

Ecotourism, Cultural Identity, and Social Transformation in Indigenous Island Communities: Evidence from Hukurila, Indonesia

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between ecotourism development, cultural identity, and social transformation within the indigenous island community of Hukurila. The research investigates how ecotourism shapes cultural preservation, community participation, and socio-economic transformation in the context of sustainable tourism governance. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach grounded in tourism sociology, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, documentation, and field notes involving customary leaders, local government officials, tourism managers, residents, youth groups, tourism entrepreneurs, and visitors. The findings reveal that ecotourism has strengthened local economic opportunities while simultaneously transforming social relations, livelihood patterns, and community participation. Indigenous cultural identity remains preserved through customary rituals, local wisdom, and traditional governance systems integrated into tourism practices. However, tourism expansion also generates sociological challenges, including cultural commodification, unequal access to tourism benefits, environmental pressures, and shifts in traditional authority structures. The study introduces the concept of "Indigenous Island Ecotourism Sociology," emphasizing the interconnected relationship between marine ecology, customary institutions, cultural identity, social participation, and sustainable tourism governance. This research contributes to tourism sociology and indigenous studies by demonstrating that ecotourism functions not only as an economic activity but also as a medium of cultural resilience, identity negotiation, and community adaptation in coastal societies.

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INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism has increasingly become one of the dominant paradigms in global sustainable development discourse, particularly in coastal and small-island regions where ecological vulnerability and cultural uniqueness intersect. Across many developing countries, ecotourism is promoted not only as an economic alternative capable of generating local income, but also as a mechanism for environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and community empowerment (Lee & Jan, 2019; Yasintha, 2020). In Indonesia, the expansion of sustainable tourism policies has accelerated significantly over the past decade, especially through the development of tourism villages, marine conservation zones, and community-based tourism initiatives in eastern coastal regions. This transformation has positioned indigenous island communities as important actors within tourism governance while

simultaneously exposing them to broader processes of globalization, commercialization, and socio-cultural change.

Within this context, Hukurila, a coastal indigenous community in Eastern Indonesia, represents an important sociological setting for understanding how ecotourism reshapes local identity, social structures, and community relations. Hukurila possesses a rich combination of marine ecological resources, customary institutions, traditional rituals, and local knowledge systems that have historically sustained community life. The increasing recognition of Hukurila as a sustainable tourism destination has stimulated tourism-related economic activities, strengthened digital tourism promotion, and intensified interactions between local communities and external tourism actors. However, tourism development in small-island indigenous communities rarely produces solely positive outcomes. Instead, it often generates complex negotiations between economic aspirations and cultural continuity, environmental protection and tourism exploitation, as well as modernization and indigenous social resilience (Nendissa et al., 2021; Yanes et al., 2019).

The rapid expansion of ecotourism in coastal societies has also transformed the social organization of indigenous communities in multiple ways. Tourism activities frequently alter patterns of livelihood, encourage occupational diversification, reshape social interactions, and influence local power relations (Niode & Rahman, 2022; Sawatsuk et al., 2018). In many island communities, traditional authority systems and customary institutions are increasingly required to negotiate with market-oriented tourism governance, private investment interests, and state tourism policies. Such transformations are particularly significant in indigenous societies where cultural identity is closely embedded within communal land systems, customary rituals, marine resource governance, and collective memory. Consequently, ecotourism cannot merely be understood as an economic sector; rather, it constitutes a social arena where identity formation, cultural negotiation, and social transformation continuously occur.

In Indonesia, tourism development in eastern island regions has expanded rapidly alongside the national agenda of sustainable tourism and blue economy development. Government policies promoting tourism villages and coastal tourism destinations have generated substantial changes within local communities, particularly in areas with strong indigenous cultural characteristics. While tourism is frequently associated with economic growth and regional development, evidence from various coastal destinations demonstrates that tourism expansion may simultaneously create environmental pressure, unequal access to resources, social exclusion, and cultural commodification (Pical & Lopulalan, 2022; Zielinski et al., 2020). Communities that were previously organized around subsistence economies and customary resource management increasingly become integrated into tourism markets that prioritize visibility, consumption, and cultural performance.

These dynamics are particularly visible in small-island contexts where ecological vulnerability and social cohesion are deeply interconnected. Coastal communities often depend heavily on marine ecosystems for their livelihoods and cultural continuity. As tourism activities intensify, local communities are required to adapt to changing economic

opportunities while preserving social harmony and ecological sustainability. In many cases, younger generations become more actively involved in tourism entrepreneurship, digital promotion, and hospitality services, while older customary leaders attempt to maintain traditional values and indigenous governance systems. This intergenerational interaction creates both opportunities for cultural revitalization and tensions regarding authenticity, commercialization, and social authority.

Existing scholarship on ecotourism has produced extensive discussions regarding environmental conservation, destination management, and economic development. Ecotourism is widely viewed as a sustainable alternative to mass tourism because it emphasizes environmental responsibility, local participation, and conservation-oriented tourism practices (Lamerkabel et al., 2021; Wuryanto & Wibowo, 2021). Studies have demonstrated that community-based ecotourism can contribute to local welfare, biodiversity protection, and participatory governance when communities are meaningfully involved in tourism management (Asy'ari et al., 2021; Badaruddin et al., 2021). In many developing regions, ecotourism has also been associated with poverty alleviation and rural economic diversification, particularly in ecologically sensitive areas.

At the same time, sociological studies of tourism have emphasized that tourism represents more than recreational mobility or economic exchange. Tourism also functions as a social process involving representation, identity construction, symbolic interaction, and power negotiation (Latuheru & Tiwery, 2022; Sumiasih, 2018). Cultural performances within tourism settings are often shaped by external expectations regarding authenticity and exoticism, which may influence how indigenous communities reinterpret their traditions and identities. Botanri et al. (2021) argued that tourism frequently creates staged forms of authenticity in which local cultures are selectively presented to meet tourist demands. Such processes may strengthen cultural visibility while simultaneously transforming the meanings and functions of indigenous traditions within local communities.

Research on indigenous tourism communities further highlights the importance of customary institutions and local wisdom in maintaining socio-cultural resilience amid modernization pressures. Indigenous governance systems frequently play central roles in regulating natural resource management, social relations, and ritual practices (Astutik & Ramadhoan, 2020; Lelloltery et al., 2020). In coastal societies, local ecological knowledge constitutes not only practical environmental management but also a cultural framework through which communities understand their relationship with land, sea, and collective identity. Previous studies in Southeast Asia have shown that indigenous tourism initiatives can strengthen community solidarity and cultural pride when local communities retain decision-making authority over tourism governance (Afdhal, 2023; Wardhani & Susilowati, 2021). Nevertheless, tourism may also intensify internal social inequality, particularly when economic benefits are distributed unevenly among community groups.

Several scholars have examined the relationship between tourism and social transformation in coastal communities. Tourism expansion has been found to alter gender roles, generational relations, occupational structures, and patterns of community

participation (Deason et al., 2022; Rusli et al., 2023). In island societies, tourism often encourages the transition from subsistence-based livelihoods toward service-oriented economic activities, thereby reshaping social stratification and collective values. Digital tourism promotion has further accelerated these transformations by exposing local communities to global tourism imaginaries and external cultural influences. As social media increasingly becomes part of destination branding, indigenous communities are compelled to negotiate how their cultural identity is represented within digital tourism spaces.

Studies focusing specifically on Indonesian tourism contexts have largely concentrated on destination competitiveness, tourism management, and economic impacts. Research concerning tourism villages frequently highlights the importance of local participation and environmental sustainability, yet relatively few studies critically examine how tourism reshapes indigenous cultural identity and social structures from a sociological perspective. Existing analyses often treat community participation as a technical component of tourism management rather than as a contested social process shaped by power relations, customary authority, and cultural negotiation. Furthermore, most tourism studies remain centered on mainstream destinations such as Bali or urban tourism regions, leaving indigenous small-island communities in Eastern Indonesia underrepresented within international tourism sociology literature.

Although previous studies have contributed significantly to understanding ecotourism and community development, important dimensions remain insufficiently explored. The interaction between marine ecology, indigenous governance, cultural identity, and social transformation is rarely analyzed simultaneously within the context of island ecotourism. Discussions regarding community participation often overlook the sociological complexities underlying indigenous adaptation, social resilience, and shifting authority structures. Similarly, studies addressing cultural commodification tend to emphasize tourism representation without fully examining how local communities actively negotiate, reinterpret, and sustain their identities amid tourism expansion. These limitations indicate the need for a more integrated sociological approach capable of connecting tourism development with indigenous social realities, particularly within vulnerable coastal and island environments.

Against this backdrop, the present study offers a broader sociological understanding of ecotourism by situating indigenous island communities not merely as tourism objects but as active social actors engaged in processes of cultural negotiation, adaptation, and transformation. By examining Hukurila as a community where marine ecology, customary institutions, local participation, and tourism development intersect, this study seeks to illuminate how ecotourism simultaneously produces opportunities for cultural resilience and pressures for socio-cultural change. Rather than separating environmental sustainability from social dynamics, this research places both dimensions within a unified analytical framework that highlights the interconnectedness between ecological preservation, indigenous identity, and community agency.

This study therefore aims to analyze how ecotourism development influences cultural

identity formation, social transformation, and community participation within the indigenous island community of Hukurila. More specifically, the research explores how local wisdom and customary institutions are maintained, negotiated, and transformed amid sustainable tourism practices, while also examining how tourism reshapes livelihoods, social relations, and collective identity in coastal indigenous society. Through this approach, the study contributes to the development of tourism sociology and indigenous studies by providing a contextual understanding of sustainable island ecotourism within Eastern Indonesia's rapidly changing socio-cultural landscape.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach grounded in the perspective of tourism sociology to examine how ecotourism development shapes cultural identity, social transformation, and community participation within the indigenous island community of Hukurila, Eastern Indonesia. A qualitative approach was considered the most appropriate because the research sought to understand lived experiences, social meanings, cultural negotiations, and collective interpretations emerging from the interaction between indigenous communities and ecotourism practices. Rather than measuring tourism impacts quantitatively, this study focused on exploring how local actors interpret social change, maintain customary values, and negotiate their cultural identity amid increasing tourism expansion. Qualitative research enables researchers to capture the complexity of social realities embedded within everyday interactions, symbolic practices, and community narratives that cannot be fully explained through statistical approaches alone (Alhulays, 2024; Naeem et al., 2023). In the context of indigenous island societies, social transformation often occurs subtly through changes in authority structures, livelihood adaptation, intergenerational relations, and cultural performances, making qualitative inquiry particularly relevant for understanding these sociological dynamics.

Hukurila was selected as the research site because the village represents an indigenous coastal community experiencing rapid ecotourism development while still maintaining strong customary institutions and local ecological traditions. The village possesses significant marine tourism potential, including coastal ecosystems, traditional cultural rituals, and community-based tourism initiatives that increasingly attract visitors through digital tourism promotion. At the same time, Hukurila reflects the broader realities faced by many small-island communities in Eastern Indonesia where tourism expansion intersects with environmental vulnerability, indigenous governance, and socio-cultural transformation. The selection of Hukurila was therefore based not only on its tourism relevance but also on its sociological significance as a community actively negotiating modernization, tourism commercialization, and cultural continuity within a coastal setting.

The informants in this study consisted of 20 participants selected purposively based on their direct involvement and knowledge regarding tourism development and community life in Hukurila. They included four customary leaders, three village government officials, three tourism managers, four local residents involved in tourism-related economic activities,

three youth community members, two local tourism entrepreneurs, and one visiting tourist. These informants were chosen because they represented different social positions and perspectives within the community, allowing the study to capture diverse interpretations of ecotourism and social transformation. Customary leaders were included because they hold authority in preserving indigenous values, rituals, and customary governance systems. Village officials and tourism managers were selected due to their active roles in tourism planning and policy implementation. Youth groups and tourism entrepreneurs represented emerging social actors adapting to digital tourism and changing economic opportunities, while local residents and tourists provided insights into everyday social interaction and tourism experiences. The diversity of informants allowed the research to understand how ecotourism is perceived, negotiated, and practiced across different layers of community life.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, participant observation, documentation studies, and field notes over the course of the research process. In-depth interviews were used to explore personal experiences, social meanings, and collective perceptions regarding tourism development, cultural identity, and social change. Semi-structured interview techniques enabled informants to narrate their experiences openly while allowing the researcher to explore emerging sociological themes flexibly (Guillen, 2019; Sarfo et al., 2021). Participant observation was carried out to understand social interactions, tourism activities, customary practices, and community participation directly within their natural settings. Through observation, the researcher was able to capture everyday dynamics that were not always fully expressed during interviews, particularly regarding social relations, cultural performances, and patterns of interaction between local residents and visitors. Documentation studies were conducted by reviewing village tourism documents, local regulations, tourism promotion materials, photographs, and community archives to strengthen contextual understanding and support field findings. Field notes were continuously maintained to record observations, informal conversations, and reflective interpretations throughout the research process.

To ensure the credibility and validity of the findings, this study applied triangulation through multiple techniques and data sources. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from customary leaders, government officials, tourism actors, and local residents to identify consistency and differences in perspectives. Method triangulation was implemented by cross-checking findings derived from interviews, observations, and documentation studies. In addition, time triangulation was applied by conducting repeated observations and interviews at different moments during the fieldwork process to ensure the stability of information and social interpretations. The data were analyzed thematically using interactive analysis techniques involving data reduction, data display, interpretation, and conclusion drawing as proposed by Nha (2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ecotourism Expansion and the Reconfiguration of Indigenous Coastal Economies

The expansion of ecotourism in Hukurila has gradually reshaped the economic

landscape of the indigenous coastal community, transforming the village from a predominantly subsistence-based fishing society into a more diversified local economy connected to tourism services and marine-based entrepreneurship. Findings from field observations and in-depth interviews reveal that the growth of ecotourism has opened various economic opportunities for local residents, particularly through the development of homestays, small culinary businesses, marine tour services, local transportation, handicraft production, and community-based tourism activities. This transformation reflects a broader pattern in many coastal societies where tourism becomes integrated into everyday economic life while simultaneously altering traditional livelihood structures (Daforsa & Handra, 2019; Doyle et al., 2020).

In Hukurila, tourism-related economic activities have become increasingly visible alongside the intensification of digital tourism promotion through social media platforms and community tourism networks. Younger generations, in particular, play a significant role in promoting marine attractions, cultural activities, and local tourism experiences through digital content production. Several youth groups actively manage online tourism information, coordinate visitor activities, and collaborate with local tourism managers in organizing snorkeling tours, coastal tracking, and cultural events. One youth informant, identified as R.L., explained that tourism has provided new economic possibilities that previously did not exist within the village economy. According to him, younger residents no longer depend solely on fishing activities because tourism-related services now offer alternative income sources, especially during peak visitor seasons. This finding demonstrates how ecotourism contributes to livelihood diversification by expanding employment opportunities beyond traditional marine extraction activities.

The emergence of tourism entrepreneurship has also influenced household economic strategies within the community. Some families have converted parts of their homes into small-scale homestays for visitors, while others have developed local culinary businesses based on traditional coastal food products. Women's participation in tourism-related economic activities has become increasingly prominent, particularly in food preparation, handicraft production, and hospitality services. Field observations indicate that tourism has created more flexible forms of household economic participation where family members collectively contribute to tourism-based income generation. This condition reflects what recent sustainable tourism scholarship identifies as adaptive livelihood transformation, namely the ability of local communities to reorganize economic practices in response to emerging socio-economic opportunities and environmental change (Bait et al., 2019; Hermawan, 2019).

However, the transformation generated by ecotourism is not entirely free from tension and inequality. Although tourism has strengthened local economic opportunities, access to tourism benefits remains unevenly distributed among community members. Residents who possess better social networks, financial resources, or strategic coastal locations tend to benefit more significantly from tourism activities than households still relying primarily on small-scale fisheries. Interviews with several fishers revealed concerns

regarding the seasonal and unstable nature of tourism income. An informant identified as M.K. explained that while tourism can provide additional earnings during holiday periods, fishing remains the primary source of livelihood for many families because tourism activities fluctuate according to visitor numbers and weather conditions. Such findings illustrate that tourism integration does not completely replace traditional livelihoods but instead produces hybrid economic arrangements where fishing and tourism coexist simultaneously.

This coexistence between traditional marine livelihoods and tourism-oriented economic activities has also altered social relations within the village. Tourism expansion encourages greater interaction between local residents and external actors, including tourists, travel organizers, and government tourism agencies. These interactions gradually reshape local perceptions regarding work, economic aspiration, and community participation. Several customary leaders interviewed during the study expressed concern that younger generations increasingly perceive tourism-related work as more prestigious and economically attractive than traditional fishing occupations. While this shift reflects adaptive economic rationality, it also indicates broader sociological changes concerning identity, intergenerational values, and social mobility within indigenous coastal communities.

The findings further demonstrate that tourism development in Hukurila remains deeply embedded within local social structures and cultural relations rather than operating purely as a market-based economic sector. Economic participation in tourism frequently relies on kinship networks, customary trust relations, and communal cooperation. Homestay management, cultural event organization, and tourism service provision are often coordinated collectively among extended family members and neighborhood groups. This condition supports the concept of tourism social embeddedness, which argues that tourism economies are inseparable from local social relations, cultural norms, and power structures (Saz-Gil et al., 2021; Simoni et al., 2019). In Hukurila, tourism expansion does not simply create new income opportunities; it also reorganizes social interaction, redistributes economic authority, and reshapes community participation within the indigenous coastal economy.

At the same time, ecotourism development has increased community awareness regarding the economic value of environmental conservation. Marine ecosystems, coastal landscapes, and cultural traditions are increasingly recognized not only as communal heritage but also as valuable tourism assets that require collective protection. Consequently, economic transformation in Hukurila cannot be understood merely through income growth or occupational change. Rather, it represents a broader process of adaptive coastal livelihood transformation in which indigenous communities negotiate between economic survival, cultural continuity, and environmental sustainability within the expanding sphere of ecotourism.

Cultural Identity Preservation through Indigenous Ecotourism Practices

The development of ecotourism in Hukurila has not only transformed the economic orientation of the community but has also become closely intertwined with the preservation and reinterpretation of indigenous cultural identity. Findings from interviews, participant observation, and documentation studies demonstrate that cultural practices in Hukurila

remain strongly embedded within everyday social life despite the increasing expansion of tourism activities. Rather than being displaced by tourism modernization, local traditions, customary rituals, and indigenous governance systems continue to function as important social foundations that shape the direction of community-based ecotourism. In this context, ecotourism has evolved into a social space where cultural continuity and adaptation occur simultaneously.

One of the most visible expressions of cultural preservation in Hukurila is the continued implementation of customary marine management practices, particularly the local sasi system. Sasi functions not merely as an environmental regulation mechanism but also as a collective cultural institution that reflects indigenous values concerning balance, communal responsibility, and respect for marine ecosystems. Field observations revealed that tourism activities in coastal areas are still regulated according to customary agreements and community consensus. Several customary leaders emphasized that tourism development must remain aligned with traditional ecological ethics inherited from previous generations. An elder informant identified as A.H. explained that certain coastal zones and ritual spaces cannot be freely commercialized because they hold sacred cultural meanings connected to ancestral history and collective identity. This demonstrates that indigenous governance remains central in determining the boundaries of tourism utilization within the community.

The preservation of cultural identity is also reflected through the continued practice of ritual ceremonies, oral traditions, and historical narratives that are increasingly incorporated into local tourism experiences. Community festivals, traditional welcoming ceremonies, and storytelling about the village's historical relationship with the sea are not solely performed for tourists but continue to function as mechanisms of intergenerational cultural transmission. Tourism, therefore, does not entirely transform culture into spectacle; instead, it creates new opportunities for cultural revitalization within the indigenous community. Similar findings have been highlighted in studies of indigenous tourism communities where cultural tourism strengthens local identity when communities retain authority over cultural representation and interpretation (Ernawati et al., 2021; Trianto et al., 2020).

At the same time, the expansion of tourism has required the community to continuously negotiate how cultural identity is presented within modern tourism contexts. Younger generations have become increasingly active in promoting local traditions through digital media platforms, tourism videos, and social networking sites. Youth involvement in digital tourism promotion reflects an adaptive strategy through which indigenous identity is rearticulated within contemporary communication spaces. Several youth informants described tourism not only as an economic opportunity but also as a means to introduce local culture to broader audiences. One participant identified as R.T. explained that social media content related to traditional rituals, local cuisine, and marine conservation is intentionally designed to strengthen public awareness regarding Hukurila's cultural uniqueness. This finding illustrates how digital technology has become integrated into local cultural preservation efforts rather than functioning solely as a commercial tourism instrument.

Nevertheless, the integration of culture into tourism activities also generates internal tensions regarding authenticity, commodification, and the protection of sacred traditions. Interviews with customary leaders revealed concerns that excessive tourism exposure could gradually reduce the symbolic meaning of certain rituals if cultural performances become overly oriented toward visitor expectations. Some community members expressed discomfort when outsiders attempted to access restricted ritual spaces or document sacred ceremonies without permission. Consequently, local customary institutions continue to regulate which cultural elements may be publicly displayed and which must remain protected within the internal cultural sphere of the community. These forms of negotiation indicate that indigenous culture in Hukurila is not passively consumed by tourism expansion but actively managed through selective adaptation and communal control.

The findings further reveal that cultural preservation in Hukurila is closely connected to collective memory and social belonging. Tourism activities frequently encourage community members to re-engage with local history, traditional ecological knowledge, and indigenous narratives that might otherwise receive diminishing attention amid modernization processes. Through tourism-related cultural activities, younger generations become more familiar with customary values and community identity. In this sense, ecotourism contributes not only to economic sustainability but also to cultural resilience by creating renewed spaces for the reproduction of indigenous knowledge and social memory. As argued by cultural resilience scholars, indigenous communities often maintain cultural continuity not through rigid resistance to change but through dynamic adaptation that allows traditions to remain socially meaningful within changing social contexts (Barrutia & Echebarria, 2022; Handayani & Badrudin, 2019).

This process can be conceptualized as a negotiated indigenous identity, namely a condition in which cultural identity is preserved through selective adaptation to external tourism influences and modern social change. In Hukurila, indigenous identity is neither entirely static nor fully transformed by tourism commercialization. Instead, local communities continuously negotiate which cultural values may be adapted for tourism purposes and which must remain protected as sacred communal heritage. Such negotiation demonstrates that ecotourism operates as a complex sociocultural arena where tradition and modernity interact in fluid and dynamic ways.

Community Participation and the Transformation of Social Relations

The expansion of ecotourism in Hukurila has significantly reshaped patterns of community participation and social interaction within the indigenous coastal society. Findings from interviews and participant observation indicate that tourism development has encouraged broader involvement from various social groups that were previously less visible in village-level decision-making processes. Community participation in Hukurila no longer operates merely through formal meetings or symbolic inclusion within tourism programs, but increasingly manifests through active engagement in destination management, environmental conservation, digital tourism promotion, and the development of local

creative economies. This transformation reflects how ecotourism has become embedded within the social organization of the village, influencing not only economic activities but also the structure of social relations and collective agency.

One of the most visible changes concerns the increasing involvement of younger generations in tourism governance and promotional activities. Youth groups have become central actors in organizing tourism events, managing social media promotion, guiding visitors, and developing digital content related to marine tourism and local culture. Several younger informants explained that tourism provides a new social space where they can contribute more actively to village development while simultaneously strengthening local identity. An informant identified as F.L. described tourism as an opportunity for youth to remain connected to the village rather than migrating permanently to urban areas in search of employment. According to him, ecotourism allows younger residents to combine technological skills, local knowledge, and economic participation within their own community. This condition demonstrates that tourism has altered generational participation patterns by expanding opportunities for youth leadership and social visibility.

Women's participation has also increased considerably alongside the growth of tourism activities. Field observations revealed that women are actively involved in culinary businesses, homestay management, handicraft production, and the organization of cultural tourism activities. In several tourism-related community meetings observed during the fieldwork process, women were not positioned solely as supporting actors but increasingly participated in discussions concerning tourism planning and local economic initiatives. This growing involvement has gradually shifted traditional gendered divisions of labor within the village economy. While domestic responsibilities remain significant, tourism-related activities create additional social and economic spaces for women's participation in public community life. Similar patterns have been identified in community-based tourism studies, which suggest that tourism can strengthen local participation when economic and social opportunities become more accessible to previously marginalized groups (Hendrianto, 2019; Tadjoeidin, 2020).

The emergence of local tourism business groups and community-based tourism organizations has further transformed social interaction within Hukurila. Tourism development requires collaboration among customary leaders, village government officials, tourism managers, youth groups, and local entrepreneurs. As a result, social relations increasingly involve negotiation and coordination across multiple community actors with different interests and forms of authority. Community meetings regarding tourism management often become arenas where economic aspirations, environmental concerns, and cultural values intersect. Several tourism managers explained that collective decision-making has become more frequent because tourism activities directly affect communal resources, coastal spaces, and cultural representation.

However, the expansion of participation has also generated new tensions within the community, particularly regarding authority, access to resources, and decision-making legitimacy. Interviews with customary leaders revealed concerns that tourism governance is

gradually becoming more influenced by actors possessing digital skills, external tourism networks, or stronger economic capital. Some elders expressed unease regarding the growing influence of younger tourism organizers whose approaches are perceived as more market-oriented and less grounded in customary values. An elder informant identified as Y.M. explained that tourism development should remain under the guidance of customary principles because excessive commercialization may weaken collective responsibility and cultural ethics. This finding illustrates that ecotourism does not merely expand participation but also reshapes symbolic authority within the indigenous social structure.

The involvement of digital tourism communities has contributed further to these changing power relations. Social media platforms increasingly shape how Hukurila is represented to external audiences, influencing tourism branding, visitor perceptions, and promotional strategies. Younger tourism actors who possess greater technological literacy often gain stronger influence in determining tourism narratives and destination visibility. Consequently, symbolic authority within the village is no longer based exclusively on customary status or seniority but is increasingly connected to digital competence and tourism networking capacity. Such transformations indicate that ecotourism introduces new forms of social capital that coexist alongside traditional authority systems.

At the same time, community participation in tourism activities has strengthened collective awareness regarding environmental conservation and village development. Coastal clean-up programs, marine conservation initiatives, and community tourism events are frequently organized collaboratively among residents, youth groups, and tourism managers. Participation in these activities reinforces social cohesion and collective responsibility concerning the sustainability of local tourism resources. Several residents stated that tourism has encouraged stronger communal cooperation because environmental quality and cultural preservation directly affect the village's attractiveness as a tourism destination. In this sense, ecotourism contributes not only to economic participation but also to the revitalization of communal engagement within indigenous coastal society.

The findings of this study conceptualize these dynamics as a form of participatory social transformation, namely the restructuring of social relations resulting from the expansion of community participation within tourism governance. Participation in Hukurila is not static or uniformly harmonious; rather, it involves continuous negotiation between traditional authority, emerging youth leadership, economic interests, and collective cultural values. This condition supports the argument within Community-Based Tourism Governance theory that participation in sustainable tourism is inseparable from struggles over legitimacy, power distribution, and resource access (Agusta, 2023; Wahyudi et al., 2020). In Hukurila, ecotourism functions as a social arena where indigenous communities continuously negotiate new forms of participation while attempting to preserve social cohesion and customary identity amid ongoing socio-economic transformation.

Ecotourism, Environmental Pressure, and the Negotiation of Indigenous Governance

The rapid expansion of ecotourism in Hukurila has created a complex relationship between environmental conservation, tourism growth, and indigenous governance within the

coastal community. While tourism has generated economic opportunities and strengthened local visibility, the increasing flow of visitors has simultaneously intensified ecological pressures on marine and coastal ecosystems that have long sustained the community's social and cultural life. Findings from participant observation and interviews indicate that local residents are increasingly aware that tourism development carries environmental consequences that must be collectively managed to prevent ecological degradation and the weakening of customary environmental ethics.

One of the most visible impacts identified during the fieldwork process concerns the growing pressure on coastal areas and marine spaces used for tourism activities. Popular snorkeling sites, beach areas, and coastal access points have experienced increased visitor concentration, particularly during holiday seasons and tourism events. Several residents reported that tourism activities have contributed to rising waste production, disturbances to coral reef areas, and growing competition over the use of coastal space. An informant identified as J.T., who works as a local tourism guide, explained that visitor numbers have increased significantly in recent years, especially after digital tourism promotion became more active through social media platforms. According to him, tourism growth has brought economic benefits, but the community also faces challenges related to maintaining beach cleanliness and protecting marine ecosystems from irresponsible tourist behavior.

These findings demonstrate that ecotourism in small-island communities cannot be separated from ecological vulnerability. Coastal societies such as Hukurila rely heavily on marine ecosystems not only for tourism income but also for fishing livelihoods, cultural continuity, and collective survival. Consequently, environmental degradation is perceived not merely as an ecological issue but as a threat to social stability and indigenous identity. Several customary leaders emphasized during interviews that the sea is understood as part of communal heritage rather than simply an economic resource. This cultural perspective shapes how environmental protection is interpreted within the local governance system.

In response to these pressures, the community continues to rely strongly on indigenous governance mechanisms and customary ecological principles to regulate tourism activities. One of the most significant mechanisms observed during the study is the continued implementation of customary marine regulations through local conservation norms and collective monitoring practices. Certain marine zones remain subject to customary restrictions concerning resource use, visitor access, and environmentally sensitive activities. Community elders explained that these customary rules are intended not only to preserve ecological sustainability but also to maintain social balance between humans, nature, and ancestral values.

Field observations further revealed that environmental supervision frequently operates through collective community participation rather than solely through formal governmental enforcement. Community members regularly organize coastal clean-up activities, monitor tourism behavior in marine areas, and remind visitors regarding local environmental norms. Youth groups involved in digital tourism promotion also actively disseminate messages concerning environmental responsibility and sustainable tourism

ethics. An informant identified as R.S. explained that younger residents increasingly recognize that tourism sustainability depends on preserving the ecological condition of the village. According to him, environmental protection is no longer viewed only as the responsibility of customary leaders but has become a shared concern among community members involved in tourism activities.

At the same time, the expansion of tourism has introduced new governance challenges related to overlapping authority between customary institutions, government tourism policies, and external tourism actors. Interviews with village officials and customary leaders revealed that tourism development programs initiated by government agencies or private tourism promoters do not always align fully with local customary priorities. In several cases, external tourism initiatives emphasized infrastructure expansion and visitor accessibility without sufficiently considering customary environmental restrictions or the social capacity of the community to manage tourism growth. These conditions create tensions regarding who possesses legitimate authority over tourism governance and coastal resource management.

An elder informant identified as M.H. explained that customary leaders sometimes feel excluded from tourism planning discussions involving external stakeholders. According to him, tourism policies are occasionally implemented too quickly without fully consulting indigenous institutions that traditionally regulate communal coastal areas. This finding illustrates that tourism governance in Hukurila involves continuous negotiation between formal administrative systems and indigenous authority structures. Rather than functioning as static cultural symbols, customary institutions remain active political and ecological actors within local tourism governance.

The findings of this study suggest that the sustainability of ecotourism in Hukurila depends largely on the community's ability to integrate environmental conservation with indigenous governance systems. Customary institutions continue to function as mechanisms of social control, ecological regulation, and collective legitimacy within the tourism sector. This condition aligns with Indigenous Environmental Governance theory, which emphasizes that indigenous communities maintain ecological stewardship through local knowledge systems, customary authority, and communal participation (Haseeb et al., 2020; Yudha, 2020). In Hukurila, environmental governance is not solely technocratic or policy-driven; it is deeply embedded within cultural values, social obligations, and collective memory.

Towards an Indigenous Island Ecotourism Sociology

The findings of this study demonstrate that ecotourism in Hukurila cannot be understood merely as an economic sector or a technical strategy for coastal development. Rather, ecotourism emerges as a multidimensional social arena in which marine ecology, indigenous governance, cultural identity, social participation, and local power relations continuously intersect and reshape one another. Throughout the research process, it became evident that tourism development in Hukurila is deeply embedded within the social fabric of the indigenous island community, influencing not only patterns of livelihood but also collective identity, environmental ethics, and the structure of community relations. This

interconnectedness reveals that ecotourism in indigenous coastal societies involves far more complex processes than those commonly emphasized in conventional tourism development frameworks.

Field findings indicate that tourism expansion simultaneously produces opportunities and tensions within community life. On one hand, ecotourism has strengthened local economic resilience through livelihood diversification, community entrepreneurship, and the emergence of youth-led tourism initiatives. Tourism has also revitalized collective awareness regarding the importance of preserving customary traditions, marine conservation practices, and indigenous ecological values. Cultural rituals, local narratives, and customary institutions remain actively integrated within tourism activities, allowing the community to maintain cultural continuity amid increasing global tourism exposure. Several informants described tourism as an opportunity to strengthen pride in local identity while introducing Hukurila's cultural heritage to broader audiences.

At the same time, the study also reveals the ambivalent character of ecotourism within indigenous island communities. Economic opportunities generated by tourism are not distributed equally across all social groups, creating new forms of differentiation related to access to tourism networks, capital ownership, and digital capacity. Certain households benefit more substantially from tourism-related businesses, while others remain dependent on traditional fishing livelihoods that are increasingly affected by environmental pressure and changing economic structures. These findings suggest that tourism development may reproduce local inequalities even within community-based tourism frameworks.

The expansion of tourism also creates tensions surrounding cultural representation and authority. While younger generations actively utilize digital media to promote local identity and tourism attractions, customary leaders often emphasize the importance of maintaining sacred boundaries that should not be fully commercialized. Interviews with customary elders revealed concerns regarding the gradual transformation of cultural values when traditions become increasingly oriented toward visitor expectations and tourism performance. An informant identified as A.L. explained that tourism must not reduce culture into entertainment detached from its social and spiritual meaning. According to him, indigenous traditions should continue to function primarily for the community itself rather than solely for tourism consumption. This perspective reflects the ongoing negotiation between cultural preservation and market-oriented tourism development.

The ecological dimension of tourism expansion further reinforces the complexity of social transformation occurring in Hukurila. Marine ecosystems that serve as tourism attractions simultaneously constitute the ecological foundation of community life, customary identity, and coastal livelihoods. As tourism activities intensify, environmental conservation becomes increasingly intertwined with questions of governance, legitimacy, and social responsibility. Community members repeatedly emphasized during interviews that protecting the sea is inseparable from protecting collective identity and ancestral heritage. In this context, ecological conservation is not merely an environmental agenda but also a cultural and social obligation embedded within indigenous worldviews. This finding aligns

with recent discussions in indigenous environmental governance scholarship, which argue that ecological stewardship in indigenous societies is closely connected to cultural continuity and communal responsibility (Faoziyah & Salim, 2020; Indraningsih et al., 2021; Purnamawati et al., 2023).

These interconnected dynamics lead this study to propose the conceptualization of Indigenous Island Ecotourism Sociology as a broader sociological framework for understanding tourism development within indigenous coastal and island communities. This perspective views ecotourism not simply as an economic activity or conservation strategy but as a multidimensional social process shaped by the interaction between marine ecology, indigenous governance, cultural identity, social participation, and sustainable tourism practices. The concept emphasizes that tourism development in indigenous island societies cannot be analyzed in isolation from local power relations, ecological ethics, historical memory, and customary institutional structures.

Unlike mainstream tourism sociology, which frequently concentrates on urban tourism spaces, destination branding, or tourist consumption patterns, this conceptualization places indigenous island communities at the center of analysis. The experience of Hukurila demonstrates that small-island ecotourism involves distinctive sociological characteristics shaped by ecological vulnerability, communal governance systems, and strong cultural attachment to coastal environments. Tourism development within such contexts requires constant negotiation between modernization pressures and indigenous social resilience. As argued by Nugraha et al. (2020) and Suaedi et al. (2023), cultural resilience in tourism communities emerges not through rigid resistance to change but through adaptive processes that allow communities to reinterpret traditions while preserving collective meaning.

The proposed conceptual framework also expands discussions regarding sustainable tourism governance by integrating sociological dimensions often overlooked in tourism policy and management studies. Sustainable tourism in Hukurila depends not solely on economic growth or environmental protection but on the capacity of indigenous communities to maintain social cohesion, cultural legitimacy, and participatory governance amid expanding tourism pressures. Ecotourism therefore becomes both a site of empowerment and a terrain of contestation where different actors negotiate access, authority, identity, and environmental responsibility.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that ecotourism in Hukurila functions not merely as a mechanism of local economic development, but as a multidimensional social process that continuously reshapes cultural identity, community participation, and indigenous governance within the context of coastal transformation. The findings indicate that the expansion of ecotourism has encouraged adaptive livelihood diversification, strengthened youth and community participation, and increased local awareness regarding the importance of environmental conservation and cultural preservation. At the same time, indigenous identity in Hukurila remains sustained through customary institutions, marine conservation traditions,

collective rituals, and local ecological values that continue to regulate the social boundaries of tourism practices. Nevertheless, tourism development also generates new sociological tensions related to cultural commodification, unequal access to tourism benefits, ecological pressure, and the shifting configuration of authority between customary leaders, tourism actors, and emerging digital communities. These conditions reveal that ecotourism within indigenous island societies operates through ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity, economic opportunity and environmental sustainability, as well as communal values and market-oriented tourism expansion. Based on these findings, this study proposes the perspective of Indigenous Island Ecotourism Sociology as an analytical approach that places marine ecology, indigenous governance, cultural identity, social participation, and sustainable tourism governance within an interconnected sociological framework. Through the case of Hukurila, the study contributes to the development of tourism sociology and indigenous studies by emphasizing that sustainable ecotourism in small-island communities depends fundamentally on the capacity of local communities to maintain cultural legitimacy, ecological ethics, and participatory social resilience amid the growing pressures of global tourism transformation.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles, including informed consent, protection of informants' confidentiality, and respect for local cultural values. Special consideration was given to participants from vulnerable groups to ensure their safety, comfort, and equal rights to participate. No external funding was received, and the authors declare no conflict of interest. All data and information presented were collected through valid research methods and have been verified to ensure their accuracy and reliability. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) was limited to technical assistance for writing and language editing, without influencing the scientific substance of the work. The authors express their gratitude to the informants for their valuable insights, and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content and conclusions of this article.

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