeh – Turkmen Ecolodge are highly welcome. Furthermore, the salaries of the staff of the lodge are higher than average.

While in agriculture the remuneration for a work day of eight hours is about 15 US dollars, and in the construction sector 20 US\$ on average, the staff at Boomkolbeh – Turkmen Ecolodge get about 26 US\$ per work day.

Compared to a mass tourism destination, all the other aspects under this criterion are not applicable or comparable – unless the younger ones among the employees are getting special encouragement and support to learn English, with a future perspective.

4.5 Strengthening local culture and cultural identity and avoiding/minimising any social and cultural damage caused by tourism

As mentioned earlier, the founding family Vahabzadeh/Anvari has designed the whole business concept of Boomkolbeh – Turkmen Ecolodge in such a way (see 3.3.1) as to contribute to strengthening cultural identity and/or to show respect for Turkmen culture.

For example, this also includes encouragement for the women producing handicraft not to sell their elaborate and time-intensive woven fabrics or silk needlework below value, and not to be bargained down (though guests try to do that now and then).

It also includes that wilderness guides (i.e. the former poachers) reject bribes from visitors

paying in foreign currency – for example, in order to secretly get a *permission* for the national park for 200 US\$, or to go on a wilderness tour, bypassing existing structures, for 100 US\$.¹³

Irrespective of the above-mentioned activities and measures to strengthen cultural identity: Boomkolbeh – Turkmen Ecolodge hands out its "Sustainable Ecotourism Guidelines"¹⁴ to every guest. With regard to Turkmen culture, these guidelines state:

1. Do not take pictures of local people.
2. Shaking hands with local women is not custom.
3. Tipping the musician is custom.
4. For walking outside of the ecolodge you need a local guide.
5. By buying local products we are trying to help these communities prosper sustainably while mitigating their impacts on Golestan National Park.

What Boomkolbeh – Turkmen Ecolodge rejects are bus loads from the big Iranian cities. When 40 or 50 people suddenly appear all at once, this cannot be tolerated in a small village like Tootly Tamak, says Kamran Anvari – especially as these visitors with their often rather "urban" attitudes generally show little respect for the rural population. The result would be an inner-Iranian "cultural clash".

4.6 Environmental compatibility

As the business philosophy has from the onset been geared at sustainability, the demands associated with it have already been met during the construction phase. Today's Boomkolbeh – Turkmen Ecolodge has been built on the basis of a 60 year old clay house (with walls 40 cm thick), renovated and modified with existing local materials.

The whole building has been conceptualised in an energy efficient manner, but since there are no suitable solar panels available in Iran (yet)¹⁵, it cannot be run with renewable energy. As there is no gas connection in remote Tootly Tamak yet, oil must be used for heating during the cold season.

Organic waste is being composted, waste is being avoided when ever possible, glass bottles are being reused in various ways, and for instance rain water is being collected in order to irrigate the large organic garden with its various types of vegetables, herbs and berries. The waste water from the showers and toilets outside the main building is being drained off through sink pits which have been planted with bamboo and reed.

For the tourist activities in nature or within the national park, certain self-restrictions apply. Large groups of visitors are – with consideration for the wildlife – divided into three or four different smaller groups. Not all of them use the same path at the same time. Every group has a local guide with them, and finally there are also possibilities of limiting the time of stay in one place, or on one trekking route.

Furthermore, the Boomkolbeh – Turkmen Ecolodge is, so to say, the national park's local premium partner. It supports its conservation projects and environmental education programmes both ideally and, when possible, financially.

¹³ Examples that the author was told by one of the wilderness guides he interviewed. Not without the guide adding: "If it was really only about the money, I could also go back to poaching".

¹⁴ In addition, there are rules of conduct and tips related to the equipment needed for staying in Golestan National Park.

¹⁵ Panels that work under conditions of high humidity and cloudy sky.

4.7 Participation of women and men in planning and implementation processes – improvement of gender relations

Applying purely Western standards to this criterion, one would have to respond "rather not", because Turkmen society is to the outside dominated by men. Going into details, however, one would discover that gender relations here follow quite different standards, for example as far as ownership is concerned.

So in Turkmen culture, it is the man's obligation to ensure the livelihood of the family. However, if a woman/his wife earns an additional income, it is exclusively her money. The gold that the family has is hers and only hers, and so are the cows (which currently may have a value of between 2,500 and 4,000 US\$ per cow). The sheep, however, (up to 600 US\$ per sheep) as well as the land belong to the man.

With regard to the cooperation with Boomkolbeh – Turkmen Ecolodge, this of course means that the financial position of women is strengthened and their work is appreciated. The percentage of employed and independent women working with the lodge is about 70 percent). The fact that in another house they will meet other men is not a problem for the families involved, as long as the rules of behaviour are observed.

4.8 Ensuring economic and institutional sustainability of the project

According to Kamran Anvari, the Boomkolbeh – Turkmen Ecolodge has from the beginning been in the black and is self-sustaining. This information is credible, against the backdrop of the price calculation for accommodation, food, and excursion programmes. It is also important that the profits, which were probably not very high, were, as it seems, not withdrawn from the company, but were re-invested (equity capital formation).

The fact that since the opening of the lodge visitor numbers have increased annually by 30 to 35 percent is an indication for economic sustainability. If the opening of the country continues as it is to be hoped for, and if there is an end to the sanctions in the near future, Boomkolbeh – Turkmen Ecolodge can be described as extraordinarily well positioned.

It would be too early to assess the institutional sustainability. The company is too young for that. The institutional sustainability can probably only be regarded as ensured when the management may, as contemplated, be handed over to the young staff of the lodge from Tootly Tamak, and if they also run the company in a successful manner.

5 CONCLUSION

The author in charge did not expect to find such a well-conceptualised eco tourism project during his visit in Iran. As a whole, **BOOMKOLBEH – TURKMEN ECOLODGE** is of international standard and has certainly achieved to play a model role within Iran.

One of the reasons: The families Vahabzadeh/Anvari have cumulative expertise and regard their line of action as a long-term sustainable investment in the region. With two focuses: on the one hand, socially responsible tourism development around the unique Golestan National Park, and on the other hand a commitment to culture conservation that creates perspectives. In a nutshell: Domestic Iranian tourism especially must take this project as a model to follow.

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