



## The Role of Ecotourism in Empowering the Local Community Economy in Riau Province: A Case Study in the Bukit Tiga Puluh National Park Area

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### **Abstract**

*Ecotourism as a form of nature-based tourism has the potential to provide significant economic benefits to local communities, while supporting the conservation of natural resources. Bukit Tiga Puluh National Park in Riau Province, with its abundant biodiversity, offers great potential in ecotourism development that can improve the welfare of local communities. This study aims to analyze the role of ecotourism in empowering the economy of local communities around the Bukit Tiga Puluh National Park (TNBT) area, Riau Province. As a form of sustainable tourism, ecotourism is expected to improve community welfare through job creation, increased income, and environmental conservation. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design involving in-depth interviews and observations of local communities, ecotourism managers, and tourists. The results show that ecotourism has had a positive impact on the community's economy, especially through the accommodation, tour guides, and handicraft production sectors. Communities that previously relied on subsistence agriculture now have new opportunities in the tourism sector, although challenges related to limited managerial skills and sustainable natural resource management still exist. Local governments and conservation institutions play an important role in supporting ecotourism development, but more integrated policies and more intensive training are needed to optimize the potential of ecotourism as a driver of community economic empowerment. This study concludes that ecotourism in TNBT can be a model for sustainable conservation-based economic empowerment with better management and active involvement of local communities.*

*Keywords: Ecotourism, Economic Empowerment, Local Community, Bukit Tiga Puluh National Park, Sustainable Management*

### **1. Introduction**

Riau Province, located on the east coast of Sumatra Island, is known for its abundant natural resources, especially vast tropical forests, wetlands, and high biodiversity. One of the natural areas that has great potential in supporting sustainable development is Bukit Tiga Puluh National Park (TNBT), which is one of the most important conservation areas in Riau. With an area of more than 140,000 hectares, TNBT is not only a habitat for rare flora and fauna, but also has a vital role in maintaining the balance of the ecosystem on Sumatra Island, which is increasingly threatened by land conversion for plantations and other human activities. However, despite having extraordinary natural resources, the people living around this area, especially in the villages around TNBT, still face major challenges in terms of economic welfare. Most people rely on traditional livelihoods such as farming, hunting, and logging to meet their daily needs. However, these practices are often unsustainable and can damage the existing ecosystem, which in turn threatens the sustainability of their own livelihoods. Conversion of forest land into oil palm plantations and monoculture agriculture, for example, has reduced forest area and decreased environmental quality, which has an impact on people's lives.

In an effort to overcome people's dependence on

environmentally damaging activities, ecotourism development has emerged as a sustainable alternative. Ecotourism, which integrates aspects of nature conservation and local economic empowerment, is believed to be a solution to create a balance between the use of natural resources and environmental conservation. In Bukit Tiga Puluh National Park, ecotourism development offers opportunities to empower local communities directly through the provision of jobs, increased income, and increased community skills in managing nature-based tourism.

However, although ecotourism has great potential, its implementation in TNBT still faces various challenges. Limited infrastructure, suboptimal human resource capacity, and lack of market access for local products are some of the obstacles that need to be overcome. Therefore, it is important to understand more deeply how ecotourism can play a role in empowering the economy of local communities in the area, as well as the factors that influence the success and challenges in its management.

This study aims to examine the role of ecotourism in empowering the local community economy around Bukit Tiga Puluh National Park, with a focus on the economic impacts received by the community, the challenges faced in managing

ecotourism, and the policies that need to be implemented to support the sustainability of ecotourism in this area. With a deeper understanding, it is hoped that this study can contribute to formulating more effective policies in utilizing ecotourism as a tool to improve the welfare of local communities while preserving nature.

## **2. Research Methods**

### **2.1. Research Location**

This research was conducted in Siambul Village and Rantau Langsat Village located around the Bukit Tiga Puluh National Park area, Riau Province. The selection of this location was based on the involvement of local communities in ecotourism activities involving nature-based tourism sectors, such as tour guides, homestay management, and sales of local products. The villages selected as the focus of the research include villages closest to access to TNBT and have growing ecotourism potential.

### **2.2. Data Sources**

The data sources in this study consist of primary data and secondary data. Primary data will be obtained through direct interviews with: Local Communities: Interviews with tour guides, homestay managers, and local product traders involved in ecotourism. Ecotourism Managers: Interviews with Bukit Tiga Puluh National Park managers, local government, and organizations that play a role in ecotourism development. Tourists: Interviews with several tourists who have visited the TNBT area to find out their perceptions of the impact of ecotourism on local communities. Secondary data will be obtained from relevant documents, such as annual reports, government policies on ecotourism, and socio-economic data of the community around TNBT.

### **2.3. Data Collection Techniques**

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted to gain deeper information about the role of ecotourism in increasing community income, challenges faced in ecotourism management, and social benefits felt by the community. Interviews will be conducted with local communities, ecotourism managers, and tourists. Researchers will conduct direct observations of ecotourism activities in the field, such as tours, interactions between communities and tourists, and economic activities related to ecotourism. This observation aims to gain a contextual understanding of the dynamics of ecotourism activities in the area.

### **2.4. Data Analysis Techniques**

The collected data will be analyzed thematically, namely by identifying the main themes that emerge from interviews and observations. The analysis

steps taken include: Data Organization: Data from interviews and observations will be compiled and grouped based on relevant themes, such as economic impacts, challenges in management, and community expectations of ecotourism. Coding and Theme Compilation: Data will be grouped into certain categories based on coding, such as "community income", "employment", "natural resource management", and so on. Thematic Analysis: The researcher will identify patterns that emerge from the themes and relate them to theories and concepts about ecotourism and economic empowerment.

## **3. Results and Discussions**

### **The Role of Ecotourism in Empowering the Local Community Economy**

The results of interviews with local communities and ecotourism managers show that ecotourism has a significant role in empowering the economy of communities around TNBT. Local communities are involved in various ecotourism activities, ranging from tour guides, homestay management, selling local products such as handicrafts, to providing transportation services for tourists. Most informants said that ecotourism activities provide significant additional income opportunities, especially for families living in villages around TNBT.

According to ecotourism managers, visitors who come to enjoy the natural beauty and biodiversity in TNBT make a major contribution to improving the local economy. Communities that previously relied on subsistence farming have begun to shift to the service sector directly related to ecotourism. For example, residents who initially only farmed rice are now also opening homestay businesses for tourists visiting this area. This indicates that the ecotourism sector is able to create new jobs that have the potential to improve the quality of life of local communities.

For example, in Tanjung Simpang Village, communities involved in homestay management and tour guides said that they can earn additional income that is much higher compared to their agricultural products. According to one informant, the monthly income obtained from the ecotourism sector can be twice their income as farmers.

### **Impact of Ecotourism on Local Infrastructure Development**

In addition to increasing income, ecotourism also has a positive impact on the development of local infrastructure. Observation results show that income obtained from the ecotourism sector encourages the development of basic infrastructure such as village roads, provision of sanitation facilities, and increased accessibility to tourist areas.

The local government, in collaboration with conservation institutions, also supports infrastructure development to improve tourist comfort and provide benefits to the community.

However, despite significant infrastructure improvements, several villages still face challenges in terms of accessibility, especially during the rainy season, when roads to tourist areas become difficult to pass. This indicates that despite progress, better and more sustainable infrastructure development is still needed to maximize ecotourism potential.

### Challenges Faced in Ecotourism Management

Although ecotourism brings significant economic benefits, this study also found several challenges in managing ecotourism in the TNBT area. One of the main challenges is the lack of managerial and marketing skills among local communities. Many people are involved in ecotourism, but they do not fully understand the concept of sustainable tourism management. They tend to rely on personal experience in managing homestays or tours without adequate knowledge of tourism management, marketing, and good service standards.

In addition, some local communities also face problems related to excessive use of natural resources. Although ecotourism aims to conserve nature, there are some indications that poorly managed ecotourism activities can cause environmental damage, such as waste pollution and damage to sensitive ecosystems. Therefore, there is an urgent need for training and education for the community on environmentally friendly and sustainable ecotourism management.

According to one ecotourism manager, one of the biggest challenges is regulating the number of tourists visiting TNBT to prevent over-tourism, which can cause environmental damage and reduce the tourism experience. This indicates the need for stricter policies related to regulating the number of tourists and protecting the environment.

### Policy Support and Government Participation

Local governments and conservation institutions play an important role in supporting the development of ecotourism in the TNBT area. Based on the results of interviews with area managers, policies issued by the government such as providing funds for ecotourism management and infrastructure development support the sustainability of this sector. In addition, training provided by conservation institutions also helps communities understand the importance of nature conservation and sustainable ecotourism management. However, despite government support, some existing policies have not been fully optimized in creating synergy between nature

conservation and community economic empowerment. In this case, increased coordination between related parties is needed to create policies that better support community empowerment.

### 4. Conclusion

Overall, ecotourism in the Bukit Tiga Puluh National Park area has had a positive impact on empowering the local community's economy, especially through job creation and income generation. Although there are challenges in sustainable ecotourism management, such as limited managerial skills and potential environmental damage, ecotourism remains an effective strategy to improve the welfare of communities around TNBT. Further support is needed in terms of training and policies to ensure environmentally friendly and sustainable ecotourism management.

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