

Theoretical Framework and Scientific Research Model on Sport Tourism in the Druze Villages of the Golan Heights

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Abstract

Previous studies indicate that hosting regional sporting events can lead to significant increases in accommodation occupancy, tourist spending, and local business revenue for Druze villages in the Golan Heights. In addition to data from previous studies, this article presents a multidimensional theoretical framework to examine the impact of sport on tourism in Druze villages in the Golan Heights. The article addresses scientific theories, including sports tourism, regional development, social capital, and sustainable tourism. Examples of key sports sectors in the region include winter sports on Mount Hermon, water sports in Birkat Ram, mountain races, and the proposed sports complex in the village of “Ein Kinyeh.” It offers a socio-economic model for developing sports in rural minority communities and extends the sports tourism literature to a unique Middle Eastern context.

Keywords: sport tourism, Druze villages, Golan Heights, regional development, social capital, sport and tourism.

1. Introduction

The Druze villages of Majdal Shams, Masada, Bukaata, and Ein Kinya in the Golan Heights constitute a unique region both geographically and culturally. These villages, located at the foot of Mount Hermon and surrounded by rich natural landscapes and scarce water resources, offer significant but untapped tourism potential.

In recent decades, sports tourism has emerged as a key factor in economic and community development in rural areas. This raises the question: to what extent does sport drive tourism in the Druze villages of the Golan Heights and affect the regional economy?

This article aims to provide a theoretical framework for analyzing this question. The first part presents four key theories relevant to the topic, and the second part presents a conceptual research model that reflects the value chain from sports infrastructure development to community economic strengthening.

2. Examples of sports activities in the Druze villages in the Golan Heights

2.1 *Winter sports on Mount Hermon*

Winter sports on Mount Hermon are among the most significant seasonal economic activities in the Druze villages of the northern Golan Heights, particularly Majdal Shams, Mas'ade, and Ein Qiniyye. The mountain is home to the only ski resort operating under Israeli administration, attracting large numbers of domestic visitors during snowy winters (Tourist Israel, 2026). The resort typically operates during the peak winter months and offers skiing, snowboarding, sledding, and cable car attractions, creating substantial seasonal demand for hospitality and recreational services (EL AL, 2026). As a result, nearby Druze villages experience increased commercial activity through tourism-related spending on lodging, restaurants, retail, and transportation.

From a research perspective, Mount Hermon provides a useful example of how climate-dependent sports tourism can affect local economies. One key variable is the distribution of overnight stays, as many visitors choose accommodation in nearby villages for their proximity to the ski area (Israel Inside Out, 2026). Higher occupancy rates in guesthouses and short-term rentals can generate supplementary household income and stimulate employment opportunities. Another important indicator is restaurant revenue, especially in Majdal Shams, where local dining establishments often benefit from day visitors seeking meals before or after winter activities. Comparative analysis between low-snow and high-snow years would be particularly valuable, as snowfall levels directly influence the operating season, visitor numbers, and business turnover (Tourist Israel, 2026). Such findings could help assess the vulnerability of local communities to changing weather conditions and the importance of diversifying tourism beyond winter recreation.

2.2 *Water sports at Birkat Ram*

Water-based recreational activities at Birkat Ram represent an additional form of sports tourism that contributes to the economy of the Druze villages in the northern Golan Heights. Birkat Ram, a volcanic crater lake located near Majdal Shams and Mas'ade, is one of the most prominent natural attractions in the region and serves both agricultural and recreational purposes. During the warmer months, the lake and its surroundings attract visitors interested in leisure activities such as paddle boating, kayaking, walking, and other outdoor recreation (Israel Nature & Parks Authority, 2026). Because of its scenic location and accessibility, Birkat Ram creates seasonal opportunities for local tourism development and supports the diversification of sports activities beyond the winter season.

From a research perspective, the analysis should first focus on participation rates in water-related recreation, including visitor numbers, frequency of use, and seasonal patterns. Higher participation levels can positively affect nearby businesses such as restaurants, cafés, local markets, and guesthouses in adjacent Druze villages, where visitors often spend on food, accommodation, and transport services (Golan Regional Tourism Center, 2026). However, another essential dimension is the balance between tourism use and environmental preservation. As a sensitive freshwater ecosystem, Birkat Ram requires careful management to prevent water pollution, shoreline degradation, and overuse caused by increasing visitor numbers. Sustainable planning measures, including visitor regulation, waste management, and ecological monitoring, are therefore necessary to ensure that recreational benefits do not come at the expense of long-term environmental quality (OECD, 2020).

2.3 Hermon Race and Ultra-Marathon

The Hermon Race and Ultra-Marathon events represent an important form of sports tourism in the Druze villages of the Golan Heights, particularly because they attract participants and spectators who often remain in the region for several days. Endurance races held in the Mount Hermon area combine athletic competition with scenic landscapes, challenging terrain, and the unique cultural environment of nearby villages such as Majdal Shams and Mas'ade. Sports events of this kind are widely recognized as catalysts for regional tourism, since they encourage travel, overnight stays, and repeat visitation among both competitors and accompanying family members (Getz & Page, 2016). In peripheral regions, recurring sporting events may play a particularly valuable role in extending tourism activity beyond traditional peak seasons.

From an empirical perspective, research should examine participant numbers, visitor spending patterns, and the broader branding effects associated with these races. Direct economic impacts may include expenditure on accommodation, restaurants, transport, sports equipment, and local retail services. Multi-day visitors typically generate higher average spending than day tourists because they require lodging and consume a wider range of services during their stay (Higham, 1999). In addition, branding effects are especially relevant, as races promoted through digital media and sports networks can strengthen the image of Mount Hermon and the surrounding Druze villages as destinations for adventure tourism and outdoor recreation. Successful event branding may therefore create long-term tourism benefits that persist beyond the race itself, including increased awareness, destination loyalty, and future visitation (Chalip, 2004).

2.4 Mountain biking

Mountain biking has emerged as a year-round recreational activity with growing popularity in the Golan Heights and considerable potential for the Druze villages located near Mount Hermon. The region's varied topography, scenic volcanic landscapes, forest trails, and changing elevations provide suitable conditions for both amateur and advanced riders. Unlike winter sports, which depend heavily on snowfall, mountain biking can be practiced during most months of the year, making it a more stable and less climate-sensitive tourism product. Outdoor cycling tourism has expanded globally in recent years as visitors increasingly seek nature-based and active travel experiences (UNWTO, 2019). In this context, the Golan Heights possesses natural advantages that can support the continued development of cycling routes and related tourism services.

From an economic perspective, mountain biking has strong potential to reduce seasonality in local tourism and generate more consistent income streams for nearby Druze communities such as Majdal Shams, Mas'ade, and Ein Qiniyye. Because cyclists often travel in small groups and visit repeatedly throughout the year, they can create steady demand for guesthouses, cafés, restaurants, bicycle rentals, repair services, and guided tours. Research on cycling tourism indicates that riders frequently spend on accommodation, food, and local services while valuing authentic rural environments and destination accessibility (Lamont, 2009). Consequently, investment in trail infrastructure, signage, safety measures, and event organization could strengthen mountain biking's role as a sustainable economic sector. Its ability to attract visitors outside the winter peak season makes it especially valuable for stabilizing tourism income and reducing dependence on short seasonal demand cycles.

2.5 *Proposed stadium in Ein Qiniyye*

The proposed stadium in Ein Qiniyye presents a distinctive opportunity for economic development through sports infrastructure in one of the Druze villages of the Golan Heights. Modern stadium facilities in rural or peripheral areas can serve not only residents but also visiting teams, sports organizations, and spectators. If strategically planned, the project could attract preseason training camps, youth academies, and amateur or professional clubs seeking high-altitude conditions, moderate summer temperatures, and a quiet training environment. Research on sports infrastructure indicates that well-managed facilities can generate local multiplier effects through employment creation, visitor spending, and complementary business activity (Baade & Matheson, 2016). In the case of Ein Qiniyye, a stadium could therefore become more than a single venue, functioning instead as a broader economic catalyst.

An additional advantage lies in the potential to stimulate group tourism and host regional or international competitions. Visiting teams and organized groups typically require accommodation, catering, transport, and leisure services, creating demand for nearby guesthouses, restaurants, and retail businesses. Sporting tournaments may also increase destination visibility through media exposure and digital promotion, thereby strengthening Ein Qiniyye's image as an emerging sports destination (Getz & Page, 2016). If integrated with surrounding attractions such as Mount Hermon and nearby Druze cultural tourism, the stadium could help transform the village into a regional sports hub. Long-term success, however, would depend on professional management, transport accessibility, year-round programming, and cooperation between local authorities and private investors.

3. Theoretical theories and models

3.1 *Sport tourism*

Sport tourism is commonly defined in academic literature as the combination of travel away from one's usual environment with either active participation in sport or attendance at sporting activities (Gibson, 1998). This field has developed into an important interdisciplinary area linking tourism studies, leisure studies, and sport management. Gibson (1998) identifies three principal categories of sport tourism. The first is active sport tourism, in which individuals travel in order to participate directly in physical activities such as running, cycling, skiing, or swimming. The second is sport tourism, where travel is motivated by participation in or attendance at organized sporting events, including races, tournaments, and championships. The third is nostalgia sport tourism, which refers to visits to famous stadiums, halls of fame, or sites with historical and symbolic sporting significance (Gibson, 1998). This classification remains widely used because it helps explain the different motivations and spending patterns associated with sport-related travel.

In the Druze-Golan context, the villages primarily combine active and event sport tourism rather than nostalgia tourism. Visitors are drawn to opportunities for direct participation in outdoor activities, including mountain biking, skiing on Mount Hermon, hiking, and water recreation at Birkat Ram. At the same time, organized events such as the Hermon Race and regional ultra-marathons generate visitor flows that include athletes, spectators, and accompanying family members. These activities create demand for accommodation, restaurants, transport services, and local retail businesses, thereby linking sport participation with rural economic development. Because the region offers both natural landscapes and a distinctive cultural setting, sport tourism may also strengthen destination competitiveness by combining recreation with authentic community experiences.

Weed and Bull further argue that successful sport tourism development depends on integration between sport policy, tourism policy, and local service providers. Their model

emphasizes coordination among municipalities, event organizers, hospitality businesses, transport providers, and community stakeholders. This framework is particularly relevant to the Druze villages of the Golan Heights, where small-scale community structures and family-owned enterprises can support cooperative tourism models. Effective collaboration between local councils, entrepreneurs, and regional planners could improve infrastructure, marketing, and event management while ensuring that economic benefits remain within the community. Accordingly, sport tourism in the Druze-Golan area can be understood not only as a recreational activity but also as a strategic tool for sustainable local development.

3.2 Regional development model

The regional development model provides a useful framework for understanding how peripheral areas can generate economic growth despite geographic distance from major metropolitan centers. According to Porter (1990), regions can achieve a competitive advantage by successfully mobilizing unique local assets, developing specialized attractions, and creating supportive economic networks. Rather than competing directly on scale with large urban centers, peripheral regions often benefit by emphasizing distinctiveness, authenticity, and resource-based specialization. This perspective is highly relevant to the Golan Heights, where natural landscapes, climatic conditions, and cultural identity create opportunities for niche tourism and recreation-based development.

The Druze villages of the Golan Heights possess several strategic assets that align with Porter's framework. First, Mount Hermon serves as a rare winter tourism destination, offering snow-based recreation and skiing conditions uncommon in the wider region. Second, Birkat Ram represents a distinctive freshwater and landscape asset that supports leisure, eco-tourism, and water-related recreation. Third, Druze culture provides an authentic differentiating factor through local cuisine, hospitality traditions, agricultural heritage, and community identity. Together, these three components create a diversified destination product in which nature-based tourism is strengthened by cultural uniqueness. Such combinations are often more competitive than single-attraction destinations because they encourage longer stays and broader visitor spending (Porter, 1990).

Sport further enhances this regional model by acting as an economic catalyst through multiplier effects across the local economy. Chalip argues that sporting events can generate broader benefits when they are strategically leveraged through tourism, branding, and business linkages. In the Golan context, events such as races, cycling competitions, skiing seasons, and outdoor festivals may increase overnight stays, restaurant demand, transport use, and purchases from small local businesses. These expenditures circulate through regional value chains, creating both direct employment in tourism services and indirect employment in supply, maintenance, agriculture, and retail sectors. As a result, sport tourism can help distribute income within the Druze villages while reinforcing long-term regional development objectives.

3.3 Social Capital Theory

Social Capital Theory emphasizes the value of social networks, trust, norms of reciprocity, and cooperative behavior in promoting community well-being and collective action. Putnam (Putnam, 2000) argues that communities with stronger patterns of civic engagement and shared activities tend to display higher levels of trust, cooperation, and institutional effectiveness. Social capital is often divided into two complementary forms: bonding social capital, which strengthens ties within a specific community, and bridging social capital, which connects people across different social, ethnic, or geographic groups (Putnam, 2000). In this sense, sport and

recreation are frequently viewed as practical mechanisms for generating both internal cohesion and external collaboration.

Sporting events are particularly effective at building social capital because they foster repeated interactions, shared goals, and positive contact among participants, volunteers, organizers, and spectators. Within the Druze villages of the Golan Heights, community races, cycling events, and recreational festivals can reinforce internal solidarity by encouraging collective organization and local pride. At the same time, larger cross-regional events such as ultra-marathons linking Druze villages with Jewish communities in the Golan and Upper Galilee provide an important example of bridging social capital. Through joint participation, logistical cooperation, and mutual hospitality, such events may reduce social distance and strengthen neighborly relations between communities that might otherwise interact only to a limited extent.

These collaborations can also generate economic opportunities rooted in trust-based partnerships. Shared sporting initiatives may encourage integrated marketing of race routes, accommodation packages, local food services, and transportation networks that benefit multiple communities simultaneously. Putnam (Putnam, 2000) notes that social capital often has measurable economic value because trust lowers transaction costs and improves cooperation. In the Golan context, intercommunity sports tourism therefore has the potential to create not only social cohesion but also practical development outcomes through joint entrepreneurship and coordinated destination planning. Social Capital Theory thus offers a valuable framework for understanding how sporting activities can contribute to both community relations and regional economic resilience (Putnam, 2000).

3.4 *Sustainable tourism*

Sustainable tourism has become a central framework in managing sport-related travel in environmentally sensitive destinations. Getz argues that sport tourism development must balance economic benefits with environmental protection and long-term community well-being, particularly in regions where natural resources are the core attraction. This requires careful regulation of visitor flows, protection of ecosystems, and meaningful participation of local communities in planning and decision-making processes. Without such measures, sports tourism can lead to environmental degradation, seasonal overuse, and uneven distribution of economic benefits (Getz, 2008).

In the context of the Golan Heights, sustainability concerns are particularly relevant given the ecological sensitivity of key sites, such as Birkat Ram, and the alpine environment of Mount Hermon. Birkat Ram, as a volcanic crater lake, requires careful management to prevent pollution, shoreline damage, and excessive recreational pressure. Similarly, Mount Hermon's natural landscape is vulnerable to seasonal overcrowding during peak winter months, when skiing and snow-related tourism concentrate large numbers of visitors within a limited timeframe. These pressures highlight the importance of managing peak-season demand while ensuring that infrastructure development does not compromise environmental integrity.

A key sustainability challenge in the region is the strong seasonality of tourism activity. Winter sports generate intense short-term economic gains but also create fluctuations in employment and resource use. According to sustainable tourism principles, one effective strategy is to redistribute visitor flows throughout the year by diversifying activities in the Druze villages, such as hiking, cycling, and cultural tourism. This approach reduces environmental stress during peak periods while increasing year-round economic stability. Consequently, sustainable sport tourism in the Golan Heights depends on balancing environmental conservation with economic diversification and inclusive governance structures (Getz, 2008; Petkova, Galily & Pilyavsky, 2024).

3.5 Conceptual model

Based on the reviewed literature on sport tourism, regional development, and sustainable tourism, a conceptual value-chain model is proposed to explain how sport-related activities can contribute to economic and social development in the Druze villages of the Golan Heights. The model follows a sequential structure that begins with the development of sport infrastructure and ends with broader community resilience. This approach aligns with sport tourism theories that emphasize the interdependence between physical infrastructure, event production, visitor demand, and local economic systems (Weed & Bull, 2004).

Stage A focuses on developing sports infrastructure, including running trails, stadium facilities, water-sport sites, and mountain-biking routes. These assets form the foundational supply side of sport tourism and determine a destination's capacity to host both events and recreational visitors. Stage B involves organizing sporting events and structured activities, such as races, tournaments, training camps, and recreational programs. These activities act as demand generators by creating reasons for travel and increasing destination visibility. Stage C then reflects the resulting increase in visitor arrivals, including both day visitors and overnight tourists, whose patterns are influenced by seasonality, event timing, and accessibility.

In Stage D, increased visitation leads to higher tourist expenditures across multiple sectors, including accommodation, food services, transport, and recreational services. Stage E captures the downstream effects on the local economy, particularly the hospitality sector, restaurants, and small family-owned businesses that characterize the Druze villages. These effects contribute to job creation and income diversification within the community. Finally, Stage F represents broader economic strengthening and community resilience, where sustained tourism flows enhance financial stability and support long-term development. This structure is consistent with sport event leverage theory, which emphasizes that benefits are maximized when tourism is strategically connected to local economic systems (Chalip, 2004).

Importantly, the model is not strictly linear. While it assumes causal progression from infrastructure to economic outcomes, it also recognizes feedback loops. As local economic capacity increases, communities gain the ability to reinvest in infrastructure, improve event quality, and expand marketing efforts. This reinvestment cycle strengthens the overall system and enhances its sustainability over time. In this way, the conceptual model reflects both the dynamic and self-reinforcing nature of sport tourism development in peripheral regions such as the Druze villages of the Golan Heights.

4. Conclusion

This article develops a structured theoretical and conceptual understanding of sports tourism in Druze villages in the Golan Heights by integrating multiple academic perspectives. It begins by defining sports tourism as a combination of travel and participation in or viewing of sports-related activities (Gibson, 1998) and distinguishes among active, event, and nostalgia forms. In the case of the Druze villages, the dominant forms are active and event sports tourism, manifested in activities such as skiing on Mount Hermon, participation in endurance races, water recreation in Birkat Ram, and mountain biking. These activities position the region as a multi-purpose sports tourism destination rather than a single attraction site.

In addition, the article examines more specific examples of sports tourism across the region, highlighting their economic and seasonal characteristics. Hermon serves as a major winter tourism hub, generating strong seasonal demand that affects accommodation and restaurant revenues, as well as local business activity, with clear differences between high- and low-snow years. Birkat Ram is analyzed as a summer-oriented water recreation site that contributes to visitor flows outside the winter season while raising important sustainability concerns. Events

such as the Hermon Race and ultramarathons are highlighted as drivers of multi-day tourism, increasing visitor spending and enhancing destination branding. In addition, mountain biking is presented as an annual activity that could reduce seasonality and stabilize local income. At the same time, the proposed stadium in Ein Kinyeh is identified as a future infrastructure project that could support training camps and regional competitions.

The theoretical framework integrates several key academic models to explain these developments. Sports tourism theory emphasizes the importance of integrating sports participation, event hosting, and tourism demand (Gibson, 1998; Weed & Ball, 2004). Regional development theory (Porter, 1990) explains how peripheral regions can gain a competitive advantage by leveraging natural assets, such as Mount Hermon and Birkat Ram, and cultural distinctiveness, such as the Druze identity. Social capital theory (Putnam, 2000) is used to explain how sports activities strengthen trust and cooperation both within Druze communities and between neighboring groups through joint events and collaborative initiatives. At the same time, sustainability theory emphasizes the need to balance tourism growth with environmental protection, especially in ecologically sensitive areas.

Finally, the article proposes a conceptual value chain model that connects sports infrastructure development to long-term economic and social outcomes. The model progresses through stages: infrastructure development, event organization, increased visits, tourist spending, growth in local business activity, and ultimately community economic resilience. Importantly, it emphasizes that this process is not entirely linear but includes feedback loops in which economic gains enable reinvestment in infrastructure and future events. Overall, the paper argues that sports tourism in Druze villages in the Golan Heights functions as an integrated system linking natural resources, community structures, and economic development, with strong potential for sustainable regional growth when properly managed.

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