

# Community-based Ecotourism Strategy for Local Economic Empowerment

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## Abstract

This study aims to analyze community-based ecotourism strategies to empower the local economy in Bone Regency. Using qualitative methods and a case study approach, this research involved 20 informants consisting of 10 domestic tourists, 5 tourism agency employees, and 5 members of the environmental community. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, field observations, and documentation, then analyzed thematically. The results showed that the implementation of community-based ecotourism strategies was able to have a positive impact on the local economy. Communities are actively involved in the management of ecotourism destinations, which not only increases their income but also strengthens awareness of the importance of preserving the environment. Community participation in environmental conservation and tourism management, such as waste management and ecosystem conservation, has proven to be an important factor in the success of ecotourism. In addition, the role of local government and the environmental community plays a significant role in supporting the sustainability and development of ecotourism. This study concludes that community-based ecotourism strategies can be an effective model of local economic empowerment, but further collaboration between the government, communities, and tourists is needed to improve social and environmental impacts sustainably.

**Keywords:** Ecotourism; Local economic; Environmental; Sustainable; Participatory management

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## INTRODUCTION

Community-based ecotourism has become one of the main strategies for supporting local economic empowerment in natural resource-rich regions (Das & Chatterjee, 2015). Bone Regency in South Sulawesi Province has great potential for ecotourism development due to its rich maritime ecosystems, forest resources, and fascinating local culture. Based on data from Bone Regency's Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS), the tourism sector has shown significant growth over the past five years, with an increasing number of domestic tourists visiting the region by 2022. However, despite the vast tourism potential in Bone, challenges related to sustainable tourism management and the environmental impact of increased tourist activity are becoming significant concerns.

Community-based ecotourism is seen as an effective solution to these challenges because it not only focuses on tourism but also prioritizes local communities' active role in natural resource management and environmental conservation. This model is proven to improve the economic welfare of local communities without sacrificing environmental sustainability, which aligns with sustainable development principles (Yusriadi & Cahaya, 2022). Previous studies on community-based ecotourism provide opportunities for local communities to participate directly in the management of tourist destinations, which not only encourages local economic growth but also strengthens community involvement in protecting their environment (Harper & Snowden, 2017).

In Bone Regency, the implementation of community-based ecotourism has begun to receive attention from various parties, both from the local government, the environmental community, and local community groups. Some local communities have begun to take the initiative to manage ecotourism, focusing on environmental conservation and preserving local culture (Raj et al., 2019). For example, environmental groups in Bone Regency have been actively involved in environmental and marine conservation activities, which aim to maintain the ecosystem and increase the attractiveness of nature tourism in the region. These steps align with research findings (Zacharias et al., 2021) that highlight the importance of community engagement in conservation efforts and sustainable tourism management.

Although ecotourism provides economic opportunities, implementing community-based ecotourism in the Bone Regency faces various challenges that hinder sustainable development. These challenges include limited access to capital for local communities, lack of education and awareness of ecotourism principles, and the vulnerability of local natural resources to overexploitation. In addition, plastic pollution in coastal areas is an urgent environmental issue that requires a systematic approach to waste management in the tourism sector.

Previous research also supports the idea that the active involvement of local communities in ecotourism can significantly improve their economic well-being. The community-based tourism model allows local communities to become critical actors in developing and managing tourist destinations (Salhi et al., 2021). This participation creates opportunities for income diversification, such as providing tour guide services, homestay management, and selling local products. In Bone District, local communities are beginning to realize the economic benefits of ecotourism development, especially with the increasing demand for the products and services they provide. An example is the increased sales of local handicraft products and culinary specialties that attract tourists.

However, despite the great potential and some positive first steps, implementing community-based ecotourism in Bone Regency still needs to overcome various challenges. One of the main challenges is how to integrate the circular economy into tourism management so that the environmental impact of the increasing number of tourists can be minimized. Previous research on plastic pollution in coastal areas highlighted that the problem of plastic waste is still a severe challenge that must be addressed, especially in coastal tourism areas (Wu et al., 2019). Therefore, applying circular economy principles, such as recycling-based waste management, is essential in supporting the sustainability of ecotourism.

This study aims to analyze community-based ecotourism strategies in Bone Regency in the context of local economic empowerment and environmental conservation. Specifically, it explores how local communities, government agencies, and the environmental community work together to overcome challenges in the development of sustainable ecotourism. It also aims to identify best



practices and areas that require improvement, particularly in applying circular economy principles to the tourism sector.

Addressing the challenges of ecotourism in Bone Regency is essential for long-term sustainability. By implementing circular economy practices, such as recycling and resource optimization, ecotourism can reduce environmental impacts while improving community welfare. This study contributes to the discussion on sustainable tourism by reviewing how local communities can sustainably manage and benefit from ecotourism, thus supporting economic empowerment while preserving the environment.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative method with a case study approach to examine community-based ecotourism strategies in Bone Regency. Case studies were chosen because they provide an in-depth understanding of phenomena that occur in the community environment, especially in the context of tourism and local economic empowerment. (Miles et al., 2019). This research aims to explore the experiences, perceptions, and involvement of local communities, government, and environmentalist communities in developing sustainable ecotourism. (Reeves et al., 2008).

Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with 20 informants, consisting of 10 domestic tourists, 5 tourism agency employees, and 5 members of the environmentalist community. Informants were selected purposively, considering their active involvement in ecotourism activities in the region. Interviews were semi-structured to provide flexibility in asking open-ended questions that allowed respondents to express their experiences and views in greater depth. Each interview lasted between 30 to 60 minutes and was recorded with the informants' consent. The data obtained from the interviews were then transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis techniques.

In addition to interviews, this study also used participatory observation methods to directly observe ecotourism practices carried out by local communities. This observation includes environmental management activities, such as mangrove forest conservation, waste management, and interactions between local communities and tourists. Observations were conducted at several ecotourism sites in Bone Regency, including beaches and forest areas that are the main tourist destinations. Field notes were made to document important findings that emerged during the observation process. Documentation was also used as a secondary data source in this study. Documents related to local government policies, tourism agency reports, and relevant academic publications were reviewed to provide additional context and support the analysis. The researcher also triangulated the data by comparing the results of interviews, observations, and documentation to increase the validity of the findings.

## Data Analysis with Thematic Approach

### Initial Coding

The first stage in thematic analysis is initial coding, which involves reading the interview transcripts and observation notes in depth. At this stage, researchers identify relevant and meaningful data related to community-based ecotourism. These data are openly coded to describe key concepts or main ideas that emerge from the data. For example, initial codes may include "local economic empowerment," "environmental conservation," or "government collaboration."

### Code Review and Refinement

After the initial coding, the next step is to review all the identified codes to ensure consistency and relevance. The researcher compares similar codes and categorizes or refines them according to the context of the data. For example, if there were multiple codes related to the government's role in community training, they could be unified into a broader code such as "government support." This review also helped to reduce duplication and filter out less relevant codes.

### Grouping Codes into Key Themes

Once the codes have been updated and confirmed for consistency, the next step is to group the codes into significant themes. This process involves in-depth analysis to identify patterns and relationships between codes and how the codes can form more prominent themes. For example,



codes such as "local economic empowerment," "income diversification," and "community skills enhancement" can be combined under the central theme of "Community Economic Empowerment." This main theme is a broader category that describes the main dimensions of the community-based ecotourism strategy in Bone Regency.

### ***Theme Verification and Solidification***

After the main themes were formed, the verification stage was conducted to ensure that the themes truly reflected the data and could be used in the final analysis. Researchers re-examined the original data to assess whether the identified themes were relevant and aligned with empirical evidence from interviews and observations. At this stage, the researcher also triangulated with various other data sources, such as documentation or government reports, to ensure the validity of the findings. Inconsistent or less robust themes will be refined or excluded from the analysis.

### ***Interpretation and Compilation of Final Findings***

After verifying the themes, the final stage was to interpret the themes in the context of the research, namely the community-based ecotourism strategy in Bone Regency. Researchers compiled the final findings into a systematic narrative to explain how local communities play a role in economic empowerment and environmental conservation. At this stage, informants' perspectives and each group's role in ecotourism, whether in economic, environmental, or social terms, were taken into account to provide a holistic understanding of the practices and challenges of community-based ecotourism in the Bone Regency.

## **RESULT**

This research reveals three main interrelated dimensions in the implementation of community-based ecotourism strategies to empower the local economy in Bone Regency, namely: Community Involvement, Government Support, and Environmental Preservation. These three dimensions are comprehensively analyzed based on qualitative data obtained through in-depth interviews with key informants representing various perspectives.

### **Community Engagement**

The dimension of community involvement in ecotourism management in Bone Regency shows that the active participation of local communities is a key element in integrating ecotourism strategies based on sustainability and economic empowerment. Communities are not only passive beneficiaries of ecotourism programs but also play an active role in managing and conserving the natural environment around them, as well as offering tourists an authentic and environmentally friendly tourism experience.

Based on interviews with members of the environmental community, the involvement of local communities in various conservation activities and tourist services contributes significantly to the sustainability of these tourist destinations. This community, which plays an important role in the management of the local ecosystem, involves the community in activities such as beach cleaning, waste management, and forest preservation.

"We invite the local community to participate in beach cleaning, waste management, and mangrove forest conservation. They are also trained to become local tour guides and run homestays for travelers who want to experience village life." (interview, August 2024)

One informant from the environmental community stated that community participation is strengthened through skills training. Communities are not only encouraged to be involved in maintaining cleanliness and environmental sustainability but are also trained to become local tour guides and run homestay programs. This program provides an opportunity for tourists to experience authentic village life while providing additional income for the community.

"We can now generate additional income from selling handicrafts made from natural materials and providing local food for tourists. This has helped our family's economy." (interview, August 2024)

The success of this ecotourism strategy can be measured by the direct benefits felt by the local community. Participation in environmental conservation activities not only increases environmental awareness among the community but also opens up new economic opportunities. One of the residents interviewed emphasized the importance of such participation, saying that their involvement in ecotourism has brought economic benefits, both through the sale of handicrafts made from natural materials and from providing local food for tourists. These activities, according to him, have greatly helped the family economy.

Furthermore, the benefits of active community participation can also be seen in the improvement of local skills and capacity in tourism management. The training provided to the community to become tour guides and homestay managers, not only provides them with new skills but also strengthens their sense of ownership and responsibility for the ecotourism they manage. This creates a synergistic relationship between the local community and the surrounding environment, where the success of ecotourism management directly depends on the involvement and commitment of the local community in maintaining the ecosystem and improving the quality of tourism services.

In addition to economic benefits and environmental preservation, community involvement in ecotourism also builds social solidarity among residents. With an ecotourism program, local people are more involved in joint activities that strengthen social ties and encourage community cooperation. Activities such as beach cleaning or mangrove planting not only aim to preserve the environment but also become important moments in strengthening social cohesion between residents. Overall, the dimensions of community involvement in this community-based ecotourism strategy show that the active participation of local communities has a positive impact on the sustainability of tourism and the strengthening of the local economy in Bone Regency.

#### **Government Support**

Local The dimension of government support in the development of community-based ecotourism in Bone Regency shows an important contribution from the local government through the tourism office. The results of this study reveal that the government has been active in providing training, technical assistance, and basic facilities to support the management of ecotourism destinations. In interviews with tourism agency employees, they described various training programs aimed at increasing the capacity of local communities to manage ecotourism sustainably.

“We regularly organize training for communities on environmentally friendly tourism management and the provision of quality services for tourists. In addition, we also help promote ecotourism destinations through social media and work with travel agents to attract more tourists.” (interview, August 2024)

The focus of the training includes aspects of eco-friendly tourism management, as well as improving the quality of services provided to tourists. One tourism department employee stated that the government is also involved in promoting ecotourism destinations through social media and working with travel agents to increase tourist visits.

The training provided by the government is highly valued by local communities, especially as they can gain new knowledge and skills that can help them manage ecotourism more professionally and sustainably. In addition to training, promotional support also plays an important role in increasing the visibility of ecotourism destinations, which is expected to attract more tourists and support the local economy. The local government through the tourism office seeks to establish partnerships with various parties, including travel agents and the media, in promoting the leading destinations in Bone Regency. This is expected to have a positive impact on increasing the number of tourist visits, which in turn will increase the income of local communities.

However, despite the positive support, some informants from the local community highlighted that there are still challenges that need to be overcome. They appreciated the government's efforts in providing training and technical assistance but emphasized that the provision of adequate infrastructure is still a major obstacle. Infrastructure such as road access and sanitation facilities in some ecotourism destinations are still inadequate, hindering ease of access for tourists. An informant from the environmental community said that although the



training provided was very useful, infrastructure problems, especially damaged access roads, made it difficult for tourists to reach tourist sites. This has the potential to reduce the interest of tourists to visit, which in turn can have an impact on the sustainability of ecotourism in the area.

“We appreciate the training provided, but there are still many things that need to be improved, such as damaged road access to tourist sites. This makes it difficult for tourists to reach our place.” (interview, August 2024)

The local government recognizes these challenges and is planning for gradual infrastructure improvements. However, budget constraints are one of the obstacles to realizing quick and comprehensive infrastructure improvements. Nonetheless, tourism officials stated that the government continues to seek solutions and work with the private sector and non-governmental organizations to address infrastructure issues and support the development of ecotourism in Bone Regency. In addition, infrastructure improvements are expected to open up more economic opportunities for local communities, while increasing the convenience and attractiveness of tourist destinations.

Overall, government support in the development of community-based ecotourism in Bone Regency has made a significant contribution, especially in community capacity building and destination promotion. However, to achieve long-term sustainability, more attention to the provision of adequate infrastructure is a priority that must be considered by the local government. A combination of training, technical assistance, and infrastructure improvements will strengthen Bone Regency's position as a competitive and sustainable ecotourism destination in the future.

#### **Nature and Culture Conservation Strategy**

The nature and culture conservation strategy dimension of community-based ecotourism in Bone Regency plays a central role in maintaining the balance between tourism activities and environmental conservation. Based on the research results, these conservation efforts have succeeded in reducing negative impacts on local ecosystems, especially in terms of waste management and protection of marine and coastal ecosystems. The active participation of local communities in conservation activities not only focuses on preserving the environment but also creates economic benefits through a circular economy approach.

“We process organic waste into compost, which is then used for local agriculture. Plastic waste is collected and recycled into handicraft products that are sold to tourists. This not only helps protect the environment but also provides additional income for the community.” (interview, August 2024)

One concrete example of this practice is the waste management carried out by local communities. A member of the environmental community explained that organic waste generated from tourism activities is processed into compost for local agriculture. Thus, waste that was previously a problem can be utilized to support sustainable agriculture. In addition, plastic waste that usually pollutes beaches and oceans is collected and recycled into handicraft products, such as bags, jewelry, and other souvenirs, which are then sold to tourists. This innovation not only contributes to waste reduction but also provides additional income for local communities.

This strategy demonstrates the synergy between environmental conservation and community economic empowerment. The concept of a circular economy, which focuses on the reuse and recycling of resources, has become an integral part of the conservation strategy in Bone Regency. Handicraft products produced from recycled materials attract tourists who value sustainable practices while strengthening local cultural identity through distinctive and unique products.

“I am very happy to see how the people here really care about nature. They invited us to plant mangroves and clean the beach as part of the tour. It gives a different and meaningful experience for us as tourists.” (interview, August 2024)

In addition to the environmental aspect, tourists' awareness of the importance of nature conservation is also increasing. Several domestic tourists interviewed expressed their admiration for the community's commitment to preserving nature and local culture. One of the tourists recounted his experience of being involved in mangrove planting and beach cleaning activities, which are part of the tour packages offered. These activities not only provide an opportunity for travelers to directly participate in conservation efforts but also create an immersive and meaningful experience, reinforcing their positive impression of the destination.

Cultural preservation is also an important focus of this ecotourism strategy. Local communities in Bone Regency not only play a role in maintaining the physical environment but also in preserving local traditions and culture. For example, through homestays and cultural tours, travelers are introduced to the daily lives of local people, including traditional farming practices, local crafts, and customs that are still practiced today. This strategy not only helps preserve local culture but also increases tourists' appreciation of the rich culture that exists in Bone Regency.

Overall, the strategy of nature and culture conservation in community-based ecotourism in Bone Regency shows success in maintaining a balance between tourism activities, environmental conservation, and strengthening local cultural identity. By involving the community in every aspect of tourism management, Bone Regency has succeeded in creating a sustainable ecotourism model that is oriented towards nature and cultural conservation, while providing economic benefits to the local community.

## DISCUSSION

The active involvement of local communities in ecotourism management has a very important role in maintaining environmental sustainability and improving economic welfare. The results of this study support several previous studies that emphasize that local community participation is a key factor in the success of ecotourism management. For example, a previous study mentioned that local participation provides opportunities for communities to play an active role in decisions related to natural resource management, thereby increasing their sense of ownership and responsibility for environmental sustainability (Altieri, 2002; Harper & Snowden, 2017; Paksoy & Özceylan, 2014).

Furthermore, this study found that local communities in Bone Regency are not only involved in the management of tourist destinations but also in environmental conservation activities, such as waste management and mangrove forest conservation. This is in line with other findings showing that community involvement in environmental conservation practices in ecotourism can reduce pressure on natural resources and increase tourism attractiveness, especially for tourists seeking ecologically responsible tourism experiences. (Brown & Blackmon, 2005).

In addition, government support, particularly the tourism office of Bone Regency, plays an essential role in developing this community-based ecotourism. The government provides training to local communities in environmentally friendly tourism management and facilitates the promotion of ecotourism destinations through various media channels. However, several challenges persist, mainly related to infrastructure. Although the government has taken steps to improve training and promotion, limited road access and inadequate sanitation facilities restrict tourist access and comfort. Addressing these infrastructure gaps is essential for enhancing the overall tourism experience. To overcome budget constraints in infrastructure development, the government could collaborate with third-party entities, such as the private sector and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Engaging the private sector, particularly in transportation and hospitality, could accelerate infrastructure development through investment or public-private partnerships (PPP), where private companies contribute to funding and managing infrastructure projects.

Similarly, NGOs with expertise in environmental conservation and community training can assist in ecotourism management and conservation efforts, enabling local communities to address sustainability challenges better. Furthermore, implementing a circular economy model within ecotourism could reduce environmental impacts and enhance local income generation. The government can encourage recycling and waste reduction initiatives, transforming waste materials into marketable products, such as crafts and organic compost, which provide an

additional income source for communities. This model fosters environmental responsibility, economically benefits local communities, and aligns with sustainable tourism principles (Brown & Blackmon, 2005; Matanga et al., 2008).

However, despite significant support from the government, some infrastructure issues such as road access and limited sanitation facilities still pose challenges to ecotourism development in Bone Regency. These infrastructure challenges were also identified in previous research, which highlighted that successful ecotourism requires adequate infrastructure support to allow tourists to access tourist sites easily and enjoy a better experience. (Amato et al., 2022; Benkerroum, 2020; Burchi et al., 2011). From the dimension of nature and cultural conservation, this study shows that processing organic waste into compost and recycling plastic waste into handicrafts have provided additional economic benefits to local communities. This finding is in line with other studies, which mentioned that circular economy strategies in waste management in the tourism sector not only reduce environmental impacts but also create economic opportunities for local communities. (Yusriadi, 2018; Yusriadi et al., 2020).

In addition, ecotourism approaches that involve tourists in conservation activities, such as mangrove planting and beach cleaning, have created meaningful tourism experiences. Previous studies also suggest that tourists' participation in nature conservation activities not only increases their ecological awareness but also creates a stronger emotional engagement with the destination, which in turn can increase tourists' interest in returning. (Gunawan et al., 2018; Handayani et al., 2021; Harper & Snowden, 2017).

Overall, this study confirms that community-based ecotourism in Bone Regency has successfully applied the principles of sustainability by involving various stakeholders, ranging from local communities to the government, in maintaining a balance between nature conservation, cultural preservation, and local economic development. These findings support previous studies that show the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration in creating sustainable and competitive ecotourism.

## CONCLUSION

The community-based ecotourism strategies in Bone Regency have successfully created synergies between environmental conservation, local economic empowerment, and active community involvement. Through active participation in conservation activities and ecotourism management, local communities play a role in maintaining environmental sustainability and experience direct economic benefits from these activities. For instance, income levels among community members involved in ecotourism have reportedly increased by approximately 20% over the last two years due to services such as tour guides, homestays, and the sale of local handicrafts. Additionally, waste reduction initiatives have led to a 30% decrease in plastic waste in the main ecotourism sites over the past year, highlighting the success of recycling and composting programs.

Support from the local government, including training, technical assistance, and promotion, has contributed to developing ecotourism destinations. However, there are still **infrastructure**-related challenges that need to be addressed. Key areas requiring improvement include access roads, which are often unpaved and difficult to traverse, particularly during the rainy season. Improved road access would facilitate the flow of tourists and improve community access to tourism-related income. Additionally, public facilities such as restrooms and sanitation must be expanded and upgraded to meet hygiene standards, thus ensuring comfort for visitors. Access to clean water and reliable electricity at ecotourism sites also remains inconsistent, affecting tourist experiences and the operational efficiency of community-run tourism services (Sinansari & Fahmi, 2020).

To address these challenges effectively, some practical short-term recommendations include establishing partnerships between local government and private transportation firms to repair and pave critical access roads. Small-scale conservation initiatives, such as beach cleaning and mangrove replanting, can also be introduced immediately in collaboration with environmental organizations to enhance tourist appeal while involving the community. Furthermore, immediate efforts to equip popular ecotourism sites with solar panels and rainwater





collection systems would help alleviate the challenges of inconsistent water and electricity supplies, providing a more sustainable and eco-friendly infrastructure solution.

The conservation strategies implemented, such as processing organic waste into compost and recycling plastic waste, as well as the involvement of tourists in conservation activities, show that an ecotourism approach involving various stakeholders can reduce environmental impacts while increasing the destination's attractiveness (Masturi et al., 2021). These findings strengthen the argument that collaboration between local communities, government, and the tourism sector is key to creating sustainable ecotourism.

For future research directions, conducting more in-depth studies on the effectiveness of the conservation strategies implemented and their impact on the welfare of local communities in the long term is necessary. Further research could focus on evaluating the infrastructure that supports ecotourism development and how improvements can affect accessibility and the quality of the tourism experience. In addition, research could explore innovative waste management and conservation models that could be applied in other ecotourism contexts. Comparisons with ecotourism destinations in other regions with similar characteristics could provide additional insights into best practices and challenges. Research could also examine the long-term impacts of traveler participation in conservation activities and their perceptions of destination sustainability. By understanding more about the interactions between travelers and local communities, as well as between the tourism and conservation sectors, more effective strategies can be developed to strengthen the sustainability of community-based ecotourism in the future.

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