

INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE OF BUKIT TIGAPULUH NATIONAL PARK

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Abstract

Previous studies have explored community participation in ecotourism. However, only a few have addressed indigenous people concerning their participation in ecotourism development, specifically within the context of a national park. Therefore, this study examined how and why indigenous people are participating in ecotourism development by taking a case study of a village in Bukit Tigapuluh National Park, Indonesia. This study collected data through semi-structured interviews and field observations using a qualitative method. Four forms of indigenous people's participation in ecotourism development are found in this study, including discovering tourist attractions, conserving the forest, working in the ecotourism sites, and managing ecotourism attractions. Furthermore, this study discovered two factors encouraging their participation, i.e., community empowerment by the national park office and perceived positive impacts of ecotourism.

Keywords: Community Participation; Ecotourism; National Park

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INTRODUCTION

National parks could make a substantial provision to the needs of the communities who are inhabiting them and rely greatly on natural resources for their livelihoods (Atiqul Haq, 2016). The benefits of the existence of national parks for local communities are mainly from an economic perspective, especially infrastructure development (Mensah, 2017). Local community support for tourism in national parks is strongly influenced by their perceived benefits (Nugroho & Numata, 2020). Moreover, residents' involvement supportively influences environmentally responsible behavior (Cheng et al., 2019). Therefore, national parks and protected areas normally involve local people in

tourism management and development programs.

The benefits of national parks are not only felt by the people living in the vicinity, but also for nature conservation (Carius & Job, 2019). Specifically, ecotourism plays a role in promoting biodiversity conservation in national parks (Ghoddousi et al., 2018). For example, when applying ecotourism systems to allow more operative conservation, altering local community's perception of wildlife is vital, in addition to creating their responsiveness and value for problematic flora and fauna species like leopards, which frequently become the attention of wildlife-human conflict (Vannelli et al., 2019).

One type of tourism that can be developed in national parks is ecotourism.

By utilizing national parks as ecotourism, the role of national parks is increasingly significant for the empowerment of indigenous people (Carr et al., 2016). To achieve this goal, local communities need to be involved in tourism planning and tourism development (Bello et al., 2016). The community cannot be separated from ecotourism planning and development aspects because their participation greatly contributes to the success of sustainable tourism (Cheng et al., 2019). Revenue from ecotourism is one thing that drives the government's efforts to protect the national park ecosystem (Sabuhoro et al., 2021). As a consequence, ecotourism has an important role in promoting biodiversity in national parks (Ghoddousi et al., 2018).

Because of the importance of local community participation, community-based ecotourism is claimed to be the right model in maintaining ecosystems and improving the quality of life of local communities from an economic perspective (Mensah, 2017). However, community-based ecotourism management in national parks also requires partnerships with other stakeholders so that the community-based ecotourism model can function optimally (Stone, 2015). Community-based ecotourism can be applied to reduce poverty and improve livelihoods for local people, especially in developing countries (Lonn et al., 2018). It is necessary to increase income for local stakeholders to motivate them to conserve the environment and participate in community-based ecotourism management (Pornprasit & Rurkkhum, 2019).

Ecotourism is a form of nature tourism that is based on the aspects of education and tourism. In addition to traveling to enjoy the various attractions, the visitors also get various educations such as how to conserve various kinds of flora and fauna, and cultural heritage (Chen et al., 2019). Although there is still debate about the definition of ecotourism, there are principles that are agreed upon by scholars, namely environmental conservation and

education, experience and cultural protection, and economic benefits (Cobbinah, 2015). Local communities can participate in ecotourism planning and development through the following stages: determine appropriate participation mechanisms, conduct initial dialogue and education efforts, establish and/or strengthen support mechanisms, conduct preliminary studies, make collective decisions on the scope and nature of ecotourism development, plan community-based development actions and implementation schemes, monitoring and evaluation, and implementation (Garrod, 2003).

Previous studies on sustainable ecotourism development have shown that local communities are an important indicator of sustainable tourism development (Cheng et al., 2019). Social engagement has the strongest influence on sustainable tourism development (Mai et al., 2020). More specifically, the awareness of the population and their attitude towards tourism development is a fundamental factor of sustainable tourism development (Gursoy et al., 2010). Their engagement is essential for a tourism development project.

However, community participation in ecotourism is not without obstacles. Previous studies have found the constraints to local residents' involvement in tourism planning and development including apathy, insufficient information, less number skillful human resources, insufficient financial capital, low education, unfair sharing of benefits, centralized management, insufficiency of coordination, and human–nature battles (Bello et al., 2017); power, legitimacy, and social status (Palmer & Chuamuangphan, 2018); knowledge and awareness (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017); economic condition (Wondirad & Ewnetu, 2019); structural, operational, and cultural limits (Tosun, 2000); low income, no transportation, and no time (Adeleke, 2015); age, education background, income gender, non-farm work

settings, family size, and distance (Chen & Qiu, 2017), and apathy (Mensah, 2017). Therefore, a local community participation framework is needed that includes aspects of perceptions and experiences in tourism planning and development (Bello et al., 2016).

The role of indigenous people in the management of protected areas has been addressed by international and national laws and regulations around the world (Farsani et al., 2012). Regarding indigenous people and ecotourism, indigenous wisdom when combined with modern science can optimize environmental, socio-cultural, and economic impacts (Pásková, 2017). Thus, ILO Convention No. 169 on indigenous and tribal peoples in self-governing nations defines indigenous community and acknowledges their rights to possess and practice their cultural, social, spiritual, and religious values and the right to specify their own priorities of development (Farsani et al., 2012).

In developing countries, including Indonesia, where the number of jobs is limited, failure to engage the stakeholders of ecotourism, specifically local people not only accelerates the decrease of ecotourism but also endangers the whole ecosystem (Wondirad & Ewnetu, 2019). One of the Indonesian national parks that has developed ecotourism activities with the dynamics of its indigenous people is the Bukit Tigapuluh National Park (BTNP) which is located in Riau Province. As ecotourism has been developed in this national park, the indigenous people, namely *Talang Mamak*, must have certain reactions to it. Moreover, they have long inhabited the area long before the existence of national park along with its ecotourism. In this case, they serve not only as the subject of ecotourism development but also as the object of the development itself. Therefore, this study was aimed at investigating how and why the indigenous people participated in the ecotourism development by taking a

case study in the Bukit Tigapuluh National Park. This study was expected to contribute to enriching the existing literature on the local community's participation in nature tourism development and the strategies for engaging them in the development phases and processes.

This study used the term 'indigenous people' or 'indigenous community' to differentiate it from 'local people' or 'ethnic group'. The umbrella phrase of 'indigenous' people is employed to define races of people who are native or endemic to an area in opposition to 'ethnic' people who might occupy a region in which they have migrated (Hall, 1996).

METHODS

This study took a study case of a village situated within the area of Bukit Tigapuluh National Park (BTNP) named Rantau Langsat. It is where indigenous people, namely *Talang Mamak*, are living in. The village was chosen since its area has the highest number of ecotourism attractions in BTNP. In addition, the village is also part of BTNP zonation system in which has a protected forest located in the buffer zone.

This study employed a qualitative method as it has flexibility in design (Brown, 2010). With this method, the researcher can go deep into the issues or problems being studied. The qualitative approach was considered suitable since it allows researchers to gain a more representative impression of the world which cannot be accomplished with mathematical data and numerical analysis typically applied in quantitative studies (Mensah, 2017). This study explored the perceptions and existing immersions of residents about their engagement in ecotourism in a national park.

The data were collected through participant observations and interviews, which were then thematically analyzed. Thematic analysis included transcribing all of the interviews, creating codes, looking for

themes, analyzing themes, defining and labeling themes, and writing a report (Braun & Clarke, 2008).

The participant observations were performed directly in the field by visiting the tourist attractions and being involved in their daily activities. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with customary (*adat*) leader of Rantau Langsat Village, the head and the secretary of People's Alliance of the Archipelago (AMAN) of Indragiri Hulu Regency Chapter, and two villagers working as tour guides in the ecotourism site of Bukit Tigapuluh National Park. These key informants were selected purposively by considering their level of knowledge and their social status in the community. The number of 4-5 informants is considered sufficient (Muellmann et al., 2021). Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide and audio-recorded so that the obtained data can be confirmed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The development of the Bukit Tigapuluh National Park (BTNP) has been normatively stated in the Long-Term Management Plan (RPJP) of the Bukit Tigapuluh National Park for 2011-2021 with the following policy points:

- 1) The management of BTNP is directed at activities that lead to the preservation of BTNP as a support for the life of the community around BTNP supported by institutional stability.
- 2) Maintaining the BTNP area in national, provincial, and district/municipal spatial planning as a balance between cultivation areas and protected areas.
- 3) Continue to seek creative steps so that BTNP functions optimally as a provider of environmental services for stakeholders in the form of water environmental services, flora and fauna, nature tourism, and carbon sinks and storage.
- 4) Strive for the BTNP area to have real usability, various activities will be pursued that utilize the BTNP area as a vehicle for research and education and the application of science and technology (Science and technology).
- 5) Implementing the BTNP area as a National Strategic Area through various communications and coordination with local governments so that the BTNP area becomes a center point for regional development.
- 6) Considering the ecosystem potential and geographical position, the BTNP area will be seeking to become the basis (core) for the management of 4 main watersheds, namely, Pengabuan watershed, Batanghari watershed, Indragiri watershed, and Reteh watershed.
- 7) Strive for BTNP management based on extensive ecosystem management, optimizing the utilization of hydrological potential to produce secondary forest products in the form of electrical energy and habitat management as well as Sumatran tiger population dynamics.
- 8) Develop the management of BTNP towards the broadest possible conservation business arrangement, including nature tourism, captivity and cultivation, and science and technology.
- 9) Taking into account the vastness of the area, the variety of potentials and the complexity of the problems in the management of the area, the direction of area management is focused on increasing the capacity and capability of the human resources of managers in anticipation of the difficulties of obtaining additional human resources, insufficient management infrastructure facilities, and the difficulty of management costs.

In the Long-Term Management Plan (RPJP), it is clearly stated that Bukit Tigapuluh National Park has been planning and developing nature tourism. In participatory tourism planning, residents play a crucial role in the success of a tourism development program. A community participation framework will result in sustainable protected areas, community empowerment, and nature/wildlife conservation (Bello et al., 2016). Participatory planning of ecotourism would be successful due to the presence of the following elements: leadership, local people empowerment, economic advantages link to conservation, local stakeholders' involvement at each program phase, and local participation in the program monitoring and evaluation (Garrod, 2003).



Figure 1. Ecotourism Information Board
Source: Research documentation (2021)

Forms of Indigenous Community Participation

The analysis of the elicited data generated four forms of indigenous people participation that indicate a variety of substantial aspects influencing indigenous community involvement in ecotourism development in Bukit Tigapuluh National Park.

Discovering Tourist Attractions

Finding a tourist attraction is not easy for a national park that covers an area of 143,223 hectares dominated by hilly forests. That is why sometimes the tourist attractions in Bukit Tigapuluh National Park were discovered by indigenous people, not the BTNP Office. This is not surprising as they have been inhabiting the national park for a long time. In addition, the distance to tourism attractions has a significant correlation with the local community's position towards ecotourism development (Chen & Qiu, 2017) This form of participation is revealed by the head of AMAN organization:

Because the area of BTNP is very large, BTNP staff are unable to reach and take an inventory of tourist attractions. That's why many tourist attractions are found by indigenous people and then reported to the BTNP Office, for example, some rivers and waterfalls were found deep in the forest by the community

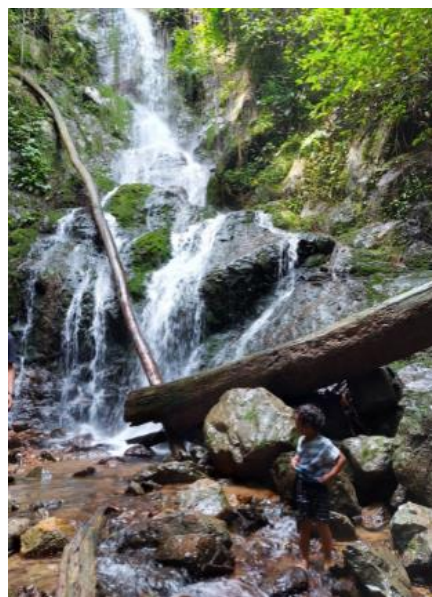


Figure 2. Pampunawan Waterfall
Source: Research documentation (2021)

After someone discovers a tourist attraction (e.g. a waterfall), he or she will report to the BTNP Office. After that, the office will follow up on the discovery. If it is feasible, then the waterfall will be included in the tourism map and offered to potential visitors. The track will be made to access the attraction. This is in line with a study suggesting that an area that has various ecotourism attractions and cultural traditions has the potential to be exploited under the concept of community-based ecotourism (CBET) (Pornprasit & Rurkkhum, 2019). Concerning this, Rantau Langsat village is situated near the buffer zone area which possesses varied types of ecotourism attractions.

Conserving the Forest

Participation in ecotourism creates hybrid outcomes on biodiversity conservation and people's incomes (Stone, 2015). Local community participation in conserving the forest is essential for the sustainability of ecotourism since the type of tourism relies much on nature conservation. The *adat* leader said that the villagers serve as the team members formed by the BTNP office to protect the forest. This team usually patrols around the forests in the buffer zone to ensure that no trees in the buffering zone are cut down.

"The BTNP office formed a forest protecting team and recruited the villagers as the members. They cooperate with us to protect the forest by educating the local people about environmentally-friendly farming. The team also make regular patrols around the forest"

The efforts of conserving the forest as the main attraction of ecotourism would not be successful without the engagement and awareness of the local community. This awareness is also supported by the local people's perception that forests can provide essential products such as food, fuel, shelter, medicines, which can support their daily life (Atiqul Haq, 2016). Therefore, to

support the local community's involvement in forest conservation, there must be benefit-sharing between the authorized institutions and the locals. This benefit-sharing can mitigate conflicts, enhance local people's engagement in nature preservation, and reduce burdens on ecosystems (Carius & Job, 2019).

To avoid forest destruction, the *adat* institution then also makes a regulation prohibiting illegal logging. This *adat* regulation is an effective deterrent for those who are intending to cut down trees illegally in the area of the national park. This is because the villagers are indigenous communities who are still attached and bound to customary tradition and law. People who are more aware are more engaged in a high level of participation (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017).

Working in the Ecotourism Sites

Community-based ecotourism has been popular in developing countries due to its contribution to environmental conservation and livelihood enhancement (Lonn et al., 2018). Although working in the tourism sector is not the local people's main job, they can improve their livelihood. In terms of economic benefits, they perceive and respond positively to the tourism activities around their place of living. They participate by becoming tour guides, homestay providers, food and drink vendors, motorbike rental, and so on. The *adat* leader admitted that many people are involved in ecotourism as their part-time jobs. He said:

"many are involved... becoming tour guides, motorcycle taxi drivers, villa managers. We hope that the tourism is run by our people so that they can get additional income"

Participating in economic activities is one of the main reasons why residents have a positive attitude towards ecotourism (Nugroho & Numata, 2020). This relates to

the principles of ecotourism which are widely promoted, including cultural protection and experience, environmental preservation and education, and economic benefits (Cobbinah, 2015). In the case of ecotourism in Bukit Tigapuluh National Park, the indigenous community support and have a positive attitude since they can directly earn economic benefits by participating in the tourism activities.

Managing Ecotourism Attractions

A strong and active collaboration between residents and agencies was well-known for local people's empowerment, particularly for tourism management (Park & Kim, 2016). The residents of Rantau Langsat Village participated in the formation of a village tourism organization called Pokdarwis. There are 17 people on the active board of directors. This organization has sections with different tasks such as security, tourist attractions, water boats, guides, ticketing, etc.



Figure 3. Camping ground
Source: Research documentation (2021)

Initially, it was BTNP Office that initiated this village tourism management, but later it was officially formed by the village government. So, initially, this organization was formed in collaboration with Village-Owned Enterprises (BUMD) through a Decree from the village head. But now Pokdarwis has a Decree from the

Tourism and Youth Office of Indragiri Hulu Regency. The *adat* leader said that

"There is no favoritism in the selection of Pokdarwis members. We do roll so that many members are involved in the management of tourism activities. So it can be said that we are the ones who manage the tourist attractions where the BTNP office acts as a coach and director"

This Pokdarwis was formed on October 11, 2012, but there were some changes in the composition of the management so that it can only be formalized by the Village Head through Decree Number: 02/SK/RTL/IV/2013. This local tourism organization is called *Pokdarwis Rantau Salo*. The BTNP Office routinely provides assistance and training for this organization related to evaluating the implementation of activities, managing organizational administration and bookkeeping as well as interpretation and guidance.

Factors Supporting Indigenous Community Participation

One of the factors that highly affect the level of community participation is their motivation (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017). For the case of indigenous people living in Rantau Langsat village, they are motivated to participate in the ecotourism development in Bukit Tigapuluh National Park because of the following factors:

Community Empowerment by the National Park Office

Community-based ecotourism is designed to enable resident empowerment (Sonjai et al., 2018). Empowering the local community signifies the essential element of successful participatory tourism planning (Tosun, 2005). Specifically, concerning this study, the economic and social empowerment of indigenous people will contribute to the positive accomplishment of indigenous tourism (Carr et al., 2016). The AMAN organization's leader admitted that

BTNP Office organized empowerment programs addressed to the Indigenous community living in Rantau Langsat village.

"We are thankful for empowerment programs initiated by BTNP Office. They initiate the empowerment programs like the seedling nursery, honey harvest, coffee farming, mats, straws made from resam (Dicranopteris linearis), but they also find the markets for the products"

From the interview excerpt, it can be inferred that BTNP plays a comprehensive role in empowering the residents of Rantau Langsat village. The office does not only start the programs on community-based farming and man-made souvenirs, but it also looks for the markets for the products. In addition, the BTNP also initiated ecotourism from which many locals are involved as actors not only as objects. These economic empowerment programs then encourage the indigenous community's participation in BTNP programs including ecotourism.

However, there is still some inconsistency mainly in the empowerment programs like seedling nurseries and honey farming. The *adat* leader revealed that sometimes the national park officials leave the farmers alone after they initiate a program. For example, after the officials and villagers' plant agricultural trees, then there is no follow-up like mentoring and evaluation.

The BTNP Office works together with the locals in planning and developing ecotourism in the national park. This is a form of a mutualistic relationship. The BTNP gets assistance on the efforts of biodiversity conservation while the locals are benefited from the programs initiated by the BTNP office. In short, the empowerment programs by BTNP are not directed towards economic ones only, but also nature conservation and education. This is in line with the purpose of ecotourism development which addresses two aspects,

i.e. conserving nature and educating the local community (Chen et al., 2019).

Perceived Positive Impacts of Ecotourism

From the analysis of the collected data, the indigenous community receive perceived positive impacts of ecotourism in the three aspects, i.e. economic, environmental, and cultural impacts. From the economic aspect, the *adat* leader admitted that the villagers are economically benefited from ecotourism. He said:

"of course, [it is] economically very beneficial. Many residents work in ecotourism sites. They become tour guides, motorcycle taxis, food vendors, and accommodation providers"

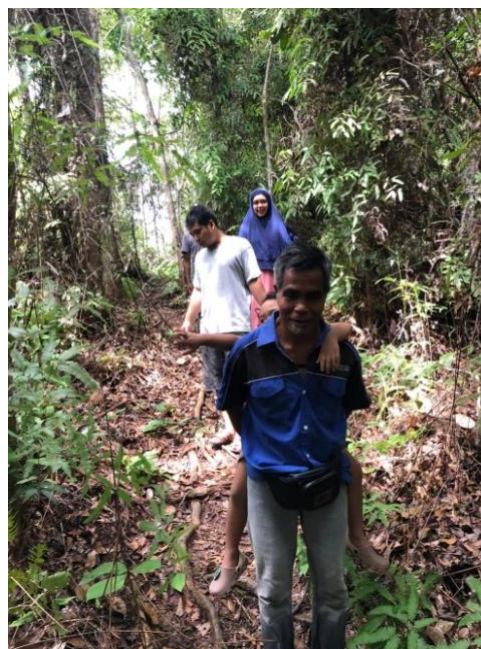


Figure 4. A guide leading the way to the forest

Source: Research documentation (2021)

In addition to working in the tourism sector, the local community also makes souvenirs from resources found in the forest. For example, straws and bracelets

are made of *resam* (*Dicranopteris linearis*). In fact, because of the high demand for these products, they are sold outside the region. A guide said he usually gets a tip of 50,000 IDR from visitors for each trip. In a day he can earn 200,000 IDR. The price of a two-way motorcycle taxi is 40,000 for one person. These are a few examples of how ecotourism can economically bring positive impacts to the local community.

From the environmental side, the indigenous community perceives the positive impacts of ecotourism in the form of nature conservation. The head of AMAN organization said that:

“If there was no national park with its ecotourism, maybe our forest was already gone. The BTNP office also said that if it wasn't for the community, we would be overwhelmed. Even with the existence of BTNP and ecotourism, there are still people cutting down trees, let alone none. So, we are grateful for the presence of the national park”

This is also one of the reasons for the willingness of indigenous people to become a team of forest custodians formed by the BTNP office. They already have environmental awareness as a result of advocacy by various parties.

From the cultural side, one beneficial impact is that the customary law eventually revives. The secretary of AMAN organization revealed that:

“After we came back from a meeting held in the ministry of environment in Jakarta, we went to BTNP Office to present the meeting results. To the national park office, we propose that customary law be applied in protecting the forest, and they agree with it.”

The customary law here is related to that governing environmental conservation. So, the customary law is applied together with the national park's regulation which has been applied before. This means that customary law is revived to preserve the forest. This is a positive impact that is felt

by the indigenous people from a cultural perspective. They feel they are contributing to the issues of environmental conservation.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has twofold contributions to residents' participation in ecotourism planning and development. First, it supports the discoveries of the existing research from other areas of the developing countries which similarly classify reflective forms of local participation in ecotourism development. This study further complements this body of knowledge by detecting forms of community participation and factors influencing the local people's participation in ecotourism development concerning the national park and protected areas within an Indonesian setting. When we intend to make the concept of community participation improve the sustainable outputs, we have to admit and promote the suggestion that effective ways of enhancing indigenous people participation need to be deep-rooted in the indigenous experiences of the indigenous people's daily lives.

This study has highlighted four forms of community participation in ecotourism development, including discovering tourist attractions, conserving the forest, working in the ecotourism sites, and managing ecotourism attractions. Despite a constraint to the indigenous community participation, i.e. a regulation prohibiting the practice of shifting field, generally the community members demonstrate a high level of participation. This is mainly driven by their satisfaction and positive attitude towards the empowerment programs initiated by the national park official. Their participation in ecotourism development is also motivated by the positive ecotourism impacts they perceive and receive so far.

Although the indigenous community has confirmed their support for ecotourism programs in Bukit Tigapuluh National Park,

the community still grumbles about the lack of monitoring and evaluation measures from the national park office. Thus, there should be more consistent programs regarding monitoring and evaluation. This is because indigenous people are those who need capacity building in the indigenous tourism development.

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