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DETERMINATION OF WINTER TREKKING ROUTES WITHIN THE SCOPE OF WINTER TOURISM POTENTIAL IN SIVAS PROVINCE[1]

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ABSTRACT

The investments made for the development and diversification of tourism in Turkey in terms of winter tourism in order to increase the income derived accordingly has gained momentum in recent years. In this respect, the recent activation of Sivas Yıldız Mountain Winter Sports Center has made Sivas a center of attraction in terms of winter tourism. However, the tourism attraction of Sivas will increase further with the introduction of different recreational and sporting activities for winter tourism within the scope of tourism diversification. Spreading on high plateaus, Sivas province is known for its freezing temperatures in winter and its nature which is snow-covered for a long time. The basis of this study is the evaluation of these features within the scope of winter tourism and the determination of winter trekking routes that could be a different activity for tourists in terms of recreation. As the primary data for the research, a field study was carried out by make interviews with the administrators of Sivas Alpin Nature and Youth Sports Club. Secondary data were obtained by searching literature on winter tourism, recreation and sports. Winter hiking routes with different difficulty levels that can be enjoyed throughout the winter season in Sivas have been determined in view of the findings obtained from the study. Various evaluations and suggestions have been made for the promotion and development of these routes. The aim is that all stakeholders, especially regional decision-makers (governorships, district governorships, municipalities, universities and NGOs) benefit from this study.

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INTRODUCTION

It is a known fact that tourists participating in tourism activities around the world act on a mass basis and prefer the sea-sand-sun triangle the most. However, with the emerging trends, tourists are observed to be moving away from classical tourism products to alternative products of tourism. Therefore, there has been a rapid increase in demand for alternative tourism activity in recent years. The supply of alternative tourism has also grown and diversified in parallel with this situation. The diversity of alternative activities in the destinations where people travel is a vital importance not only for the social and cultural development of the person but also for the economies of the tourist destinations (Yayla and Yaylı, 2019: 677). The fact that alternative types of tourism are prominent in newly discovered destinations in the tourism market as well as the product diversification activities observed in existing destinations indicate that alternative tourism types will be in high demand in the future (Kılıç and Kurnaz, 2010: 40).

As an alternative type of tourism, different winter sports and activities developed within the context of winter tourism in literature increase the attraction of existing and newly discovered destinations. Skiing, ice climbing and snow hiking etc. winter sports activities are implemented in more than 70 countries around the world in a number of winter tourism centers which varies from 4,000 to 6,000 per year, and in around 2,000 accommodation facilities (Silik and Ünlüönen, 2017: 25). In terms of the tourism sector, winter sports have a strong and significant contribution to the growth and economic activities of many regions suitable for winter tourism activities worldwide (Tuppen, 2000; Tsiotsou, 2006) and have a very important place in the related literature (Bonnefoy-Claudet and Ghantous, 2013: 624).

Large-scale events for winter tourism (Winter Olympic Games-1 in 4 years) are organized regularly throughout the world. Different events have also been organized to this end in recent years in Turkey (Erzurum Universiade 2011, the European Youth Olympic Winter Festival 2017). Furthermore, the development of new areas of activity for and the organization of national and international competitions has been emphasized in the 2023 Turkey Tourism Strategy. From this aspect, in addition to ski activities, it is also important to develop activities such as frozen waterfall climbing, ice diving and winter trekking in the development of winter tourism. In this context, the determination of winter trekking routes in Sivas is the aim of the study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Winter tourism, which stands out as one of the most important types of alternative tourism, is defined as a type of tourism that is carried out in high altitude regions with heavy snowfall and winter sports activities such as skiing, tobogganing and ice climbing are practiced effectively. In other words, winter tourism is a type of tourism that albeit centered on skiing, also includes different mountain sports and other types of sport (İlban and Kaşlı, 2008: 326). In addition, the general characteristics of winter tourism are listed as follows (Albayrak, 2013).

- Practiced in mountainous areas with a certain elevation, slope and snow.
- Serves both the sports purpose and contributes to healthy living.
- Includes unproductive mountainous areas into tourism.
- Appeals to individuals of all ages and educational levels and members of high income levels.
- Requires more infra and superstructure investments than other tourism types.
- Contributes to the regional economy and employment.

Skiing is the first traditional winter tourism activity that comes to the mind when winter tourism is mentioned (Altaş et al., 2015: 346). Every year 400 million skiers from around 80 countries visit winter sports centers (Koşan, 2013: 294). Traditional winter sports, which increased rapidly in the 1980s, lost momentum in the 2000s and the tourists participating in winter tourism turned to alternative types of sports that could be done within the framework of winter tourism (Hudson, 2004: 79-80). Table 1 presents the alternative types of winter sports.

Table 1. Classification of winter sport activities

Classical Winter Sport Activities	Alternative Winter Sport Activities
Skiing	Snowboard
Cross – Country Skiing	Heliskiing
Telemark Skiing	Snowkiting
Ice Skating	Dogsledding
Ice Hockey	Snow Biking
Sledding	Snow Motorbiking
Sleighing	Extreme Skiing
Curling	Snowskating
	Ice Sculpting

Source: (Hudson, 2004)

Over the past thirty years, many ski resorts in North America have diversified their traditional sporting activities with alternative activities (Scott and McBoyle, 2007: 1421). The main reason for this is the decline in demand for ski centers and there are two reasons that are considered responsible for this. The first reason is the increase in the number of people participating in winter tourism but not skiing; the second reason is that the people who used to ski cannot do so any more due to ageing because skiing is an active sport (Hudson, 2004: 80).

Tourists who do not ski represent a significant market in winter sports centers. It is estimated that 20% to 30% of visitors to ski resorts in Canada do not ski during their visit. Many ski resorts have invested in offering alternative activities for non-skiers. Such investments include snowmobiles, skating, dog sleds, indoor swimming pools, wellness and spa centers, squash, tennis and game rooms (Scott and McBoyle, 2007: 1421). Furthermore, it is known that participation in alternative tourism types such as hunting, culture, health, youth and nature can be integrated with winter tourism (Albayrak, 2013: 147).

Winter walks in the mountains within the scope of winter tourism are among nature-based sports activities. The first mountaineering activities were initiated in the 18th century when Europeans climbed the Alps. In recent years, this activity has evolved into recreational and sporting activities in nearby and distant mountains (Emekli, 2015: 205). Mountaineering is separating into branches such as hiking, trekking (nature walks), climbing with technical material, classic mountaineering, ski mountaineering, artificial wall climbing, rock face climbing, continuous climbing, big wall climbing with the help of technical material, alpine type climbing, super alpine type climbing and expedition climbing (Somuncu, 2004: 6).

Hiking, trekking and expedition, which are included in mountaineering activities, are separate walking activities. However, they are often confused with each other in terms of meaning. An explanation of the terminology for walking mentioned in literature is given as follows (Turkish Mountaineering Federation, 2017).

Hiking: means walking in nature for pleasure and sport and is generally used for daily nature walks in beautiful natural environments such as forests, footpaths and valleys. Hiking routes can be easy or have different levels of difficulty. Hikes vary from 2 to 8 hours.

Trekking: is used to describe nature walks carried out over long and uneven terrain at high altitudes that last more than one day. Trekking is more difficult than hiking because it includes camping and carrying food, drinks and equipment.

Expedition: can be defined as nature walks which include climbing more than one peak over a long period and distance carried out for research and investigation purposes in large groups (İDADİK, 2010).

The courses in which the above mentioned walking types are organized are divided into various degrees of difficulty. These difficulty levels are examined in six different categories. Table 2 shows the difficulty levels of hiking trails (Şahin, 2010).

Table 2. Difficulty levels of hiking trails

Difficulty levels	Explanation
1	The slope of the track is minimal. There are very few ups and downs in the course. Ascents do not exceed 100 m. The trails are wide. Walking time does not exceed 2 hours. Beginners and those without health problems can participate in these walks.
2	The slope of the track is small and includes slight ascents that do not exceed 300 m. The only difference from the previous category is the duration of the walk. Total walking time does not exceed 3.5 hours. Suitable for anyone who has participated in walks before.
3	The slope of the course is steeper than the previous levels. Includes ascents that do not exceed 500 m. It may be necessary to pass through narrow trails, sometimes through dense forests and more rocky areas. Passing through wet ground is more frequent. Walking time does not exceed 5 hours. The walks are suitable for anyone who is fit and experienced.
4	The course slope is steeper than the third level. The ascents reach 700 m. The paths are irregular, almost nonexistent in the forest areas. The route passes over more rocky and rugged ground. Walking time does not exceed 6.5 hours. Suitable for athletic and fit individuals.
5	The slope of the course is more challenging than for the fourth level. The ascents start to exceed 1000 m. The route includes hard structured, stony, rocky and pathless areas. Forested areas are quite challenging. The route includes wet and slippery ground. The guide should be experienced. Walking time is around 8 hours. Although this level preferred by athletic, experienced and fit hikers does not contain technical ascents, it is challenging.
6	The sixth level walks with more steep slopes, ups and downs compared to the other levels, ascents up to 1500 m requiring long-term route follow-up are carried out in harsh terrain conditions. Camping may be necessary. Walking time is 8 hours or more. This level requires experience, attention, condition, knowledge and discipline.

Global warming and climate change, which have been subjects on the world agenda in recent years must be taken into consideration in terms of winter tourism. As is the case with other types of tourism, winter tourism activities that are compatible with nature and suitable for sustainable tourism need to be developed and extended. For example, the decline in the snow level in the Alps in the winter season of 1989/90 led to economic losses in all areas integrated with tourism, particularly in hospitality businesses (Abegg and Froesch, 1994; Koenig and Abegg, 1997: 47). Likewise, global warming is expected to have an adverse impact on winter tourism activities in Scandinavia (Falk and Vieru, 2017: 1312). Therefore, highlighting winter tourism activities that do not harm nature and the ecological balance can be a solution in preventing economic losses. Activities such as winter hiking are one of the winter tourism activities that should be supported as they are compatible with nature-based and sustainable tourism.

METHOD

This study has been prepared to determine walking routes that can be evaluated within the scope of winter tourism sport activities in Sivas province. The study was based on qualitative analysis and primary and secondary data were used. In this context, in order to determine the walking routes, as the primary data, a field study was carried out by interviewing with "Sivas Alpin Nature Youth and Sports Club" managers and members (club president, mountain guide and expert biologist) in January 2018. Secondary data were obtained by searching literature on winter tourism, recreation and sports. In view of the findings obtained from the study, winter trekking routes with different difficulty levels that can be followed during the winter season in Sivas province were determined with the help of Google Earth Pro. Walking routes with different difficulty levels near Sivas center were examined in this study due to time constraints.

FINDINGS

Within the scope of this section, as a result of interviews and field study based on the purpose of the research, winter trekking routes determined for Sivas province are presented.

The Geographical Structure of Sivas Province

Sivas province is one of the important provinces of our country with its historical and cultural values, surface area, underground resources, natural assets, geographical location and geological structures (Ayaz, 2013: 65). A major part of Sivas which is the second largest province in Turkey in terms of surface area is located in Kızılırmak basin while the rest is located in Yeşilırmak and Fırat basins. Kızılırmak basin is dominated by a continental climate, the Yeşilırmak basin is dominated by the Black Sea transitional climate and the Fırat basin is dominated by the Eastern Anatolian continental climate (Sivas Nature Tourism Master Plan, 2013).

Due to the continental climate, there is no rainfall in summer and drought is encountered in Sivas. Precipitation is concentrated in other seasons and in winter season it is transformed into snow due to cold. The average annual rainfall is 420 mm. The average number of snowy days is 30 days and snow thickness is around 20 cm (Sivas Governorship, 2017). Snow thickness is 60 cm at high altitudes (Muhammet Erköse, personal interview, December 2017).

As a result of the destruction that has lasted for centuries, the ratio of forest area in Sivas to the steppe is quite low. Due to its geographical location and interregional transition, the terrain is rugged and steep (Sivas Nature Tourism Master Plan, 2013). The Northern Anatolia Mountain Range is comprised of the most important mountains in Sivas. The mountain range starts with Yıldız Mountain at an elevation of 2,537 m in Yıldızeli and continues eastward with Mount Asmalı (2,406), Tekeli Mountain (2,621 m), Köse Mountain (3,050 m) and Kızıldağ (3,015 m). Tecer Mountains, Karacatepe (2079), Gurlevikdagi (2688), Beydagi (2802) m are among the other mountains in Sivas and there are many other big and small mountains and hills (Sivas Governorship, 2017).

The routes included in the study consist of large and small hills and mountains determined according to different difficulty levels. Kardesler Hill, Sivri Hill, Celtek Mountain, Tecer Mountains, Yildiz Mountain, Emirhan Rocks, Gurlevik Mountain and Kizildag hiking routes are among the designated areas.

Kardeşler Hill Hiking Trail

Picture 1. Kardeşler hill hiking trail

Source: Google Earth Pro/Kardeşler Hill

The course starts from Sivas Police Training Center (Picture 1), continues through the path in Kardeşler Forest to reach the summit and ends on return to the starting point along various paths in the forest. The trail is

approximately 5.50 km long reaching an altitude of 1460 meters. The route is covered with pine trees and is the only forested area in central Sivas. As it is a short course, participation in hiking excursions is facilitated. The forest also hosts wildlife and it is enjoyable to watch wildlife and the city from the bird watching towers at the summit in the forest. It is one of the closest tracks to the city center where people who endure the stress and crowds of the city can be alone with nature. Wildlife that can be found on the Kardeşler Hill Hiking Trail: boars, wolves, foxes, rabbits and small songbirds. Track difficulty level: 2

Sivri Hill Hiking Trail

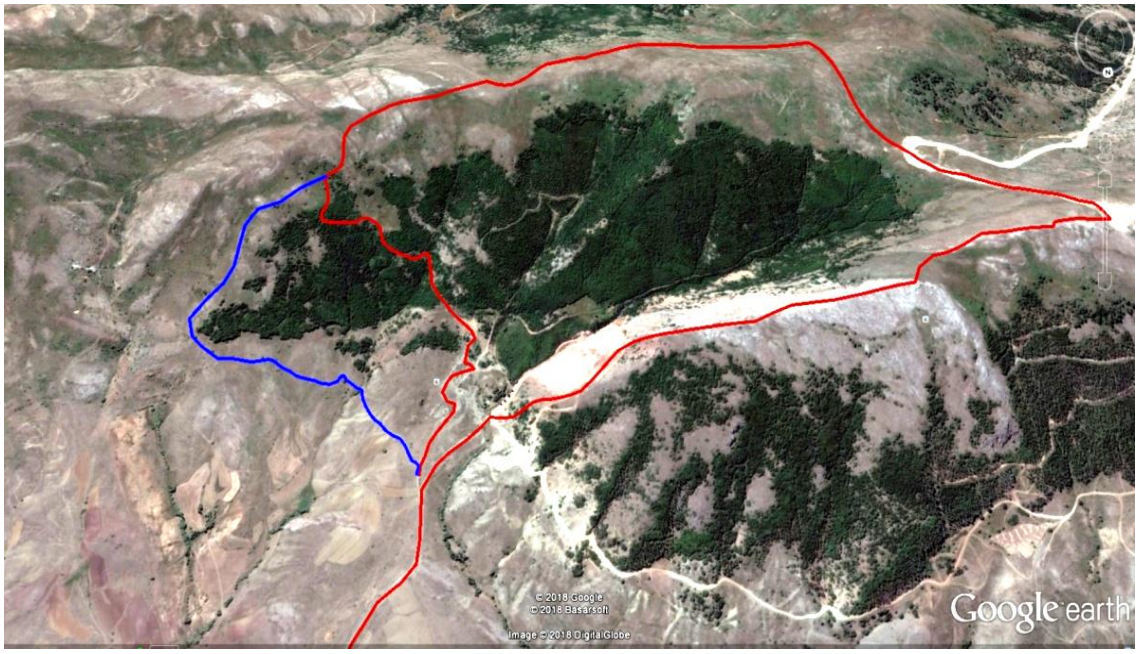
Picture 2. Sivri hill hiking trail

Source: Google Earth Pro/Sivri Hill

Sivri Hill hiking and climbing trail (Picture 2) is the second closest track to Sivas center. The starting point of the track that has a total length of around 5 km is Sivri Hill and the end point is İşhan Village. The route is at an elevation of 1538 meters and is suitable for daily walking. It is quite suitable for those who want to be alone with nature and watch the city from the hill. The natural wall on the eastern bank of İşhan Village is suitable for rock climbing. Track difficulty level: 2

Çeltek Mountain Hiking Trail

Picture 3. Çeltek mountain hiking trail



Source: Google Earth Pro/Çeltek Mountain

Çeltek Mountain with an elevation of 2067 m is 30 km from the center of Sivas. This trail, which is suitable for daily hiking (Picture 3), starts at the crossroads on the northern slope of Çeltek Mountain and Çeltek Village. Starting with a steep climb, the course continues from the mountain ridge to the second peak and then to the path to the west of the forested area. Two different routes can be followed once this area is reached. These routes consist of walking through a forest path or around the forest to the starting point. In terms of flora some parts of the forest area are thickly populated with pine, oak, poplar and willow trees while other areas are less dense. Due to the rugged terrain not much cultivation is carried out (Doğan, 2007: 7). In terms of fauna the area is populated with foxes, wolves, wild boar, bears, small songbirds (Eray Simsek, personal interview, December 2017). Track difficulty level: 4

Yıldız Mountain Hiking Trail

Picture 4. Yıldız mountain hiking trail

Source: Google Earth Pro/Yıldız Mountain

Two different trails that can be taken daily have been determined on Yıldız Mountain. The first trail (Picture 4) starts from Yıldız Mountain Winter Sports Center and ends at the summit at an elevation of 2552 m. The peak is reached by following the ski lift line and then following the P3 ski run. It is a convenient route that can be easily used particularly by hotel guests in the region, where they can stay alone with nature and take photographs.

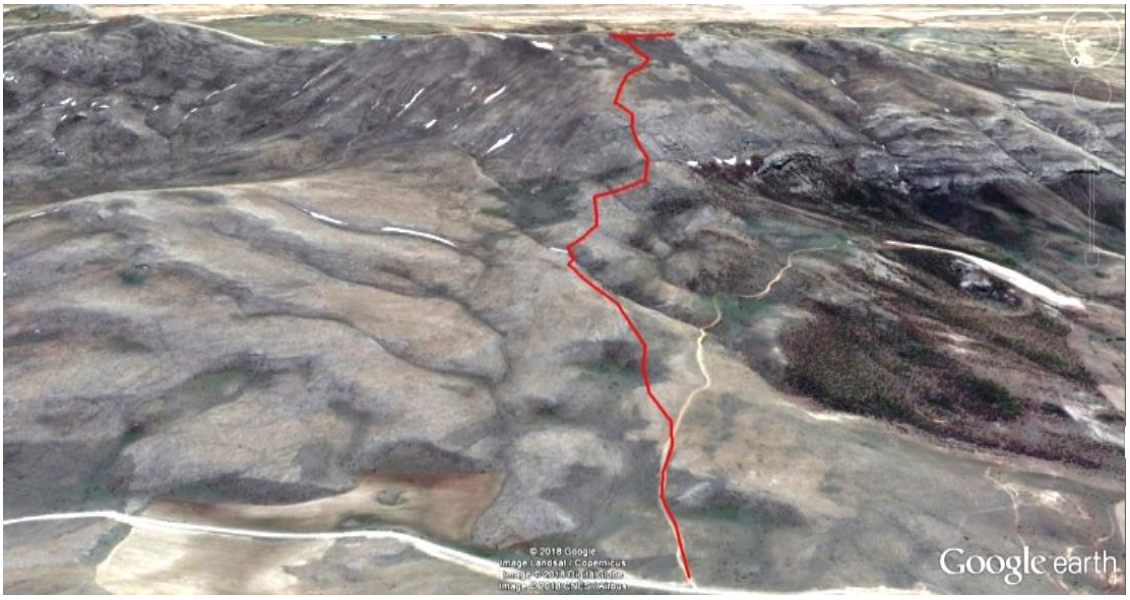
Picture 5. Yıldız mountain hiking trail (2)

Source: Google Earth Pro/Yıldız Mountain

The second track (Picture 5) is the road that starts from Yakupoğlan Village and follows the mountain ridge and reaches the summit after crossing the rocky area and following the historical road. In this course, which is more difficult than the other one, the point to be considered in winter walks is that the gaps between the rocks will be covered by snow and therefore the danger will not be noticed. The flora of Yıldız Mountain consists of forest area which is the general vegetation on the western skirts. Yıldız Pond, waterfalls and caves are located to the south of the mountain. Track difficulty level: 5

Tecer Mountain Hiking Trail

Picture 6. Tecer mountain hiking trail



Source: Google Earth Pro/Tecer Mountain

The Tecer Mountain hiking trail (Picture 6), which has an elevation of 2260 m, starts at the Tecer Village junction and after following a path for some time, the mountain ridge is followed and the summit is reached. Subsequently by following the same route you return to the starting point. A trekking route can also be established by following the mountain ridge. The mountain is appreciated by hikers with its interesting geological form and the winter landscape overlooking the lakes and different flora can be observed. In addition to large steppe communities, oak, juniper and larch communities dominate on the southern slope of the mountain while hazelnut and scotch pine flourish in the sub humid forest area extending on the northern slope (Garipağaoğlu, 1994: 387). When examined in terms of wildlife, mammals and birds seen outside the drylands of Sivas are also observed here. Wild goat is frequently seen in the region (Eray Şimşek, personal interview, December 2017). Track difficulty level: 4

Kızıldağ Hiking Trail

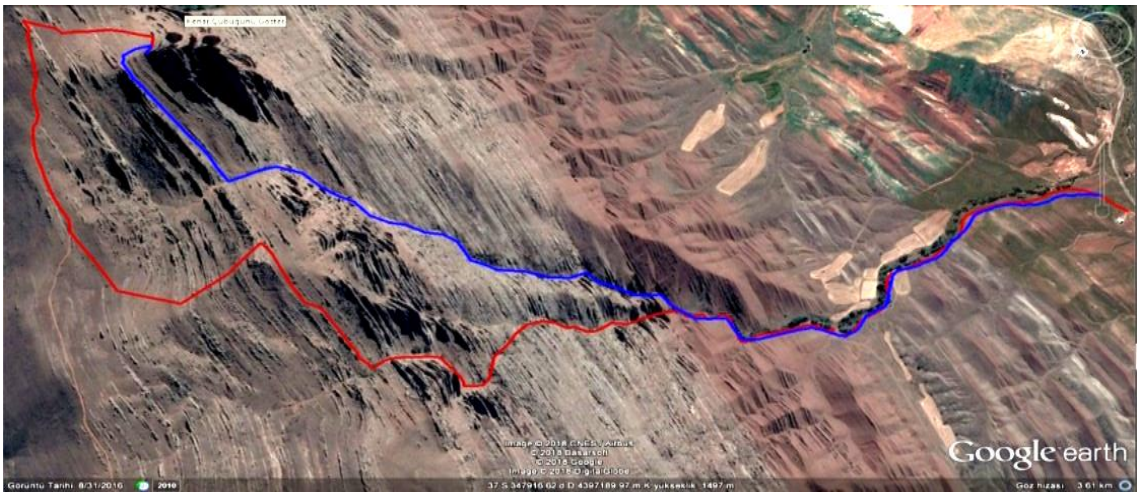
Picture 7. Kızıldağ hiking trail

Source: Google Earth Pro/Kızıldağ

Kızıldağ is a 3015 m high mountain extending between the provinces of Sivas and Erzincan in the northwest and southeast directions. The Kızıldağ hiking trail (picture 7) reaches the summit from the mountain ridge, following the path to the left of the forest on the route that starts from Kızılmezrac and continues northward n terms of flora, the northern slopes of Kızıldağ are under the influence of the Black Sea climate. In these areas coniferous trees and broad-leaved forests are encountered. Wild animals seen in Sivas province can be observed in the region which is rich in fauna (Eray Şimşek, personal interview, December 2017). Track difficulty level: 5

Emirhan Rocks Hiking Trail

Picture 8. Emirhan rocks hiking trail



Source: Google Earth Pro/Emirhan Rocks

Emirhan Rocks, located behind Emirhan village, 20 km from Sivas city center, makes the region attractive for a hiking trail thanks to its proximity to the center and its interesting geological structure and rich fauna and flora. Emirhan Rocks, which are considered a geoheritage, is a natural asset worth seeing (Ayaz, 2015: 50). The starting point of this track (Picture 8) starts with the junction which is 500 m away from Emirhan Village. The summit is reached by following the creek through the cultivated areas and following the red line in picture 8 from the crack in the rock. There is a carved monastery at the summit of the rocks at an altitude of 1780 m that is of cultural importance. In addition, descending from the monastery at the summit there is a steep rock wall approximately 70 m high where mountaineering activities are carried out. It is possible to do a photo safari among the steep cliffs on the course that will be preferred by those who want to get away from stress and stay alone with nature. The region attracts attention with its rich flora and fauna. All wild animals found in Sivas can be seen (Eray Şimşek, personal interview, December 2017). Track difficulty level: 5

Gürlevik Mountain Hiking Trail

Picture 9. Gürlevik rocks hiking trail

Source: Google Earth Pro/Gürlevik Rocks

Gürlevik Mountain extends about 12 km in the East-West direction. The fact that most of the mountain consists of hard limestone which is resistant to abrasion has caused the formation of very steep and cragged areas (İnan and İnan, 1990: 51). Mount Gürlevik with an altitude of 2688 meters can be considered as the most difficult climbing route. The Gürlevik Mountain trail (Picture 9) is located in the Hafik district of Sivas province, 68 km away from Aktaş village. The slope is quite steep at the beginning and near the peak. The point to be taken into consideration during winter walks are the snow balconies that form on the mountain ridges leading to the summit. The fauna seen in Sivas province can also be seen on Gürlevik Mountain. Track difficulty level: 6

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The importance of alternative types of tourism such as winter tourism, cave tourism, river tourism, agricultural tourism, dark tourism, tableland tourism and adventure tourism in freeing Turkey which attracts people from all over the world with its natural and historical values, from the seasonal aspect of tourism and distribute its coverage throughout the twelve months, is an undeniable truth. It is known that tourism activities, especially in developing economies, contribute to the increase in the share of the general economic structure. Therefore, the increase in demand for alternative tourism types in the future shows that tourism will contribute more to the general economic structure.

Sivas province has an important potential for winter tourism on account of the cold winter seasons. Making a serious investment in Sivas such as Yıldızdağı Winter Sports Tourism Center is an important breakthrough in terms of establishing destination attraction in winter tourism. On the other hand, recent academic studies on the winter tourism of Sivas province (Arslan, Kendir and Asan, 2018; Pürlü, 2018; Asan, 2018; Okan, Yıldırım and Sünnetçioğlu, 2018) have been reflected in the related literature. The focus of the mentioned studies has mainly been on subjects such as skiing, tobogganing and ice climbing. However, a study for a recreational activity such as winter trekking in Sivas has not been encountered in the literature. The aim of this study was to determine winter trekking routes in terms of diversifying winter tourism activities in Sivas province. Sivas province extends over geographically high altitude plateaus resulting in cold and snowy winters manifesting a significant potential in this sense. A total of 9 winter hiking routes in Sivas were determined within the scope of study. On the other hand, the difficulty levels of these routes range from 2 to 6 degrees. From this point of view, the following suggestions have been developed within the scope of the study:

- It is important to take inventory of winter trekking routes in Sivas province and authorized institutions promote them especially on the social media.
- Adequate safety precautions and warnings are essential on routes with high levels of difficulty.
- It will be beneficial to deliver the necessary training to hiking guides to prevent the destruction of nature within the scope of sustainability.
- Routing and informative signs must be placed in the necessary places on walking routes.

In conclusion, this study aimed at the diversification of winter tourism in Sivas province can pioneer other academic studies to be conducted in the related field in the following years. Different theoretical or applied academic studies about the winter tourism opportunities of Sivas will be useful for the development of winter tourism in Sivas.

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