

Original Research Article

Landscape as a Source of Development (Protection of the Rural Landscape, an Important Step in the Development Process: A Case Study of Villages of Kuhdasht County)*

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Abstract | Contemporary progress in the field of development has fundamentally transformed the landscape of Iranian villages, affecting not only the physical and functional structures but also the meaning and identity of the rural landscape. This research, grounded in a place-based approach and the concept of landscape as a resource, shows how ignoring the semantic and cultural dimensions of place in development plans leads to the weakening of identity foundations and the destruction of the rural landscape. The research method is qualitative and based on phenomenological analysis of three case studies in Kuhdasht County (the villages of Paye Astan, Khosrowabad, Aboulvafa, and Sorkhdom Laki). The data were collected through field observations and the analysis of development plan documents, and were analyzed using an interpretive analysis approach. The findings show that development plans in these villages, which have been mainly based on a physical and sectoral perspective, regardless of an ontological understanding of place, have led to a break in the connection among historical, cultural, and natural elements. As a result, place-making indicators such as “systematic relations of heritage elements”, “occurrence of communal spaces”, “centrality of sacred elements”, “view and landscape”, and “organicity” have been ignored in the development process. This research concludes that the protection of the rural landscape is not a purely aesthetic or heritage matter, but rather a foundation for achieving sustainable and endogenous development; a development that arises from the understanding of place as a source and from the ontological reading of space. In this framework, paying attention to the concept of landscape as a source in development policy-making can provide a native model that is resistant to uniformizing and non-contextual development trends.

Keywords | *Rural landscape, Place-based development, Landscape as a resource, Kuhdasht County.*

Introduction | Today, rural landscapes are changing. The flow of capital, people, goods, and information shapes the functions and forms of the rural landscape, altering its character. Development flows have led to the creation of abandoned farmland, uninhabited houses, and abandoned landscapes in rural areas. Landscape structures, patterns, and

functions in villages have changed. Local cultural landscapes have been destroyed, productive activities have declined, and agricultural lands, forests, and natural resources are rapidly decreasing due to urbanization and industrial development. Profound changes have occurred in cultural, fundamental, economic, and natural relations, and the values and meaning of the landscape are being transformed and reinterpreted.

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Changes in the social composition of rural areas (newcomers, residents, tourists) affect the symbolic meanings that different rural actors (including agricultural households) attribute to agriculture, nature, and rural landscapes. The rural landscape is not only a reflection of historical, cultural, and environmental interactions between humans and nature, but also acts as a “resource” of symbolic values, productive resources, and local identities (Antrop, 2005; Rega, 2014). In recent decades, development processes in rural areas, including development projects, tourism, industrial agriculture, and land use changes, have had profound effects on the structure and functioning of rural landscapes. These interventions have, in many cases, been carried out without taking into account the specific characteristics of the place and by ignoring local capacities; as a result, they have led to the destruction of natural elements, the weakening of cultural identity, and the reduction of spatial cohesion in villages (ELC, 2000; Kizos & Iosifides, 2007).

Kuhdasht County, one of the counties of Lorestan Province, with its natural, cultural, and historical diversity, is a clear example of rural landscapes vulnerable to uncoordinated development. This county, with about 70 years of settlement, was formed during the land reforms of the Pahlavi era and has so far been the recipient of various development plans, including urban master plans and rural guide plans. Unfortunately, due to the lack of attention given to the concept of place, which is a combination of history and geography, not only have these plans not achieved success in development, but by destroying natural and cultural capital, creating poverty, and reducing job opportunities, the Kuhdasht region is now facing a crisis of loss of human resources.

Therefore, protecting the rural landscape of this region is not only an aesthetic or environmental measure, but also a fundamental step towards achieving balanced, sustainable development based on local capacities. Focusing on landscape as a resource, this article examines the effects of development measures on the structure and meanings of rural landscapes in Kuhdasht. It explains the necessity of a place-based approach in development planning. In this regard, this article seeks to answer the question: How do the understanding and interpretation of rural space contribute to protecting it from potential destructive development processes? What is the importance of place protection in development plans? It seems that paying attention to landscapes as places offers a new development model that harmoniously integrates cultural, social, economic, and environmental factors. Therefore, protecting rural landscapes should be considered a development priority.

Research Method

This research is applied in nature and purpose and qualitative in approach. Its main goal is to analyze the impact of development plans on the rural landscape. In this regard, the research emphasizes a phenomenological understanding of

place and residents' lived experience rather than relying on quantitative measures. The primary methods of data collection included field observations, document content analysis, and development plans. In the first stage, three villages of Paye Astan, Khosrowabad, Aboulvafa, and Sorkhdom Laki were selected as purposeful case studies, considering their natural-cultural characteristics and the extent of intervention of development plans. Samples were purposively selected to enable in-depth observation of the effects of development. In the second stage, for each case, multifaceted field studies were conducted, including visual documentation, the creation of analytical maps, identification of natural and cultural elements, and a comparative study with development plan documents (including the Rural Guide Plan). These data were examined as an interpretive and comparative analysis to extract common patterns in landscape change and spatial identity. Data analysis was conducted at two levels:

1. Physical-landscape analysis: assessing spatial and visual changes in the natural context of the village;
2. Perceptual-semantic analysis: exploring the residents' perception of place and the transformation of the sense of belonging;

In summary, the present research approach, grounded in interpretive analysis of landscape and place, has sought to achieve a deep understanding of the relationships among development, nature, culture, and human perception in the villages of Kuhdasht County through observation and interpretation.

Theoretical Foundations and Research Background

• Landscape and place

The concept of “place” in the literature of geography, landscape, and architecture goes beyond a mere geographical location or physical space. It is considered a multidimensional structure including spatial, cultural, social, and experiential dimensions. One of the most important theorists who has systematically explained the concept of place is Norberg-Schulz. In his famous book,¹ he mentions the “genius loci,” a concept rooted in Roman tradition that refers to the preserving and identifying force of each place. From Schulz's perspective, place is a combination of natural, cultural, historical, and spatial elements that, in interaction with human experience, form the “lived space.” He emphasizes that architecture should reveal and enhance this spirit of place, not eliminate or ignore it. According to Tuan (1977), place is formed when space is mixed with meaning, experience, and human attachment; In other words, “space” becomes “place” through lived experience. He considers place to be the result of human experience of space, a space mixed with memory, meaning, and attachment that becomes a place. Massey (1994) also emphasizes the dynamism and polyphony of place and considers it a product of social, historical, and economic relations established within a specific geographical context. In this regard, Relph (1976) proposes the concept of “sense of place,” which refers to the emotional

and perceptual bond individuals have with their living environment. In a place-based approach to development, these definitions are important because they show that each place has unique characteristics that must be taken into account in development policy and planning (Healey, 2006). As a result, a deep understanding of the concept of place and its semantic and social dimensions is a fundamental prerequisite for designing effective, sustainable, and locally relevant development interventions. The relationship between “landscape” and “place” is a fundamental one in landscape literature. Landscape is understood not only as a physical or visual structure, but also as an objective and spatial manifestation of “place”; a place that is imbued with human experience, historical memory, and cultural meanings. Malpas (2011) defines landscape as “a way of being in place”; that is, landscape itself is a type of place through which humans interact with the world around them. This phenomenological perspective sees landscape not simply as an image or backdrop, but as a platform for lived experience, identity, and meaning-making. Inspired by Heidegger, Malpas calls landscape part of the “topology of being”; The space in which humans are situated, give meaning to, and interact with the world. Studies by Hunziker et al. (2007) also show that landscape can be analyzed from two aspects: as “space” and as “place”. In this framework, landscape as place carries “place identity” and “sense of place,” concepts that refer to the emotional, cultural, and perceptual connections humans have with the environment. These landscapes should not only be preserved aesthetically in development processes, but their internal and social meanings should also be considered. As a result, landscape and place are presented as intertwined concepts in landscape literature; landscape as the spatial manifestation of place, and place as the semantic context of landscape. This relationship provides a theoretical foundation for place-based approaches to the development and protection of cultural and natural landscapes.

• Development and its place-based approach

Development is the lexical equivalent of the English word (Development), which is derived from the word (Develope) meaning gradual growth and expansion, manifestation and evolution, revealing and coming out of the shell and sheath. This shell and sheath are also in English (Envelope). Therefore, gradual exit from the envelope is the exact meaning of the word development (Jahanian, 1998). The United Nations considers development (a process that unites the efforts of the people and the government to improve the economic, social, and cultural conditions of each region and integrates the people of these regions into the life of a nation, enabling them to participate fully in national progress). Ultimately, development is an event that creates a new stage in a changing situation. In general, development is a process of growth, change, and transformation that takes place to enable individuals and society to flourish, realize latent capacities, and transform potentials into actualities.

The place-based or place-centered approach, as one of the contextual approaches, emphasizes the importance of each place’s unique characteristics in policy-making and development planning. Unlike traditional models that consider development in a uniform and comprehensive manner, this approach believes that each region has specific social, cultural, environmental, and Fundamental conditions that must be taken into account in the design of development interventions. Within this approach, place is considered not only as a geographical context but also as a dynamic socio-ecological system in which interactions among humans, nature, institutions, and power structures take shape (Mubangizi, 2024). Recent studies show that focusing on specific places, especially in rural areas, can lead to a deeper understanding of Fundamental, cultural, and environmental complexities and thus provide more effective and tailored solutions for sustainable development (Prosser, 2021). A place-based approach also emphasizes the active participation of local actors, the use of indigenous knowledge, and the strengthening of social capital. These features allow development policies to be shaped not only from the top down but also from the bottom up, thereby increasing their legitimacy and effectiveness. For example, a study in southern Italy found that development interventions designed with a detailed understanding of local characteristics and community participation achieved significantly more sustainable outcomes than general, non-contextualized programs (Sgroi et al., 2017). In addition, the place-based approach can serve as a model for international cooperation, because local findings, when analyzed comparatively, can be generalized to global challenges and used to design macro policies (Mubangizi, 2024). In the context of rural landscapes, the place-based approach is critical. In this context, landscape conservation as part of the development process requires a detailed understanding of the specific characteristics of the place, including spatial patterns, cultural elements, natural elements, and social relationships. Therefore, in areas such as Kuhdasht County, which have high natural and cultural diversity, adopting a place-based approach can lead to landscape preservation, strengthening local identity, and improving the quality of development.

• Landscape and development

In recent decades, the concept of “landscape” in environmental sciences, geography, and spatial planning has undergone a fundamental transformation. Landscape is no longer considered simply as a visual manifestation of the natural or cultural environment, but rather as a “multidimensional resource” supporting human, economic, and cultural life (Domon, 2011). These landscapes can provide ecosystem services, attract tourists, produce local products, and promote social capital (Kizos & Iosifides, 2007). The concept of “resource” in this article refers to a space that stores and preserves local values, resources, and identities, and that plays a protective and resistant role against

development interventions. Protecting these landscapes is not only an aesthetic act but also a strategic necessity in the path of balanced development. This approach is rooted in the paradigm shift from “landscape as an aesthetic object” to “landscape as a dynamic system of relationships and values” (Antrop, 2005). From this perspective, landscape is not only a representation of the past, but also a platform for the production of value in the future. Landscape as a resource means understanding it as a set of “natural, cultural, and social capitals” that, when interacting, enable essential environmental and social functions (Gerber & Hess, 2017). This concept aligns with the “ecosystem services” and “natural capital” approaches, with the difference that here cultural, symbolic, and identity dimensions are also recognized (Rega, 2014). In other words, landscape is a resource that can simultaneously support “material production (e.g., agriculture, biological resources)” and “semantic production (identity, beauty, collective memory)”. Recent studies have identified three main types of landscape resources (Li et al., 2022): 1. Natural and environmental resources, including land, water, vegetation, biodiversity, and ecosystem services, 2. Cultural and historical resources: including settlement patterns, vernacular architecture, livelihood systems, and local knowledge, and 3. Social and perceptual resources: including symbolic values, aesthetics, sense of place, and identity bonds. The combination of these three dimensions makes landscape a multi-layered resource capable of supporting sustainable development. Landscape is a resource that provides a foundation for economic, social and cultural development; Because the landscape: 1. acts as a repository of cultural and social life that is necessary for a given lifestyle and can provide a reflective image of itself to insiders and a marketable image to outsiders, 2. the landscape can discover and identify previously undiscovered resources that are beneficial to society and use them in its planning, 3. landscape resources can be used in a way that maximizes their benefits to those who need them most. That is, the landscape creates and enhances “environmental justice”, 4. coordinates the use of landscape resources to sustain resource use, using the repository of past and present cultural life for inspiration in the future to maintain the social community, 5. minimizes the damage caused by changes and reduces the cost of capital improvements, 6. uses the landscape to develop a marketable image that is consistent with the internal reality and enhances the reflective image (Hester, 1987). Therefore, the process applied to the landscape has an impact on development (Fig. 1). It is possible to utilize the resources of the pristine landscape, to show how these resources can be used to benefit the needy members of the community, to create a balance between consumption and sustainability of the resource so that the resources are available to the community for a long time, to design the landscape reservoir for the life of the community in such a way that the damage from changes

is minimized. At the same time, the benefits of change are created, and finally, appropriate images of the community are presented that are presentable and consistent with the community’s reality.

- The dichotomy of “use” and “protection”

A significant challenge in the “landscape as a resource” perspective is the conflict between “economic exploitation of landscape resources” and “protection of their intangible values” (Domon, 2011). In many rural areas, uncoordinated development and a focus solely on economic productivity have led to “consumption” of landscape resources rather than “sustainability” (Kizos & Iosifides, 2007). Gerber & Hess (2017) warn that this approach risks reducing landscape to a consumer commodity, while landscape has non-instrumental values, such as identity, memory, and beauty, that cannot be measured economically. Therefore, researchers suggest that landscape should be seen not only as an economic resource, but also as “a source of meaning, culture, and social continuity” (Stephenson, 2008). This view overlaps with the concept of “landscape as resource” because both emphasize the landscape’s capacity to reproduce cultural and environmental life.

- Landscape as a resource in policy-making and development

The European Landscape Convention (ELC, 2000) explicitly states that “landscape is a desirable resource for economic activity and its protection, management and planning can lead to improved quality of life and job creation”. This document also emphasizes the need to “integrate landscape conservation into the development process,” as recognizing landscape as a resource enables balanced, place-based development (Barca et al., 2012). In rural areas, this approach means accurately recognizing the indigenous values of each place. Villages, by possessing a combination of “natural” and “cultural” capital, can provide a foundation for sustainable development by protecting their landscapes (Makhzoumi & Pungetti, 1999). Otherwise, uncoordinated development will deplete this resource, leading to environmental degradation and identity fragmentation (Antrop, 2005). Accordingly, “landscape as resource” is a

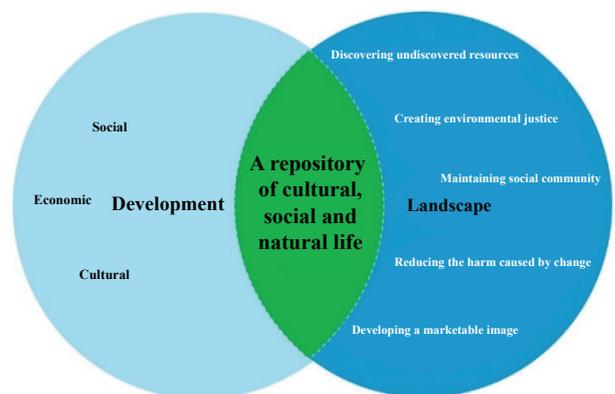


Fig. 1. The relationship between landscape and development. Source: Authors.

theoretical framework that allows for a multidimensional understanding of human environments. This concept establishes a link between “protection, use, and meaning.” It is based on the principle that sustainable development can only be achieved when the capacities of the landscape are exploited as a renewable, cultural, and social resource. In fact, any development intervention should nourish and regenerate this resource rather than consume it. Such an approach paves the way for “place-based development”; development that arises from the heart of the place and respects the source of its values.

• Rural landscape

A landscape is a phenomenon perceived by local people, whose characteristics result from the action of natural and/or cultural factors (i.e., human factors). Landscapes evolve through the actions of natural and human forces. The landscape constitutes a whole, in which the “natural” and “cultural” (human) components are placed together, not separately. The rural landscape is also the inhabitants’ perception of the relationship between its components. The village is a system, and the perception of its components’ relationships shapes its landscape. The rural landscape is a spatial and social structure that results from the interaction among humans, nature, and productive activities in non-urban areas. These landscapes include natural (topography, vegetation), human (settlements, paths), and cultural (historical heritage, symbols) elements and reflect historical, economic, and cultural processes (Antrop, 2005). The rural landscape is not only a living context, but also a carrier of meaning, identity, and collective memory of local communities (Rega, 2014). “Rural” is a concept and a spatial/place entity that is not easily defined, but rural landscapes describe the complex interactions between humans and nature. Perhaps it is precisely this ambiguity of the rural that makes the concept of rural landscape encompass a range of different issues.

• The importance of the rural landscape and the necessity of protecting its resources in the development process

The rural landscape is one of the most fundamental manifestations of the bond between man and nature. It reflects the history of productive, cultural, and social interactions in a given place (Antrop, 2005). This landscape is not only the result of the spatial organization of human activities, but also the manifestation of a kind of lived relationship between people and their surrounding environment; a relationship that has established identity and meaning in space over time (Hunziker et al., 2007). From this perspective, protecting the rural landscape means protecting the collective memory and biological capacities of the place, because any change in its physical or functional structure is actually a change in the cultural and social system of the inhabitants. The importance of the rural landscape in the context of place-based development can be analyzed from several aspects. First, from an “ecological” perspective, these landscapes are a reservoir of natural resources that provide vital services such as climate

regulation, biodiversity conservation, erosion control, and biomass production (Termorshuizen & Opdam, 2009). The loss of these resources not only disrupts the region’s ecological balance but also undermines the livelihoods and sustainability of local communities. Second, from a “cultural and identity” perspective, the rural landscape is the context for the formation of place identity, where physical structures, rituals, indigenous knowledge, and biological patterns have developed uniquely in interaction with nature (Stephenson, 2008). These cultural values are part of the place’s symbolic capital, which is rapidly eroding amid uncoordinated development. According to Rega (2014), the rural landscape should be seen as a multi-layered resource capable of generating material and immaterial values. This resource includes three main categories of “landscape resources”:

1. Natural resources: including agricultural lands, forests, pastures, water resources, and biodiversity that underpin livelihoods and ecological sustainability.
2. Cultural-historical resources: such as vernacular architecture, traditional fabric, local knowledge, and livelihood systems that represent the history of human-environment interaction.
3. Social-cognitive resources: including the sense of place, collective memory, and social networks that enable the continuity of social life in a place (Gerber & Hess, 2017).

In the context of place-based development, these resources should not only be identified but also considered in the decision-making process as “core development assets” (Barca et al., 2012). Development that does not take these resources into account actually consumes the “landscape” as a resource, rather than reproducing it. Studies by Antrop (2005) show that uncoordinated development in rural areas of Europe has led to the gradual depletion of landscape resources, a phenomenon also observed in many villages in Iran.

Consequently, the protection of the rural landscape is not only an aesthetic or environmental measure, but also a strategy for “protecting the foundations of development”. In fact, as Hunziker et al. (2007) point out, when the landscape is transformed from “space” to “place”, its identity and perceptual values become essential, and development that ignores these values leads to the loss of the sense of place and the collapse of the human-environment bond. Accordingly, development planning in rural areas should be such that landscape resources are preserved and reproduced as the identity and environmental infrastructure of the place, because only then can development be synergistic with the place’s internal characteristics and lead to spatial, cultural, and social sustainability.

Case Study: Kuhdasht County

Kuhdasht County is one of the historical and cultural regions of Lorestan Province in western Iran, known for its beautiful natural landscapes, ancient history, and a rich cultural heritage. This county is the fourth-largest county in Lorestan Province. This area is of great historical importance; ancient

monuments such as Mirmalas Cave and the Sorkhdom Laki Temple indicate that humans have inhabited this area for about twelve thousand years. Kuhdasht County comprises several districts and rural districts, each with villages that possess unique cultural and natural characteristics. The central districts of Darb Gonbad, Tarhan, and Kuhnani are among the most important divisions of this county. Among them, rural districts such as South Kuhdasht, Gol-Gol, Bolouran, East and West Tarhan, and Darb Gonbad host villages that have given the region a distinctive character with their traditional architecture, native customs, and pristine natural landscapes. Despite the development challenges, Kuhdasht remains one of the cultural and natural poles of Lorestan, and its study can provide a deeper understanding of the social, historical, and geographical structure of western Iran. In examining the villages of Kuhdasht County, two essential features stand out that require attention and study: the natural and cultural landscapes.

Findings

• Developmental measures and their impact on rural landscape: changes in the cultural structure of rural landscape

Culture is the result of the secondary-making of man in his lifeworld, and, according to Sauer (1929), the cultural landscape is the result of the interaction of culture and nature as factors and contexts. Cultural landscapes are indicative of a land's identity (Mansouri, 2010). This type of landscape, as a unique indicator of each land, requires protection. In the following, an attempt is made to critique the approach to development plans in dealing with these components of place by analyzing the cultural landscape of each village and understanding its importance as a repository of the village's identity and social life.

- Paye Astan Village

Paye Astan Village (Paye Asin) is a village in Tang-Siyab Rural District, Kunani District, Kuhdasht County, established by nomads in the 1940s. The village is arranged in a linear pattern along the road, offering views of the gardens below. Among the unique features of this village is its proximity to and view of the first Qajar castle of one of the great men of Lorestan, Nazar Ali Khan Amraei (Ghazanfari), the remains of which can still be seen in the plain below the village. According to observations, in the northern part of the pattern, a carved stone can be seen among the hedges, which, according to the village headman and secondary studies, including documents and oral history of the people, has special value for the villagers. According to oral history and folk tales, this stone is attributed to Imam Ali (AS) (Saki, 1964, as cited Adinehvand et al., 2016, 146). It is a memento of the famous Khan of the region, Nazar Ali Khan Ghazanfari.² The semantic connection of this stone with the castle, along with its visual connection, is one of the talents of this village that seems to

have been neglected in development plans. The mere physical protection of this element, in the most undesirable form, and the lack of attention to its relationship with the village, have turned it into an additional component of the village. In the village guide plan (Parvari, 2010), no heritage or historical element has been seen for the village at all, and even near the stone boundary, there have been seen uses such as rural facilities and equipment (water source, washhouse, etc.), i.e. facilities unrelated to the heritage identity and enhancing its landscape, which are evidence of the lack of recognition of heritage elements. What has preserved the stone and the castle today are the efforts of local custodians and residents, not the development plan, which is also subject to encroachment by farmers who no longer consider this structure an identity element, and the landscape is on the verge of destruction. The village development plans and the guide plan have been adopted without considering the heritage value of the stone and its connection with the castle and using this capacity for the benefits of the village, even though using this visual feature and the connection between the stone and the castle, as a memento of part of the influential history of Lorestan and the tribal life of Iran and the mainland, could have been a tool for the promotion of the village (Figs. 2 & 3). "The existence of heritage monuments and the systematic connection of historical monuments with each other is a place-making indicator" (Rajab Bojani, 2024). The development plans for this village, with a partial view, without considering the value of heritage, the connection of these elements with each other as a repository of people's lives, and their role in improving the quality of life in the village, are adopted and are plans that disregard the dignity and value of space, that is, the talents of place.

- Khosrowabad Village

Khosrowabad Village (Khosrawa) is located in the Shahameh Strait and is part of the mountainous region of Lorestan. Due to its proximity to the ancient road of the region (Royal Road) and the importance of the region, numerous ancient monuments can be seen in the region. The existence of these tangible monuments, along with intangible ones, is a manifestation of the culture of this village and indicates the valuable heritage landscape of Khosrowabad. The analysis of these ancient elements, including prehistoric and ancient cemeteries, natural and artificial caves (Mithraic temples), the Sassanid fire pit of Baba Salam (a Mithraic altar similar to the sacred Mithraic spaces of the region such as the Baba Abbas altar in southwest Khorramabad, the Kuhzad Kuhdasht fortress indicates the existence of a semantic system in the region that is the result of human life interacting with nature throughout history). According to the discovered remains, the past settlement in the region was not concentrated in a single area; however, from the present-day village, it appears that Mil Square was the original core. This square, which was a cemetery in the past, features a historical mound known as the

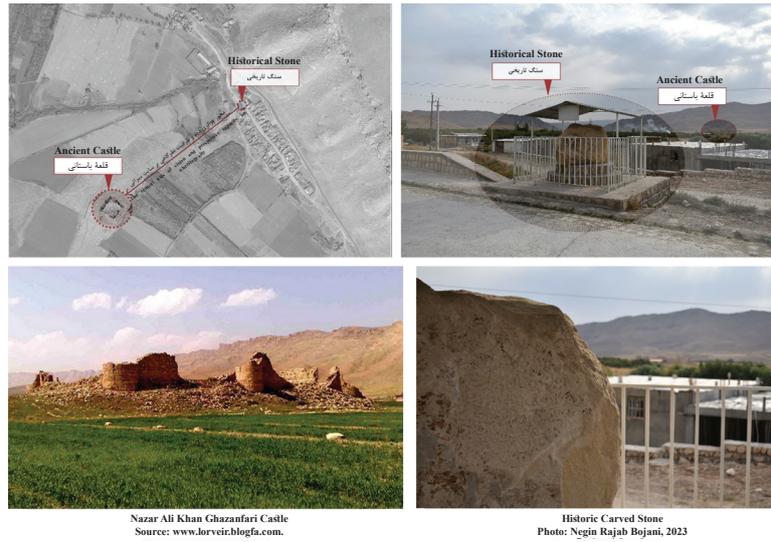


Fig. 2. Historical elements of the site and the visual relationship of the stone to the castle. Source: Authors.

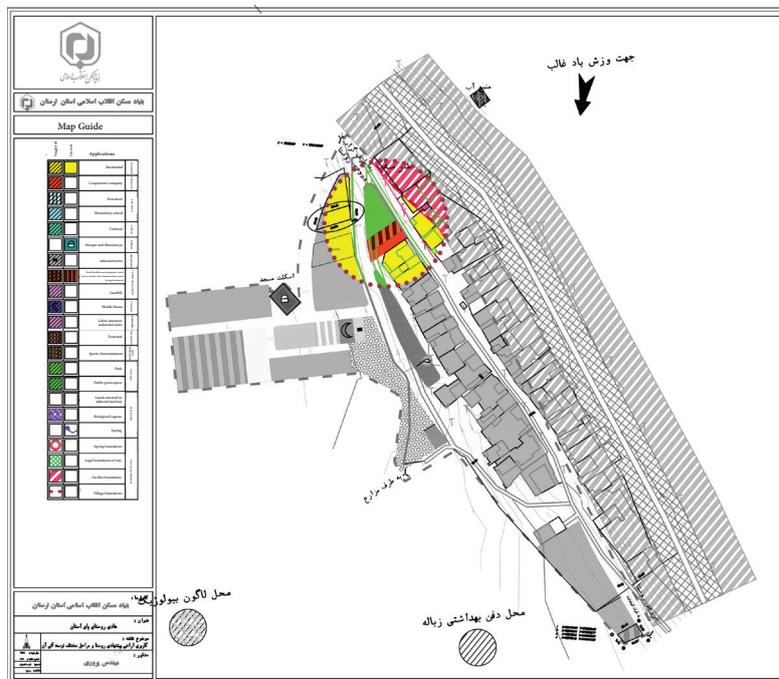


Fig. 3. The Guide plan's lack of attention to the presence of rocks and castles, despite the space's potential to transform into a place and improve the quality of the village. Source: Parvari, 2010.

Grave of Safar Beg. The practice of protecting this mound, as the oldest and most unique memorial mound in Lorestan, and its attribution to David Gavsavar as a manifestation of Mithra in Iranian culture and the behaviors of the residents, including giving water to the people, indicates the value of this space in the minds of the people and its potential to become a collective space. According to the evolution of the Iranian perspective on the sanctity of time throughout history, the mound was a sacred element of Mithra, which, in later religions, is attributed to a high-ranking person to continue the sanctity of space. The effort to physically preserve and maintain its sanctity indicates its value in Khosrowabadi's mentality and, by extension, the dignity of space. That is, the square, as a space that is the point

of the village, has the potential for being a place, that is, the value of space in various dimensions, including event-baseness as a place-making indicator (*ibid.*). However, the intervention of development plans and the construction of a new square and the allocation of event-driven uses, including a mosque next to it, have taken over the possibility of event-based use of Mill Square in a commanding manner (Fig. 4). That is, the intervention of a partial development plan has weakened the event-oriented characteristic of this place. In the recent development plan, the square's privacy and historical value have been preserved. Still, neither the order and systematic relationships of the region's heritage elements and its heritage landscape have been read, nor has the dignity of the square

as an event-oriented space and the importance of uses and components to promote its event-baseness have been taken into account (Fig. 5). In fact, the lack of ontological recognition of Mil Square and the analysis of its dignity and character in Khosrowabadi's mentality has led to the weakening of the village landscape. The continuation of this purely museum-like view of the values of the square's landscapes, that is, the square as an event-bearing space, and the lack of its holistic application, will lead to the destruction of the landscape.

- Aboulvafa Village

Aboulvafa Village is located in the central part of Kuhdasht County, Gol-Gol Rural District, on the slopes of Bareh Kazem Mountain. The presence of the Imamzadeh of Aboulvafa and graves with stepped, spindle-like steles is evidence of the

village's heritage value and its abandoned heritage landscape. Imamzadeh of Aboulvafa, in some narrations from the grandson of Imam Sajjad (AS), in some narrations one of the great men of the righteous, and relying on his name Aboulvafa and the proximity to the cemetery, which has manifestations of Mithra, has a sacred landscape at the level of the region and even the mainland, which is also considered the initial nucleus of the formation and center of the village. On the other hand, the manifestation of the spring of the village is within these limits. The coexistence of this sacred space, which has maintained its sanctity over time by attributing it to manifestations of sanctity, the manifestation of the spring and the tree, which are absent today, is evidence of the triple existence of the Iranian landscape and the value of this space



Fig. 4. Heritage elements of the Khosrowabad village boundary and the later square replacing the Mil square, taking over the eventfulness of the old square, and weakening the village landscape and quality of life. Source: Authors.

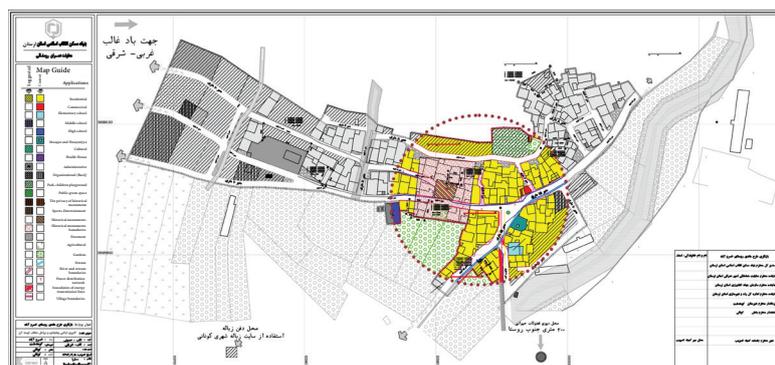


Fig. 5. Mill Square and New Square in the development plan. Source: Islamic Revolution Housing Foundation.

in the minds of the people. On the other hand, the analysis of the intangible culture of the villagers is also evidence of the centrality of the Imamzadeh (Fig. 6). Therefore, in such a space that has a unique status in the region, it is expected that a development plan will be adopted that is appropriate to the characteristics of the land. However, according to observations, the Imamzadeh was first seen as merely a sacred building, not a sacred space. Its connection with the cemetery, where each grave has a personality, was ignored. Only quality materials were allocated, and the cemetery is being destroyed day by day, transformed into a place like everywhere else. This is to the extent that, in the guide plan, a historical zone for the village was not defined, whereas a cultural zone was. In the next step, to facilitate access to the Imamzadeh, a street was designed that did not fit the village landscape, creating a break in it. Most importantly, the core of the village, the three elements of the village landscape, namely the coexistence of water, trees, and a sacred place, the destruction, and the spring outlet, have been moved downstream and have lost their semantic value. In other words, following an action aimed at development, without holistic attention to the centrality of the Imamzadeh and the importance of the coexistence of the three elements together, the sacred value of the water, the destruction, and the spring outlet have been transformed into a garbage dump (Fig. 7). “Centrality is an indicator of place” (ibid.). The lack of ontological reading of the centrality of the Imamzadeh and the elements connected to it, and merely an object-like view of the Imamzadeh and the lack of systematic attention to its role in improving the quality of life and village, have resulted in the destruction of the village landscape and have ignored the cultural landscape of this village as a repository for the people and are non-spatial.

The analysis of the examples shows that development plans are in a dialectical relationship with the cultural landscape. Development plans for the village’s settlement create physical

changes that indirectly affect the cultural landscape, which is dynamic. This will lead to the destruction of the cultural landscape when it does not arise from the cultural landscape; that is, plans, without considering the cultural landscape as a unique characteristic of each land and without considering the importance of the ontological reading of heritage, go beyond mere physical and functional recognition at different levels of the plan, from planning to implementation, or seek the ubiquity of villages or the urbanization of space. On the other hand, the intervention of the plans in the audience’s mentality and the destruction of the cultural landscape of the villages, followed by the lack of awareness of the villagers about this valuable heritage, will make them increasingly eager to become urban, and will lead to the degradation of the rural and nomadic heritage and their lack of demand for strengthening these values, the solution of which will first require the promotion of the ontology, not the museum-like, of the people’s awareness of their heritage. The villagers’ demand for protection of the cultural landscape and for the plan to adopt a holistic approach across various dimensions of development to address it is a prerequisite for the success of the development plan. A successful development plan must pay attention to place and place-making indicators, including the presence of historical elements and the systematic relationships among them, eventfulness, and centrality (as analyzed in the aforementioned case studies (Table 1)). Thousands of other components to promote the land as a concept and to improve the quality of life of the people.

• Developmental measures and their impact on the rural landscape: changes in the structure of the natural landscape of villages

The natural landscape is the human perception of nature, and the rural landscape, as one of the landscape types, is the most natural and meaningful form of human settlement throughout history and a perfect example of human

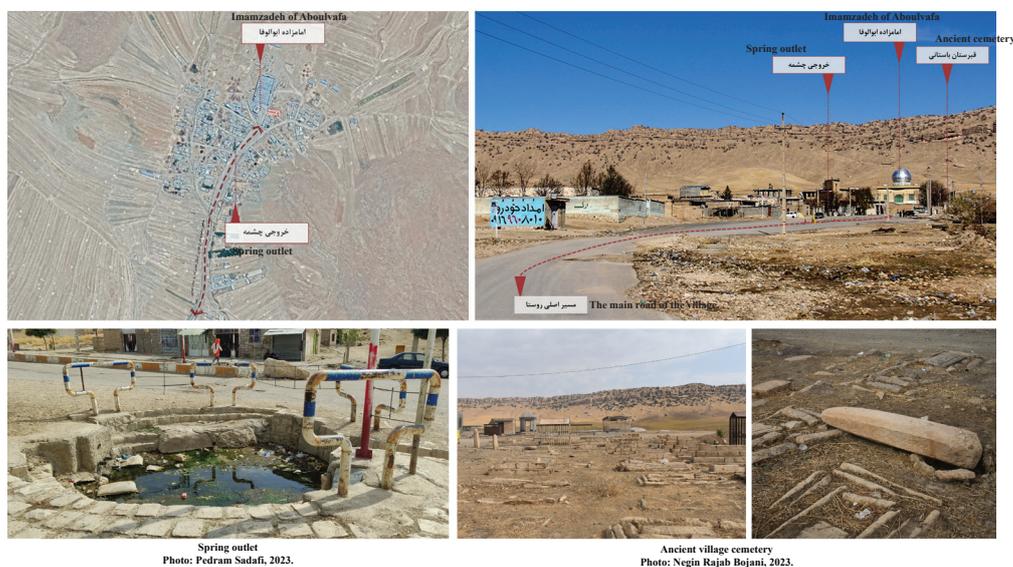


Fig. 6. Landscape elements of Aboulvafa village and its central role in the village. Source: Authors.

valuation of the natural landscape (Rezaei, 2024). In the analysis of the rural landscape, the natural landscape holds a special place, as these landscapes are not only manifestations of nature but have also been shaped by culture and society. In fact, the rural landscape is a combination of natural and cultural elements that demonstrate the socialization of nature through the appropriation and exploitation by ethnic and cultural groups, thereby giving it an independent identity (Abarghouei Fard & Saboonchi, 2020). The

rural landscape can be considered a reflection of people’s perceptions, understandings, and readings of the nature around them over time. Ignoring the role and position of “place” in the development process is, in fact, ignoring human understanding and experience of it; a knowledge that is not limited to geographical features, but also encompasses semantic, semiotic, and phenomenological dimensions. Since humans themselves are the most important factor and goal of development, ignoring how people read and interpret their environment, especially in rural communities, can have profound consequences for their sense of belonging and understanding of place. This neglect, along with the gradual changes in the natural landscape resulting from human interventions, ultimately leads to the destruction of the village’s spatial and cultural identity. The natural landscape, as one of the most fundamental manifestations of place, requires conscious protection and care to prevent unwanted changes and the distortion of the sense of place. Ignoring this not only prevents the realization of sustainable development but can also lead to the destruction of the historical continuity between nature and culture. This continuity has been built over generations and is an inseparable part of each village’s collective memory. Field observations reveal a worrying trend: the border between the city and the village is disappearing, and the village’s original character is giving way to an identityless, uniform pattern. In the meantime, numerous damages are evident, including a break in visual and auditory continuity, the obstruction of natural paths, landscape disturbance, and a decrease in spatial legibility. In the following, based on field studies in several villages in the Kuhdasht region of Lorestan province, objective examples of these damages are analyzed to clarify how uncoordinated development plans, while changing the physical structure

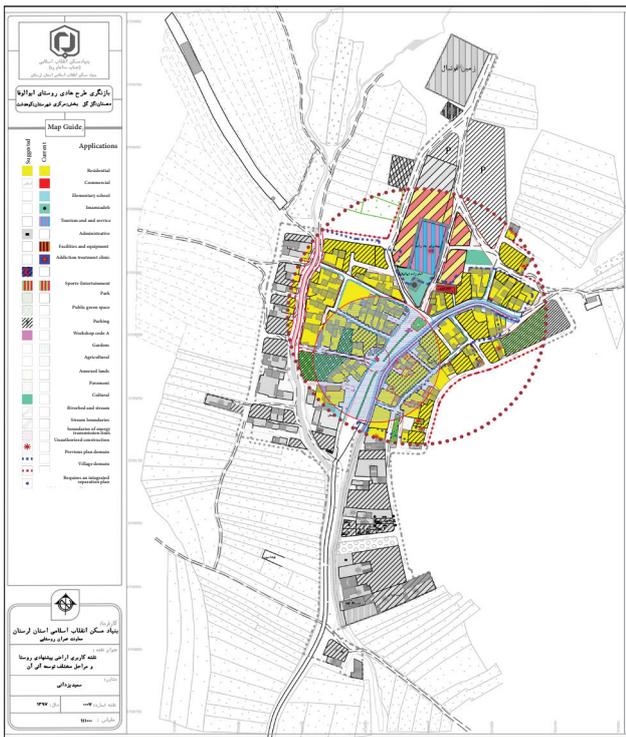


Fig. 7. Lack of ontological attention to the center and its related elements as a possibility for improving the quality of the village. Source: Islamic Revolution Housing Foundation.

Table 1. Place-making components derived from analyses of the development ratios and cultural landscapes of the villages of Paye Asin, Khosrowabad, and Aboulvafa. Source: Authors.

Sample Village	Elements of the village under study	Neglected cases in non-place-based development plans	Place-making component
Paye Astan Village	Historical stone and the fortress of Nazar Ali Khan Ghazanfari	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of attention to the stone and the castle as the heritage of the village - Lack of ontological recognition of the elements - Museum-like preservation of the stone - Lack of attention to the relationship between the stone and the castle - Lack of attention to the prospective role of the stone space 	The existence of historical elements and the existence of systematic relationships between them
Khosrowabad Village	Mill Square and Late Square	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of ontological reading of the historical landscape of the region - Paying only attention to the body of the mill - Paying only attention to the mill square as a collective space - Not adopting a use that stimulates presence around the mill - Adopting an object-oriented and purely restoration approach to the mill - Adopting a command square for the village - Injecting an event-stimulating use around the new square 	Eventuality
Aboulvafa Village	Imamzadeh Aboulvafa, the spring, and the ancient cemetery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Paying only physical attention to the Imamzadeh - Lack of attention to the ancient and historical value of the cemetery - Lack of attention to the threefold Iranian landscape - Breaking the landscape of the village by adopting an alternative path to the village 	Centrality

of the village, cause a change in the residents' perception of "place" and the gradual collapse of their sense of belonging.

- Sorkhdom Laki Village

Sorkhdom Laki Village is located near Sorkhdom Mountain and in an area with red soil rich in iron oxide. This geological feature has given the village a unique, distinctive appearance, blending its natural and artificial textures. The remaining traces of the old village texture show that past residents used this red soil as the primary construction material, creating a connection between the natural bed and the architectural body and adding to the "spatial identity" of the village from a semantic perspective. Another prominent feature of this village is its viewpoint; in such a way that the settlement of the village on the heights has provided a wide view and landscape to the surroundings and has led to the creation of a visual and perceptual relationship between the residents and the surrounding nature (Fig. 8). However, field studies show that these natural potentials have been ignored in recent development plans, especially in the implementation of the National Gas Supply Plan. The installation of gas lines without regard for the visual and physical context has disrupted the natural landscape and broken the visual continuity of the village. These changes have transformed the residents' previous understanding of the landscape and "village perspective," which was part of their collective memory. The results of the observations show that, so far, no specific and appropriate development plan has been formulated for this village; one that can emphasize local capacities and place-making components, such as the region's specific soil or its perspective characteristics.



Fig. 8. Natural Sorkhdom Laki viewpoint next to gas pipes. Photo: Zeinab Rezaei, 2023.

This is while in many of the country's prominent villages, such natural features have served as key elements in shaping the village's spatial identity and organization. The residents of the village of Sorkhdom Laki have a high desire to implement development plans, such as the guide plan and the move towards urbanization. From the residents' perspective, these plans are seen as a way to improve their economic situation and quality of life. Although this attitude indicates social acceptance of the concept of development, it can lead to counterproductive results if attention is not paid to local and contextual characteristics. Therefore, a review of the process of preparing and implementing rural development plans in such valuable areas is an inevitable necessity to prevent the repetition of unsuccessful experiences and the weakening of place identity.

- Paye Astan Village (Paye Asin)

Paye Astan Village had the distinctive characteristics of a foothill settlement and a deep connection between its physical texture and its natural environment. However, field observations show that after the implementation of the master plan and the physical development of the village, this connection has been significantly weakened, and the natural and foothill landscapes have undergone fundamental changes. Ignoring the natural and cultural context in the formulation and implementation of development plans has disrupted the organic structure of the village, altered the housing pattern and street layout, and prioritized horse traffic over pedestrian traffic. This, in addition to causing functional and spatial damage, has led to the loss of the texture's influence on the foothill form, a central component of the village's natural landscape. Another essential element of the village's natural landscape is the spring, which in the past played a pivotal role in its spatial structure and identity. In the culture of Iranian settlements, water was considered not only a source of physical life but also the center of the formation of social and spiritual spaces. However, in recent development, the village spring has lost its former value and now serves only to provide water for livestock. The lack of planning for the protection and organization of this natural element has led the spring to distance itself from the village, and its presence has faded in residents' perceptions (Fig. 9).

- Aboulvafa

In the Iranian landscape, the triple combination of "water, tree, and mountain" (and sometimes "four-arched")



Fig. 9. Left: The location of the symbol before and after the development of the Qanat and spring in the village of Paye Astan. Photo: Zeinab Rezaei, 2023. Right: The formation of the village around the new street without considering the village's foothill landscape. Source: Authors.

as natural-cultural place-making elements has always played a fundamental role in the formation of settlements (Abarghoei Fard, 2019). Field evidence from the village of Paye Astan shows that this triple was present in the village's spatial structure in the past. The presence of an Imamzadeh in the vicinity of a spring also confirms this connection, as in the Iranian architectural and landscape tradition, religious places were usually built in association with these natural elements. However, recent development interventions have created a break between the components of this triple, leading to the loss of its historical and semantic continuity. For example, the trees that used to be on top of the mountain have been cut down, and the spring has been destroyed due to neglect, becoming a place where garbage accumulates. As a result, the sacred and semantic position of these elements has changed in the minds of the residents. Also, the construction of a new street without considering the natural context and the location of the Imamzadeh has caused spatial disorder and physical inconsistency in the center of the village. The recent plan also designated the central axis of the village as a wide street, 40 meters wide, regardless of the spring's or the Imamzadeh's orientation, to accommodate the population during ritual ceremonies such as Arba'in. However, this physical intervention, due to its disproportionate scale and lack of connection to the village's historical and natural structure, has reduced a sense of belonging, increased feelings of placelessness, and created an unfamiliar space at the center of the village. Overall, the field findings show that the physical development of the Paye Astan village, without considering its natural-cultural context, has led to the gradual destruction of the original rural landscape, the disappearance of traditional place-making elements, and the weakening of residents' spatial identity (Fig. 10).

Discussion

Development is often seen as a positive concept synonymous with progress, but when it lacks a place-based approach, it can become its opposite and damage the rural landscape. Such a process ultimately leads to structural, functional, identity, and value damage in villages and threatens the continuity of their cultural and spatial life. Based on field observations and landscape analyses conducted in the studied samples, it

can be concluded that existing rural development plans have gradually transformed the cultural and natural landscape and weakened their place-making role. By focusing on physical and Constructional development, these plans have affected the authenticity and lived history of villages and, in practice, have interpreted development as "renovation" and the transition from tradition to modernity. Ignoring the natural and cultural context of villages, including landscapes, foothill texture, and place-making components such as the Iranian landscape triad (water, trees, and mountains), has led to the creation of unfamiliar, identityless, and sometimes ineffective spaces for residents. This situation occurs at a time when the growing desire of residents to "urbanize" is seen as a kind of progress. Still, in reality, it leads to a distancing from identity-giving elements and to a weakening of the sense of belonging to the place. The result of this trend is the emergence of settlements that, although physically developed, have culturally and perceptually collapsed. In such "urbanized" villages, the sense of belonging has disappeared, and residents are gradually neglecting their role in protecting the natural landscape. In fact, protecting the natural landscape is protecting the living and dynamic history of a place that narrates its identity and collective memory. Landscape is, in fact, a manifestation of human perception of place; therefore, paying attention to the audience's perception of place is considered one of the fundamental principles in the landscape approach to development. Protecting the natural landscape means preserving the perceptual relationship of humans with natural elements and, consequently, the continuity of the sense of place. Field findings showed that in many cases, existing rural developments are not grounded in an understanding of place and local capacities, but have been implemented solely in accordance with general, uniform upstream plans. This has occurred due to the ignoring of cultural and natural context, distorting residents' perceptions of space and consequently weakening spatial identity. In addition, the lack of residents' awareness and participation in protecting the rural landscape, along with their indifference to environmental values, has exacerbated the damage from this process. Other identified harms include ignoring the duality of "city and village" and attempting to unify the development model. This problem stems from neglecting the concept of



Fig. 10. Left: The inconsistency of the axis with the Imamzadeh and the spring. Source: Authors using Google Earth. Right: The inconsistency of the Qanat and the Imamzadeh of Aboulvafa on one axis. Photo: Zeinab Rezaei, 2023.

“spatiality” in rural development plans. These plans should be formulated in accordance with the natural and cultural capacities of each place and based on a holistic and perceptual approach. Lack of attention to the importance of landscape protection has caused development measures to remain solely at the level of observing physical standards, resulting in harms such as the abandonment of the village, the collapse of the spatial structure, the loss of communal spaces, the reduction of the sense of belonging, the migration of residents, and ultimately the disappearance of the landscape and identity of the village. Therefore, it can be said that future development plans should be spatial, audience-oriented, and based on residents’ perceptions, meaning they should be shaped by the place’s natural and cultural capacities and by human understanding of the environment. Only then can rural development, in harmony with nature and local culture, while protecting the natural landscape, sustain the place’s life and improve residents’ quality of life.

Conclusion

How we understand a phenomenon influences how we deal with it. Therefore, our knowledge about the way a place influences how we approach protecting that place. Being place-based means paying attention to the behavioral, human, semantic, and physical characteristics of the place, and is achievable through a holistic approach. The place-based approach, as a theoretical and practical framework, emphasizes the importance of each place’s specific characteristics in development policy-making. This approach introduces the landscape not only as a context for development, but also as an active and dynamic resource in the service of development. Sustainable and prosperous development arises from within the “place”, rather than being imposed on it from the outside. Therefore, “knowing the place” is a necessary condition for realizing development that is synergistic with the landscape, culture, and nature. In this regard, the rural landscape, as a type of place, needs protection. The measures taken in the name of development in villages have not only distorted a single component but also harmed the whole. Development should be oriented towards conservation, and measures to protect village landscapes should be a central pillar of development plans. The analyses conducted in this study show that development

plans in the villages of Kuhdasht County, despite some positive economic and social goals, have led to significant changes in the natural landscape and the spatial identity of residents. Field observations indicate that physical-spatial modifications, including the creation of new structures, land-use changes, and manipulation of elements such as vegetation and access routes, have resulted in a decrease in the harmony of the landscape with the historical and natural context of the villages. From a perceptual perspective, residents have lost their sense of belonging to the place in many cases. This finding shows that development without regard for landscape and cultural-natural elements can lead to a decline in the quality of spatial experience and a reduction in cultural-rural identity. According to the comparative analysis, integrating place-based development principles into development programs is essential for maintaining identity and sustainability. In addition, the present study emphasizes that development interventions should be designed in parallel with an understanding of residents’ lived experiences and social needs, ensuring alignment with the protection of the landscape and cultural identity. In this regard, it is necessary to pay attention to the following points:

- Paying attention to all landscapes (not distinguishing between extraordinary and ordinary landscapes) / understanding the value of landscapes / paying attention to educating the local community,
 - Lack of implementation of coordinated policies at different levels,
 - Recognizing villages as an independent unit and preventing the transformation of villages into cities,
 - Efforts to create strategic documents such as landscape atlases,
 - Effective monitoring of programs and their impact / implementing a monitoring system to assess the impact on landscapes and their protection, and the factors affecting them.
- The results of this study can serve as scientific guidance for policymakers and rural planners, especially in the design of development plans that protect natural landscapes and cultural values while improving economic conditions.

Declaration of No Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest in conducting this research.

Endnotes

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