Donya-e-Eqtesad Newspaper interview with Gary Lewis

1. In the present circumstances, Iran has been subject to huge interest by the European tourists. Do you think this opportunity could be used for the development of the rural areas which are close to the natural and protected areas? If positive, how?

The short answer is “Yes”.

But this does not only apply to rural areas which are close to the protected areas. It also applies even inside the protected areas.

Iran has a great potential in this area. It has wonderful natural resources and landscapes – rich biodiversity and protected areas – as well as noble cultural and social heritage. The country’s numerous lifestyles and rich history are more than enough to establish a strong tourism industry.

What you are seeing in the dramatic increase in tourist numbers is a manifestation of the immense interest which the outside world has in Iran – and in its ancient Persian lineage.

But there are risks. I come from a small country (Barbados) which has generally benefitted from tourism. But there was a time when we did not manage our tourist industry well – especially in the 1970s.

So, if Iran does wish to embrace tourism as a significant generator of income and jobs, it should plan well. Its planning should ensure that, firstly, there is no adverse impact on environment – especially considering the current carrying capacity. We should use sustainable development models.

Secondly, we would need to ensure that the required infrastructure and facilities are in place to support a tourism infrastructure.

Thirdly, and this is where we have not done so well in my own country, we would need to ensure that revenue generated should benefit the local economic infrastructure so that citizens see the benefits of new visitors from abroad. This is how tourism can contribute to rural – and urban – sustainable development in Iran.

Back to your point about protected areas, the evidence from the international best practice in international tourism demonstrates that tourism can actually be one of the best possible management measures of the protected areas – but only if planned and managed properly.

One way of ensuring good planning and solid income generation is to involve the local communities in the decision-making process.
In fact, in some of the United Nations’ joint projects with the government, we are supporting proper environmental tourism capacity-building activities to start the process – even as a part of wildlife conservation and protected areas management model.

Iran has an immense story to tell the world about itself and what it has achieved during the past 5,000 years.

Tourism can serve as a bridge to make this happen.

2. So far, the United Nations has carried out considerable activities in areas such as poverty alleviation, environment and health. Considering the link between tourism and environmental conservation or poverty alleviation, have you defined any projects/programmes in this regard [tourism] in Iran? If positive, how have these programmes been carried out? How do you assess these activities? If not, what standards and criteria should be defined in order to start this chapter?

Your readers may be interested to know that one of the UN agencies operating in Iran – the UN Development Programme – was actually involved in promoting tourism between the years 1999 and 2002.

This was when we supported the development of a national tourism policy framework package.

 Afterwards, we initiated a programme called Area Based Development that included local eco-tourism as a tool to reduce poverty. But nothing else has been undertaken directly in tourism since that time.

However, UNDP has continued to work hard to help reduce poverty in Iran. Take, for example, our poverty reduction work through the community-based “social mobilisation and micro-credit” techniques. This is a large part of many of our ongoing projects. This approach has created enabling frameworks – and infrastructure – for ecotourism-type activities. What happens in these projects is that local communities become empowered to plan ahead and provide services for income generation.

UNDP believes that its joint community-based initiatives with government and local communities can provide an effective entry point for eco-tourism. The approach would be low cost. And it would be sustainable.

But we must also work at the high level to create proper standards, criteria, and a sound planning framework for tourism. This is the only way to ensure that rural ecotourism can be undertaken at the community level in a sustainable way.

3. In the recent years, Iran has been facing several environmental crises. Do you think tourism could be a way to reduce these crises?
The environmental crises we face in Iran are various. At the same time, the causes of these crises are also very different. So, no one action will be able to tackle these problems. Tourism can contribute, but it alone cannot offer “the” solution.

I have repeatedly said over the past years that climate change modelling predicts – for Iran – a hotter, drier future. Of all the environmental challenges we face, I worry most about water.

The causes of the water crisis are low (and most likely decreasing) rainfall, improper water use and management and – thirdly – our development pattern in many areas. So, we cannot expect tourism alone to address all these fundamental issues.

The same goes for our other environmental challenges – challenges like air pollution, land degradation, greenhouse gas emissions, and the startling loss of biodiversity.

But, at the same time we should not underestimate the potential of the tourism industry to help out.

For example, planning for increased tourism can use development models which use less water. What we should do is avoid a situation where there is little to no planning for an increase in tourism and the resulting “development” causes too much water stress. I referred to my experience as a boy growing up in the tiny island of Barbados which lost control of the tourism industry and it took a long time to fix our errors. This has also happened in other places. But Iran does not have to repeat these mistakes. It can learn from what happened elsewhere in order to manage and plan what could easily become a major economic earner in the future. And the not-so-distant future, in fact.

So, in a nutshell, income generated by tourism can support environmentally-friendly livelihoods. The economic benefits from tourism can also partially be re-invested to address environmental threats and to restore some of our degraded ecosystems.

What we need from the government is an approach which establishes a proper, well-designed, environmentally-friendly and sustainable tourist industry which looks closely at global lessons learned – both the good and the bad. This will require seeing the tourist industry within an overall development model and not just as sectoral activities.

If planned and managed appropriately, the tourist industry can compete with other major economic earners – arguably even ones as powerful as the oil industry.

And let’s not forget that tourism is renewable economic resource – unlike oil.

4. One of the examples of tourism which is taking place in countries with greater biodiversity is preservation and control by the members of the local communities. Do you think this solution could stop the extinction of endangered species such as
the Asiatic Cheetah or Iranian zebra and lead into the growth in the number of other species such as Iranian dear, rams, wild goats, etc.?

As I have said in reply to your other questions, the best way to develop a sound tourism industry – and one which benefits the local communities – is to involve these very same local communities in the decision-making process. You ask about biodiversity. If they are involved in the economic benefits coming from tourism, the local communities will – themselves – find a way to save biodiversity without requiring the government to step in. For example, if the hunting is managed with local community involvement – and if they see the benefits from hunting fees – directly into their own pockets – we have learnt from elsewhere that poachers and others who threaten biodiversity will soon become unpopular. Locals will push them off because the poachers will be endangering their own income stream. The same goes for areas where no hunting is allowed but package tourism operators come to see an abundance of wildlife and also spend money in the local economy (hotels, restaurants, gift shops, local transport, etc.) as a result.

So, if local communities start to get economic benefits from wildlife and the protected areas, they will have an interest in conserving it themselves. In this way, tourism development can transform biodiversity into an economic resource which people see a value in preserving and protecting. This will have the happy effect of conserving biodiversity.

That is a win-win situation.