



Community Empowerment Strategy in Ecotourism Management: A Case Study in Baluran National Park

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Abstract: *This study aims to identify and analyze community empowerment strategies in ecotourism management in Baluran National Park, East Java. Ecotourism is considered a sector that can provide economic benefits while supporting environmental sustainability, but empowering local communities in its management still faces significant challenges. This research employed a qualitative approach with a case study design, utilizing data collection techniques that included in depth interviews, questionnaires, and participatory observation. The results showed that, despite several efforts to empower the community, such as skills training and providing employment opportunities in ecotourism activities, the level of community participation in planning and decision making remained limited. Factors that hinder empowerment include a lack of understanding of sustainable ecotourism, limited resources, and inadequate training. This research recommends increased community involvement in planning, more inclusive management, and policies that better support the economic and social sustainability of local communities. The practical implications of this research are expected to provide a basis for more sustainable and inclusive ecotourism policies in Indonesia.*

Keywords: *community empowerment, ecotourism, Baluran National Park, sustainability, management*

1. Introduction

Ecotourism has gained global attention in recent decades as a sustainable alternative to mass tourism. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2020), it now contributes over 20% of global tourism revenue. Despite its promise, ecotourism often presents challenges, especially regarding environmental sustainability and equitable benefits for surrounding communities (Eagles & McCool, 2002).

In Indonesia, ecotourism holds significant potential, particularly in conservation areas such as Baluran National Park in East Java. Known for its rich biodiversity and scenic landscapes, Baluran attracts many visitors. However, the economic benefits have yet to reach surrounding communities, many of whom still rely on unsustainable practices such as illegal logging and wildlife hunting (Berkes, 2004).

Community empowerment is thus essential for creating ecotourism that is both inclusive and sustainable. While some studies have explored community participation in ecotourism abroad, such as Telfer (2000) in Canada and Lassoie et al. (2003) in Africa, few have examined these strategies in the Indonesian context. Research on

national park management in Indonesia tends to emphasize conservation, often overlooking the involvement of local communities.

This study responds to that gap by focusing on empowerment strategies for communities surrounding Baluran National Park. Rather than merely restating its ecotourism potential, this research examines how empowerment mechanisms can ensure that local populations benefit from tourism while supporting environmental preservation.

Specifically, this study aims to identify and analyze community empowerment strategies applicable to ecotourism management in Baluran National Park. The goal is to inform more inclusive policymaking that supports local well being alongside conservation efforts.

By doing so, this research contributes to the broader discourse on sustainable tourism in Indonesia by offering practical insights for ecotourism governance that strike a balance between ecological integrity and social equity.

Several previous studies have explored community empowerment in ecotourism; however, most of these studies were conducted outside Indonesia. For example, research by Telfer (2000), which examined the importance of community participation in ecotourism management in Canada, found that active participation can increase economic and social benefits for local communities. On the other hand, research by Lassoie et al. (2003) emphasized the importance of integrating communities into ecotourism planning and management in various African conservation areas. In Indonesia, although there are several studies that examine national park management, there are still very few that discuss in depth community empowerment in ecotourism, especially in Baluran National Park. This suggests a lack of research that can provide a clear picture of effective community empowerment strategies in the area.

The importance of this research lies in the need to evaluate and develop more effective community empowerment strategies in ecotourism management, especially in Baluran National Park. In the Indonesian context, empowering local communities through ecotourism can be one solution to improve their welfare while preserving the environment. With the increasing number of tourists visiting national parks, it is time for managers to design policies that can increase community participation in the sustainable management of their natural resources.

This research presents a new perspective, focusing on local community empowerment in Baluran National Park, an area that has not been studied in depth. Most existing studies emphasize the conservation and management aspects of the area, while community empowerment strategies are often overlooked. By examining the empowerment strategies implemented in Baluran National Park, this research aims to fill the gap in the literature regarding the relationship between ecotourism

management and community empowerment in Indonesia, and to provide a model that can be applied in other areas with similar ecotourism potential.

This research aims to identify and analyze various community empowerment strategies that can be applied in ecotourism management in Baluran National Park.

The implication of this research is to provide a basis for a more inclusive ecotourism management policy that benefits not only the tourism sector but also local communities. By analyzing and formulating more effective community empowerment strategies, this research can guide ecotourism managers in Indonesia and other developing countries in ensuring that communities located around conservation areas benefit fairly and sustainably from ecotourism activities.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore community empowerment strategies in ecotourism management within Baluran National Park. A qualitative design is appropriate for capturing the perceptions, lived experiences, and perspectives of local communities and ecotourism managers regarding empowerment practices in the context of sustainable tourism (Creswell, 2013).

The research employs a single embedded case study design, as suggested by Yin (2018), which allows for an in depth investigation of a specific case, Baluran National Park, within its real world context. This descriptive case study allows for a comprehensive understanding of the socio cultural and economic dynamics surrounding community empowerment in ecotourism settings.

The study was conducted in Baluran National Park, located in Situbondo Regency, East Java, Indonesia. This location was selected due to its rich biodiversity and its significance as an ecotourism destination, where local communities are directly involved in tourism related activities.

The main instruments used in this research were in depth interviews and participatory observation.

In depth interviews will be conducted to gather further information on the perceptions and experiences of the community and managers regarding ecotourism management and community empowerment. These interviews will be conducted using open ended interview guidelines, allowing respondents to express their views freely and in depth.

Participatory observation is conducted to understand the social interactions and activities of the community and managers in ecotourism management. Researchers will be directly involved in ecotourism activities, such as community training programs or nature tourism initiatives, to gain a deeper understanding of the empowerment dynamics that occur.

Additionally, this study utilized documents as a source of supporting data. The documents include annual reports on ecotourism management, local regulations related to ecotourism, and publications related to community empowerment policies issued by government agencies or related organizations.

The data in this study will be collected through several techniques, including:

1. In depth Interview

Interviews will be conducted using purposive sampling techniques to select informants who have relevant knowledge and experience regarding ecotourism management and community empowerment. Interviews will be conducted with farmers, fishermen, ecotourism managers, and other related parties, including local government officials and environmental activists.

2. Participatory Observation

Researchers will be involved in ecotourism activities that involve local communities to gather data on their interactions with ecotourism managers, as well as the implementation of empowerment in daily practice. This observation aims to understand the process and impact of ecotourism activities on the social and economic life of the community.

3. Documentation Study

Relevant documentation will be collected to provide a broader context regarding ecotourism policy and community empowerment. Documents to be collected include reports on ecotourism activities, statistical data on community participation in ecotourism, and government policies related to ecotourism management in Baluran National Park.

Data Collection Procedure

1. Data collection will be conducted over three months following the following procedure:
2. Initial preparation: Researchers will conduct a literature review and document review to understand the context and existing policies.
3. Field data collection: Researchers will conduct interviews, observations, and FGDs with local communities, ecotourism managers, and other relevant parties.
4. Data analysis: The collected data will be analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis techniques to identify patterns, themes, and relationships that exist between community empowerment and ecotourism management.

To ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed several validation strategies throughout the research process. Source triangulation was used by collecting data from multiple sources, namely in depth interviews, participatory observations, and document analysis, to cross verify information and improve data credibility. Member checking was conducted by sharing initial interpretations and summaries with selected participants, allowing

them to confirm the accuracy of the researchers' understanding and provide clarifications if needed. Peer debriefing was also applied, involving discussions with fellow researchers to test emerging themes, minimize bias, and ensure analytical rigor. Reflexivity was maintained through regular journal entries in which the researchers critically reflected on their assumptions, positionality, and influence on data collection and interpretation. Additionally, thick descriptions were provided in the presentation of findings, offering detailed contextual information to support the transferability of the results to similar ecotourism contexts.

The research was conducted over a three month period and followed a structured sequence of procedures. In the initial stage, the researchers carried out a comprehensive literature review on community empowerment and ecotourism, as well as an analysis of policy documents and previous studies related to Baluran National Park. Interview protocols and observation guidelines were developed based on this review. In the second stage, coordination with local stakeholders was established, including obtaining research permits, gaining ethical clearance, and building rapport with key informants such as park authorities and community leaders. The third stage involved primary data collection, where in depth interviews were conducted using semi structured guides, each lasting approximately 45–60 minutes and recorded with the participants' consent. Simultaneously, participatory observations were made during local ecotourism activities, which were documented through detailed field notes. Supporting documents, such as annual ecotourism reports and community training materials, were also gathered. After data collection, all interviews were transcribed verbatim, and along with field notes and documents, they were organized and coded using NVivo software. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six phase approach, which includes data familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, definition, and report writing. Finally, data validation methods such as member checking and peer debriefing were implemented before synthesizing the findings into the final report.

3. Results & Discussion

This study aims to evaluate community empowerment strategies in ecotourism management in Baluran National Park. Based on the results of interviews, questionnaires, and observations, several important findings require further analysis. The following discussion presents the results of interviews with ecotourism managers and local communities, the findings from questionnaires administered to employees involved in ecotourism, and the outcomes of field observations. Additionally, this discussion will compare these findings with previous research and present the practical implications and limitations of this study.

Interview Data and Interpretation of Interview Results

Interviews with ecotourism managers revealed that, despite efforts to empower local communities through ecotourism management, their level of participation remains low. Managers admitted that they have implemented several empowerment programs, such as skills training and ecotourism based small business management. However, most of these programs have only been successful to a limited extent. One of the inhibiting factors expressed by the managers is the community's lack of understanding regarding the importance of sustainability in ecotourism. In addition, communities are often more interested in immediate, faster sources of income rather than investing in long term ecotourism activities.

Local communities interviewed provided a different perspective, where they felt less empowered in the ecotourism management process. Although they were involved in some activities such as handicraft sales and tour guiding, they felt that their role in decision making was minimal. Many of them wanted a greater role in the planning and management of ecotourism activities in their area. Some respondents also expressed dissatisfaction with the economic benefits they received, which they felt were not worth the effort and time spent.

The questionnaire administered to employees in the ecotourism sector yielded results that were quite illustrative of the prevailing conditions. While 60% of respondents reported feeling empowered by ecotourism activities, almost half also stated that they needed more training in managerial skills and sustainable ecotourism management. This suggests that, despite feeling empowered, employees still feel underprepared for the challenges associated with ecotourism management.

One thing that stands out from the questionnaire results is the imbalance between the community's contribution to ecotourism activities and the economic benefits they receive. Most employees felt that their involvement was only temporary and did not provide long term opportunities for economic growth. Only about 20% of the respondents felt that they earned a stable and sufficient income from these activities. These results illustrate a high dependency on the ecotourism sector, but with limited income potential.

Field observations show a gap between the expected empowerment goals and the reality on the ground. Local communities are indeed involved in some ecotourism activities such as tour guiding and craft sales, but this involvement tends to be sporadic and unstructured. Many of them are involved individually without adequate system support from ecotourism managers.

Researchers also observed that although local communities play a role in ecotourism activities, they do not have sufficient control over the management of these activities. Interaction between managers and local communities remains limited to the operational level, not extending to planning or strategic decision making. Community

meeting activities, which should be a means to increase community participation, are still rarely carried out, negatively impacting the low sense of community ownership of ecotourism in the area.

This research aligns with several previous studies that demonstrate the success of community empowerment through ecotourism is highly dependent on the community's active participation in planning and management. For example, research by Telfer (2000) emphasizes the importance of community participation in ecotourism management to increase social and economic benefits. This research is also similar to the study by Lassoie et al. (2003), which found that a lack of community integration in ecotourism management often hinders long term success. While there have been some efforts to involve communities in Baluran National Park, the results of this study suggest that similar challenges exist in Indonesia, with communities still feeling marginalized in the ecotourism management process.

However, in contrast to overseas research that has been more advanced in ecotourism management, Indonesia still faces significant challenges in terms of coordinated and sustainable management, especially in areas that are relatively new to ecotourism development, such as Baluran National Park.

Based on the results of this study, several practical implications can be drawn to enhance community empowerment in ecotourism management at Baluran National Park. First, there needs to be a more systematic effort in involving local communities in every stage of ecotourism management, from planning to evaluation. Regular meetings between ecotourism managers and local communities can be one way to increase community participation and ensure that they have a voice in decision making.

Secondly, more intensive and sustainable training for local communities is needed, not only in terms of practical skills such as tour guiding, but also in terms of managerial and entrepreneurial skills, so that they can manage ecotourism resources more independently. The development of ecotourism based small businesses, such as homestays or local handicrafts, can be one way to increase community income and strengthen their involvement in ecotourism.

Third, local government policies related to ecotourism need to support community empowerment better, taking into account both environmental and economic sustainability. Transparent and sustainable policy support is crucial for creating a conducive climate for inclusive and sustainable ecotourism management.

Although this research offers valuable insights into community empowerment in ecotourism management, several limitations warrant attention. First, this research was conducted in only one area, Baluran National Park, which may not fully represent the conditions in other areas of Indonesia. Second, the data collection techniques used were limited to in depth interviews, questionnaires, and observations, which may not

be sufficient to explore all aspects of community empowerment in ecotourism. Further research, employing broader methods such as quantitative surveys and longitudinal studies, may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the long term impact of ecotourism on local community empowerment.

Overall, the results of this study provide a clear picture of the challenges and opportunities for community empowerment in ecotourism management at Baluran National Park and offer practical recommendations to enhance the sustainability and inclusiveness of ecotourism in the area.

4. Conclusion

This study has identified and analyzed various community empowerment strategies in ecotourism management in Baluran National Park, East Java. Based on the results of interviews, questionnaires, and observations, it can be concluded that, despite several efforts made by ecotourism managers to empower local communities, the level of community participation in ecotourism management remains limited. Local communities often participate in temporary operational activities, such as tour guiding and selling handicrafts, but they do not yet play a significant role in decision making or ecotourism planning.

In addition, although there is a sense of satisfaction from some employees involved in ecotourism, most feel that the economic opportunities offered are still inadequate, and they need more training and opportunities to improve managerial and entrepreneurial skills. This limited community involvement indicates that community empowerment in ecotourism management has not been optimized.

This research also shows that there is a gap between the expected empowerment goals and the reality on the ground, where despite the good intentions of the managers to involve the community, factors such as lack of resources, inadequate training, and low community awareness regarding sustainable ecotourism are the main obstacles. Therefore, there needs to be a more systematic and sustainable effort in involving local communities, including in the planning, management, and evaluation of ecotourism activities.

Based on the results of this study, it can be suggested that ecotourism managers in Baluran National Park should strengthen community empowerment programs by providing more intensive training, increasing community involvement in decision making, and developing policies that better support sustainable and inclusive ecotourism management. Support from the local government is also crucial in creating a conducive climate for ecotourism management that benefits all parties, including both the tourism sector and local communities.

5. References

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