

Empowering Communities through Ecotourism: A Holistic Model for Sustainable Development

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Submitted: 17 September 2024; Reviewed: 17 September 2024; Accepted: 07 November 2024

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Abstract

This study explores a holistic model of community empowerment through ecotourism as a sustainable development strategy in Bulu Tanah Pine Forest, Bone Regency, Indonesia. Using a qualitative approach with a case study method, this research involved 15 informants selected by purposive sampling, consisting of 5 tourists, 5 stakeholders, and 5 members of the environmental community. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and direct observation in the field. The results showed that community-based ecotourism not only contributes to environmental conservation but also improves the economic and social welfare of local communities. Tourists and local communities play an active role in conservation activities and sustainability promotion, while stakeholders play a role in providing support, both in the form of facilities and technical training. Community empowerment through ecotourism has proven to be an effective approach to maintaining a balance between economic, social, and environmental interests. This research offers guidance for the development of sustainable ecotourism by integrating various stakeholders to create wider benefits for local communities and the environment.

Keywords: Ecotourism; Community empowerment; Development; Conservation; Holistic

How to cite: Mega Erdawati & Zulkifli Ayub, (2024), Empowering Communities through Ecotourism: A Holistic Model for Sustainable Development, *Journal of Education, Humaniora and Social Sciences (JEHSS)*, 7(2): 405-412



INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism has become one of the important approaches in environmental management and local community empowerment in various regions in Indonesia. As a concept that combines environmental conservation with active community participation in the tourism sector, ecotourism not only serves as an instrument to maintain ecosystem sustainability but also as an effective tool to improve the economic and social welfare of local communities (Garrod & Wilson, 2004). One area that has great potential in the application of community-based ecotourism is the Pinus Bulu Tanah tourist area in Bone Regency. This area offers the natural beauty of the mountains with pine forests which are the main attraction for tourists, both local and national.

The Bulu Tanah Pine Tourism Area is located in the highlands of Lappariaja District, Bone Regency, South Sulawesi, and has attracted tourists because of its beautiful natural beauty and cool mountain atmosphere. According to data from the Bone Regency Tourism Office, the number of tourists visiting the area continues to increase every year. This increase is driven by the various ecotourism activities offered, such as camping, hiking, and other nature-based activities (Das & Chatterjee, 2015). In addition, this area is also a place for local communities to develop homestays, handicraft products, and local cuisine, which further strengthens the attractiveness of the area as an ecotourism destination.

Previous studies have shown that community-based ecotourism can make a significant contribution to sustainable development. (Andréfouët et al., 2021; Pomfret, 2006; Trisnawathi, 2023). For example, previous studies have shown that ecotourism can encourage local communities to become more involved in conservation activities while creating new jobs and income. (Gretzel et al., 2015; Muganda et al., 2010). In addition, it highlights the importance of empowering local communities in the management of tourist destinations so that economic and social benefits can be felt directly by local communities. (Zhao, 2020). In the context of pine forest ecotourism, other studies have also found that natural forest-based destinations such as pine areas have great potential to attract tourists seeking a unique and soothing nature tourism experience. (Dossou et al., 2021; Truong, 2018).

However, this study differs from previous research in several important ways. While most previous studies have focused on economic aspects and environmental conservation in general, this study offers a holistic approach that considers various dimensions such as community involvement, government support, and socio-cultural sustainability in the context of pine forest ecotourism. In this study, the Bulu Tanah Pine Tourism Area in Bone Regency is used as a case study to explore how community engagement, local government support, and conservation strategies can support the successful management of ecotourism sustainably.

In addition, this study also differentiates itself by emphasizing the specific challenges faced in ecotourism management in pine forest areas. For example, accessibility issues and limited adequate infrastructure facilities are often the main obstacles to maximizing the potential of nature tourism. In several interviews with local communities, it was found that road infrastructure improvements to the Pinus Bulu Tanah tourism area are still urgently needed. Nevertheless, the local community has shown a high commitment to supporting ecotourism development by participating in various conservation activities such as pine tree planting and waste management in the tourist area.

Thus, this study aims to fill a gap in the literature by offering a more comprehensive model of community empowerment, which focuses not only on economic benefits but also on the social and environmental impacts of ecotourism. In addition, this research is also expected to guide policy makers and tourism industry players to develop inclusive and sustainable ecotourism strategies in the Pinus Bulu Tanah tourist area and similar destinations in Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative method with a case study approach to deeply understand the implementation of community-based ecotourism in the Pinus Bulu Tanah tourism area, Bone Regency. This research was conducted with the aim of exploring local community involvement, government support, and conservation strategies applied in the management of ecotourism.



Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 15 informants selected by purposive sampling, consisting of five tourists, five stakeholders (including employees of the tourism office and tourism managers), and five members of the environmental community who are actively involved in ecotourism activities in the area. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner with an open-ended question guide to provide flexibility to informants in providing their views and experiences related to ecotourism.

In addition to interviews, direct observation was also carried out in the Pinus Bulu Tanah tourism area to see firsthand how ecotourism activities take place, including community involvement in waste management, pine forest preservation, and interaction with tourists. These observations help in understanding the real conditions in the field and complement the information obtained from interviews. Secondary data was also used in this study, which included official documents from the tourism office of Bone Regency, annual reports on tourism, as well as related literature discussing ecotourism and community empowerment. Data analysis was conducted using the thematic analysis method, where data from interviews and observations were categorized based on themes relevant to the research objectives, such as community involvement, government support, and conservation strategies.

To analyze the data, this study used thematic analysis, which was conducted through several stages: 1) After data from interviews and observations were collected, they were transcribed verbatim and then re-read to understand the overall context. Next, the data was coded by identifying units of meaning relevant to the research objectives. At this stage, initial codes were developed to capture the various aspects of community engagement, government support and conservation strategies that emerged from the data; 2) Once the initial codes were established, the next stage was to group the codes that had similar meanings into main themes. These themes were selected based on their relevance to the research focus, such as economic empowerment, social engagement, and environmental sustainability. The identification of themes was done iteratively to ensure that the selected themes reflected the overall data; 3) At this stage, each theme was re-examined to ensure that they had a clear focus and were complementary. If any themes were too broad or lacked specificity, they were broken down or refined to make them more representative of the data; 4) Once the main themes were developed, the data was again reviewed to ensure that the resulting themes reflected the overall research findings.

This stage involved in-depth discussions to reach a final decision on the most relevant themes, so that the findings obtained can provide a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of community-based ecotourism in pine forest areas. To increase the validity and reliability of the data, triangulation techniques were conducted by comparing the results of interviews, observations, and secondary data. In addition, member checking was carried out by confirming the interim results of the research to several informants to ensure that the interpretation of the data was by their experiences and views.

RESULT

Through a holistic approach involving various stakeholders, this research examines how ecotourism can be a driving force for sustainable development in the Bulu Tanah Pine Forest, Bone Regency. Furthermore, this research seeks to uncover a holistic model of community empowerment through ecotourism as a sustainable development strategy at the site. By understanding the linkages between ecotourism, community empowerment, and environmental conservation, it is hoped that this research can contribute to the development of sustainable ecotourism and benefit all relevant stakeholders.

Community Empowerment through Ecotourism

The findings revealed that community-based ecotourism in Bulu Tanah has successfully empowered local communities in several significant ways. Economic empowerment has been one of the most noticeable impacts, with ecotourism providing new income-generating opportunities for the local population. Many community members have started small businesses related to tourism, such as running homestays, opening food stalls, or selling handcrafted souvenirs made from local materials. One local homestay owner shared his experience:



“Before we relied solely on farming, which was unpredictable. Now, with tourists coming, I can provide accommodation and meals, and it has boosted our family income.” (interview, August 2024)

This additional income has contributed significantly to improving the overall quality of life for many families in the area. In addition to economic benefits, social empowerment has been another critical outcome. The development of ecotourism has fostered a sense of community pride and ownership over the natural resources in Bulu Tanah. Community members feel a stronger connection to their land, as they are directly involved in its sustainable management. Ecotourism has also provided platforms for skills development through various training programs on hospitality, guiding, and sustainable tourism practices. A participant in one of these training programs explained:

“I used to work as a farmer, but now I have the skills to be a tour guide. I’ve learned how to interact with tourists and share knowledge about our pine forest. It has opened up new opportunities for me and others in the village.” (interview, August 2024)

Environmental empowerment has been a cornerstone of the ecotourism initiative. Local communities have become actively involved in conservation efforts, such as reforestation projects, waste management, and monitoring the health of the pine forest ecosystem. One community leader highlighted the environmental benefits:

“We organize regular clean-up events, and we’ve started replanting areas of the forest that were previously damaged. This isn’t just for tourism but for the future of our children and the environment.” (interview, August 2024)

The active participation of the local community in these conservation activities has not only helped protect the natural environment but has also deepened their understanding of the importance of sustainable practices for long-term ecological and economic sustainability.

Roles of Stakeholders

The success of community-based ecotourism in Bulu Tanah can be attributed to the collaborative efforts of various stakeholders, each playing a crucial role in supporting the initiative. Tourists, as the main consumers of the ecotourism experience, contribute to the local economy by choosing eco-friendly accommodations and participating in activities that support the environment and local culture. Responsible tourists also help raise awareness about the importance of conservation. One visitor shared their perspective:

“I wanted to support a place where the money I spend directly benefits the local community and helps preserve the forest. It’s good to know that my visit contributes to something meaningful.” (interview, August 2024)

Local communities are the primary beneficiaries and custodians of the ecotourism initiative. Their active participation in managing and conserving the pine forest is central to the initiative’s long-term sustainability. The sense of ownership the community feels over their resources has empowered them to take responsibility for both tourism management and environmental protection. According to one local leader:

“This forest is part of our heritage, and it’s up to us to protect it. Ecotourism gives us the means to do so while still benefiting economically.” (interview, August 2024)

Government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and private sector actors also play vital roles in supporting the ecotourism model. The local government has provided essential infrastructure, such as access roads and sanitation facilities, which have facilitated the



flow of tourists to the area. Additionally, the government has offered capacity-building programs, aimed at improving the community's ability to manage tourism sustainably. A government official explained:

"We provide training and technical support to help the community manage their tourism businesses better and promote Bulu Tanah as an ecotourism destination. The goal is to build long-term sustainable tourism that benefits everyone." (interview, August 2024)

NGOs and private sector partners contribute through marketing, helping the community promote Bulu Tanah as an attractive and sustainable tourist destination. They also assist in formulating policies that guide the development of ecotourism in the region. One stakeholder from a private tour company noted:

"We work closely with the local community to ensure that tourists have a meaningful and eco-friendly experience. It's important that the economic benefits are felt by the community, and that tourism doesn't harm the environment." (interview, August 2024)

Balancing Economic, Social, and Environmental Interests

The study highlights the importance of a holistic approach to ecotourism development, where economic, social, and environmental interests are balanced to achieve sustainable development. In Bulu Tanah, this balance is evident in the way community-based management is implemented. Local communities are actively involved in decision-making processes related to tourism development, ensuring that their voices are heard and that the tourism activities align with their values and needs. A community member stated:

"We discuss all major decisions in village meetings, and everyone gets a chance to share their thoughts. This way, tourism is developed in a way that benefits everyone." (interview, August 2024)

Sustainable tourism practices are another key feature of ecotourism in Bulu Tanah. The local community, with the support of stakeholders, has made efforts to minimize the negative impacts of tourism on the environment and local culture. Measures such as limiting the number of visitors, implementing strict waste management protocols, and promoting eco-friendly activities ensure that tourism growth does not come at the expense of the environment or cultural heritage. "We have a responsibility to make sure that our tourism practices don't harm the forest or disrupt our traditions," said one community leader.

Equitable benefit sharing is also emphasized to ensure that the economic benefits of ecotourism are fairly distributed among community members. Mechanisms are in place to ensure that the revenue generated from tourism is used to improve community welfare and reinvest in conservation efforts. A community member shared:

"The money we earn from tourism goes back into the community. We use it to fix roads, improve our schools, and support families in need. This way, everyone benefits from the tourism we've worked so hard to build." (interview, August 2024)

This approach not only ensures that the economic benefits are widespread but also strengthens social cohesion and community resilience.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that community-based ecotourism in the Bulu Tanah pine forest area, Bone Regency, has had a significant impact on the economic, social, and environmental empowerment of local communities. This finding is in line with previous studies that emphasize



the importance of ecotourism as a strategy to empower local communities, improve economic welfare, and sustainably preserve the environment. (Shin et al., 2022). However, what distinguishes this study is its more holistic approach in combining economic, social, and environmental interests in a balanced manner in one community-based ecotourism management model.

In the aspect of economic empowerment, the results of this study reveal that ecotourism has created new opportunities for local communities to earn additional income through tourism-related businesses, such as homestays, food stalls, and handicraft sales. This finding is in line with the results of research (Garrod & Wilson, 2004; Norton & Alwang, 2020; Purnomo & Dewi, 2023), which shows that ecotourism can have a positive economic impact on local communities by creating employment opportunities and new sources of income. One interview revealed that income from ecotourism activities has become a significant alternative economic source for many families in Bulu Tanah, reducing their dependence on the often unstable agricultural sector.

However, the research also showed that social empowerment has been a key factor in the success of ecotourism in Bulu Tanah. In addition to the economic benefits, local communities feel an increased sense of pride and ownership of their natural resources, which has been strengthened by active involvement in the management and conservation of the tourism area. Other research has also found that ecotourism can empower local communities socially by raising their awareness of the importance of their environment and providing opportunities for them to play an important role in conservation (Canale & Liotti, 2022; Resosudarmo & Abdurohman, 2018). In addition, through training in skills such as tour guiding and sustainable tourism practices, communities in Bulu Tanah not only benefit directly from tourism but also develop their capacity to engage more actively in ecotourism management.

From an environmental empowerment perspective, the community in Bulu Tanah has shown a strong commitment to the preservation of the pine forest area through conservation efforts, such as reforestation and waste management. This is in line with research conducted (Grewenig et al., 2021; Iwan & Arisman, 2023), which shows that ecotourism can encourage community participation in environmental conservation. The Bulu Tanah community has taken a leading role in maintaining the balance of the local ecosystem, not only to support tourism but also to protect their own environmental sustainability. One respondent in the interview stated that conservation activities such as forest replanting and waste management have helped maintain the natural beauty and strengthen the area's tourism appeal.

Furthermore, findings related to the role of stakeholders in the success of community-based ecotourism in Bulu Tanah confirmed the importance of collaboration between various parties, including tourists, local communities, government and the private sector. This collaboration has been instrumental in supporting sustainable tourism management, as well as promoting tourist destinations more widely. This result is supported by a study (Das & Chatterjee, 2015; Mitchell, 2012; Odhiambo, 2021) which emphasises that successful community-based tourism development requires the active participation of all stakeholders to create synergies that support economic, social, and environmental goals.

This research also reveals the challenges in balancing economic, social, and environmental interests in ecotourism management. While the economic benefits are clearly felt by local communities, there is a need to ensure that ecotourism management is done sustainably and does not damage the pine forest ecosystem that is the main attraction for tourists. This is in line with the findings of (Geoffrey Deladem et al., 2020), which highlight the importance of management strategies that consider environmental and cultural impacts in ecotourism development.

The success of community empowerment through ecotourism in Bulu Tanah is influenced by several supporting factors. One of them is the high commitment of the community to be involved in conservation activities and the wise use of local resources. This active involvement is driven by a strong sense of ownership of the tourist area, which makes people feel responsible for preserving nature in their area. This indicates that the success of ecotourism depends not only on economic aspects, but also on cultural and social factors that encourage people to contribute actively.

In addition, support from the government and various other stakeholders, such as non-governmental organizations and the private sector, plays an important role in supporting the



success of this ecotourism initiative. The government provides basic infrastructure, such as road access and sanitation facilities, which facilitate the flow of tourists to the area. However, there is a constant need to update and improve this infrastructure to continue to support tourism growth without compromising environmental quality. The technical support and training programs provided to communities also help improve their ability to manage tourism sustainably, as one government official explained: "We provide training and technical support so that communities can better manage their tourism businesses and promote Bulu Tanah as an ecotourism destination."

However, there are also some barriers faced, such as limited infrastructure and accessibility to tourist areas, which are often major obstacles in maximizing the potential of nature tourism. While the community has shown a high commitment to ecotourism development, these challenges demonstrate the importance of continued support from the government in improving infrastructure, such as road improvements and public facilities, to support the sustainability of tourism in Bulu Tanah.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that community-based ecotourism in the Bulu Tanah pine forest area, Bone Regency, has a significant positive impact on the economic, social and environmental empowerment of local communities. Economically, ecotourism opens up new opportunities for the community through homestay businesses, handicrafts, and other tourist services, which help increase income. On the social side, ecotourism strengthens the community's sense of pride and ownership over natural resources, and encourages their involvement in training and skills development programmes (Geoffrey Deladem et al., 2020; Mahadevan & Suardi, 2019). Meanwhile, on the environmental aspect, the community is active in pine forest conservation, waste management, and maintaining the local ecosystem. Collaboration between communities, tourists, and stakeholders, such as the government and private sector, plays a key role in the success of this community-based ecotourism. However, there are still challenges in maintaining a balance between economic needs and environmental sustainability (Ridderstaat et al., 2022). Therefore, a holistic approach that considers social, economic, and environmental interests simultaneously is required to ensure the long-term sustainability of ecotourism in Bulu Tanah.

Future research should be more in-depth in exploring the long-term economic, social, and environmental impacts of ecotourism, as well as understanding the changes that may occur as the number of tourists and infrastructure development increases. Strengthening collaboration between local communities, government, NGOs and the private sector is also an important focus in ensuring successful ecotourism management. In addition, it is important to examine how digital technology can be used to expand the impact of ecotourism and empower local communities in tourism marketing and management. Furthermore, studies on sustainable ecotourism management, especially in sensitive areas such as pine forests, are needed to balance economic goals and ecosystem preservation. Capacity building of local communities is also an important area for research, to find effective training models to prepare them to manage ecotourism independently and sustainably. Thus, future research can strengthen community-based ecotourism as a tool to achieve economic prosperity while maintaining natural diversity and beauty.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was funded by the Directorate General of Higher Education, Research and Technology of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia through the novice lecturer research scheme. The authors are also grateful to the Institute for Research and Community Service of Universitas Cahaya Prima for its support.



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