



Analysis of managers' and local communities' perceptions in implementing ecotourism principles at Wana Wisata Ranca Upas

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Received Date: May 30, 2024

Revised Date: June 26, 2024

Accepted Date: August 31, 2024

ABSTRACT

Background: Ecotourism that involves local communities promotes active participation, recognizing their indigenous knowledge of nature and cultural heritage as a potential tourism attraction. Community engagement is thus a crucial aspect of ecotourism development. However, differences in perception between stakeholders can influence the effectiveness of its implementation. **Methods:** This study employs a qualitative paradigm with a post-positivist philosophy to analyze the phenomenon in a natural setting. The research relies on qualitative strategies, where the researcher acts as the main instrument. Data collection was conducted using triangulation, and the analysis follows an inductive approach, emphasizing depth of understanding over generalization. **Findings:** The findings indicate that Wana Wisata Ranca Upas' management does not solely focus on commercial aspects but also prioritizes environmental sustainability, community education, and socio-economic benefits for the local population. Community motivation to participate in ecotourism varies, with some seeing it as a significant source of income. Management's perception aligns with Perhutani's vision and mission, ensuring that ecotourism principles are upheld alongside economic sustainability. However, local communities have limited understanding of ecotourism concepts, leading to disparities in knowledge between managers and residents. Factors influencing these differing perceptions include access to information, background, interests, decision-making processes, and trust. **Conclusion:** The study highlights the need for improved community awareness and education regarding ecotourism principles to bridge the knowledge gap between managers and local residents. **Novelty/Originality:** This research provides insights into the perception gap between stakeholders in ecotourism implementation and identifies key factors influencing these differences, contributing to better community-based ecotourism management strategies.

KEYWORDS: ecotourism; perception; management; community.

1. Introduction

Environmentally based tourism is a unique form of tourism often contrasted with mass tourism (Damanik & Weber, 2006). The main difference lies in the nature of the product and the target market segment. Unlike conventional tourism, environmentally based tourism prioritizes the preservation of natural resources as the primary tourist attraction. According to The International Ecotourism Society, this concept refers to responsible travel to natural areas aimed at preserving the environment and improving the livelihoods of local communities (Aryunda, 2011).

Cite This Article:

Febriansyah, M. & Rahmafitria, F. (2024). Analysis of managers' and local communities' perceptions in implementing ecotourism principles at Wana Wisata Ranca Upas. *Environment Education and Conservation*, 1(2), 58-66. <https://doi.org/10.61511/educov1i2.2024.1667>

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The involvement of stakeholders is closely related to their capacity as capital in ecotourism management. This capacity primarily includes the development of networks among stakeholders, which is essential for managing cross-sectoral ecotourism (Agustina et al., 2018). Every party involved in the management of a tourist area must establish harmonious relationships to implement ecotourism programs, enhance a sense of ownership, and build specific cooperation (Pamungkas, 2013). This is supported by the research that states that the development of community-based ecotourism in the Banda Islands is founded on the principle of sustainable economic, social, and environmental tourism development. This effort is realized through the establishment of ecotourism organizations consisting of tourism-conscious communities with skills in guiding tourists, as well as travel service providers facilitating tourist access to destinations.

Wana Wisata Ranca Upas is a nature-based tourism destination that relies on its natural beauty as its main attraction. This forest area serves a dual function as a conservation site and a tourist destination. Its fundamental concept integrates environmental education and nature conservation. The area is surrounded by protected forests rich in diverse flora, including Huru, Hamirung, Jamuju, Kihujan, Kitambang, Kurai, Pasang, and Puspa trees (Bintang et al., 2019). The fauna found in this area includes deer and various bird species. Wana Wisata Ranca Upas offers a range of attractions, including camping areas, deer breeding sites, hot springs, water parks and swimming pools, outbound activities, and children's playgrounds.

An incident involving a motocross event at Ranca Upas resulted in damage to Edelweiss fields, threatening flora and fauna conservation efforts. This incident occurred due to the negligence of event organizers who failed to supervise and direct participants along designated routes. The management had installed route barriers, but they were not adhered to. Local Edelweiss farmers expressed disappointment over the incident (Cahyaning & Najicha, 2023).

The situation in Ranca Upas, Ciwidey, Bandung Regency, demonstrates how conflicts can arise in tourism development due to differences in understanding between management and the local community. The community perceives that the ecotourism concept implemented by management does not fully align with their understanding of what has been conveyed. From the management's perspective, ecotourism development must adhere to ecotourism principles as the primary framework.

Ferdian (2020) explains the negative impact of the tourism industry on the socio-cultural and natural environment. He further elaborates that physical developments in tourism can trigger social tensions within local communities. Indicators of these tensions include conflicts over natural resource use, environmental degradation, and cultural decline.

For this reason, Priono (2012) proposes five key principles of ecotourism that must be considered: conservation (both natural and cultural), community involvement, economic aspects, education, and tourism. This study aims to examine the perspectives of managers and local residents regarding the implementation of these five community-based ecotourism principles in Ranca Upas, Ciwidey, Bandung Regency. Evaluating the implementation of this concept is expected to support tourism product development and environmental conservation efforts in the area. Ensuring that the region's development provides appropriate benefits, improves local livelihoods, and preserves natural resources is essential.

Perception can be understood as a mental process in which environmental information is received and processed by the brain, integrating thoughts, emotions, and personal experiences (Akbar, 2015). According to social learning theory, human behavior is not merely an automatic response to stimuli but rather a result of complex interactions between the environment and individual cognitive structures. Gibson and his colleagues define perception as a cognitive mechanism used to interpret and understand the surrounding world, involving the process of assigning meaning to the environment. The perception process begins when an object generates a stimulus received by sensory organs or receptors. This stimulus is then transmitted by sensory nerves to the brain through

physiological processes. In the brain, a psychological process occurs in which individuals become aware of what they see, hear, or feel. The final stage of this process is when individuals respond to the stimulus (Walgito, 2016).

The stimuli affecting sensory organs are natural or physical processes. Signals received by the senses are then transmitted through sensory nerves to the brain. This stage is known as the physiological process. Subsequently, processing occurs in the brain as the center of consciousness, enabling individuals to become aware of what they see, hear, or touch. This brain activity or conscious process is referred to as a psychological process. In conclusion, the final stage of perception occurs when individuals become aware of the stimulus received through sensory organs, such as sight, hearing, or touch. This awareness is the essence of perception. The reactions resulting from perception can take various forms (Walgito, 2016).

In the perception process, stimuli received by individuals are organized and interpreted, resulting in an integrated meaning within a person. The responses arising from perception may vary depending on attention and individual characteristics. Therefore, perception outcomes can differ between individuals even when faced with the same stimulus (Walgito, 2016).

In the context of ecotourism development, communities need to adopt a creative economic approach to market their products and services globally. In this digital era, information technology plays a crucial role in promoting creative economies. Regions implementing community-based ecotourism concepts generate direct income for local residents as providers of goods and services. This concept not only fosters local pride and identity but also encourages the preservation of native nature and culture.

The perception of managers and communities regarding the implementation of ecotourism principles is a crucial variable in tourism development. Particularly in policymaking, the community should be regarded as subjects rather than mere objects affected by policies. However, various issues often arise in discussions about the implementation of ecotourism principles. One such issue is that ecotourism principles are sometimes merely formalities, creating the impression that a tourist attraction follows an ecotourism model, while in reality, its implementation does not fully adhere to established principles. This reveals a gap between existing policies or principles and their actual application in the field. Therefore, it is necessary to align ecotourism principles with the perspectives of stakeholders directly involved in management.

To harmonize existing perceptions in the management of Wana Wisata Ranca Upas, observations and interviews will be conducted to analyze the perceptions of managers and communities regarding the implementation of ecotourism principles. The ecotourism principles theory proposed has been chosen as the reference framework for assessing ecotourism principles applied at Wana Wisata Ranca Upas, Ciwidey, Bandung Regency. After analyzing the perceptions of managers and communities in implementing ecotourism principles, recommendations for future development based on ecotourism principles at Wana Wisata Ranca Upas will be presented.

2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative paradigm as its analytical framework. The qualitative approach is a research strategy grounded in post-positivist philosophy, utilized to examine phenomena within a natural setting (as opposed to an experimental setting), with the researcher serving as the primary instrument. Data collection is conducted through triangulation, analysis follows an inductive approach, and the study results emphasize depth of understanding over generalization (Sugiyono, 2014). The qualitative approach encompasses all research stages—from proposal development, process execution, hypothesis formulation, fieldwork, analysis, to conclusion drawing—focusing on non-numeric aspects, situational descriptions, in-depth interviews, content analysis, snowball techniques, and narrative analysis. In line with this, the present study seeks to explore and comprehend the social realities related to the perceptions of both management and local communities regarding the implementation of the ecotourism concept in Ranca Upas.

Qualitative data were obtained through in-depth interviews with informants selected using a non-probability sampling method with a purposive sampling technique. As cited by Surayya (2018), qualitative methodology is defined as a research procedure that yields descriptive data in the form of written or spoken narratives from research subjects, as well as observable behaviors. Accordingly, the research data will be analyzed descriptively to present the perceptions of both management and local communities in Ranca Upas regarding the principles and implementation of ecotourism in the area.

The data collected by the researcher come from field observations, document studies, and direct interviews. Interviews were conducted with four informants, consisting of two representatives from the management of Wana Wisata Ranca Upas and two from the local community, who are partners in the Edelweiss Cooperative.

This study adopts a case study design, which is an intensive, detailed, and in-depth scientific exploration of a program, event, or activity at the individual, group, institutional, or organizational level to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. The cases studied may range from simple to highly complex. The scope of the case is limited by time and activity, with researchers collecting comprehensive information using various data collection techniques within a predetermined period. Research subjects may include individuals, groups, institutions, or communities. The researcher aims to study in depth the background and environmental interactions of the social units under investigation. The primary objective of case study research is to provide a detailed description of the background, distinctive characteristics, or status of the case being examined. From these specific characteristics, the researcher can then draw generalizable conclusions.

In qualitative research, data collection is conducted in a natural setting (authentic conditions), using primary data sources, and relies on techniques such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation (Andriani et al., 2022). Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman (2005) in Andriani et al. (2022) affirm that fundamental methods used by qualitative researchers for data collection include participation in the research environment, direct observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis.

Triangulation is a data collection method that integrates multiple techniques and sources of information. When researchers apply triangulation, they not only collect data but also simultaneously test its validity by comparing results from various data collection methods and sources (Andriani et al., 2022). In this study, technique triangulation was applied, wherein the researcher used multiple methods to obtain data from the same source. These methods included participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, conducted simultaneously on a single data source. Additionally, source triangulation was implemented, involving the use of a single method to collect data from multiple different sources (Andriani et al., 2022).

The research instrument was developed based on the theoretical framework used in the study, utilizing several supporting tools, including an interview guide prepared in advance by the researcher to ensure an effective and topic-aligned interview process. This guide contained a set of questions formulated according to the study's theoretical references, categorized into different question types for the four informants, who represented different stakeholder positions within the local community. A recording device was also employed as a supporting instrument to facilitate the observation, documentation, and interview processes through audio recordings and photographs.

3. Results and Discussion

Ranca Upas Camping Ground (BPRU) is part of the 215-hectare Ranca Upas Nature Tourism Area, located in RPH Patrol, BKPH Tambak Ruyung Timur, KPH Bandung Selatan. This nature tourism area has been managed by Perum Perhutani since 1991. The forest concession granted to Perum Perhutani includes the provision of tourism infrastructure and facilities, the management of existing tourist attractions, and the organization of nature tourism activities. Perhutani oversees the management of Ranca Upas Nature Tourism Area, with the highest managerial position held by the Site Manager, supported by senior staff and

several subordinates. This strategic position allows the Site Manager to supervise all activities at Ranca Upas, including the implementation of ecotourism principles. In addition to nature conservation efforts, the management also adopts economic policies as a business entity, ensuring revenue sharing with the local community through the Edelweiss Cooperative, which serves as a community partner in tourism activities at Ranca Upas.

Perum Perhutani implements programs and training aimed at conserving nature at Ranca Upas and welcomes external contributions to these conservation efforts. Beyond environmental conservation, the management also applies economic policies as a business entity by sharing revenue with the local community through the Edelweiss Cooperative. In sustaining tourism activities, Perum Perhutani collaborates with the Edelweiss Cooperative as an operational partner. Apart from providing land, Perhutani also supervises and trains local communities to ensure that visiting tourists have a satisfying, safe, and comfortable experience.

The Nature-Based principle has been applied and aligned with Perhutani's vision and mission of sustainable forest conservation, as explained by SU (52), the Site Manager of Ranca Upas Nature Tourism Area. Similarly, RS emphasizes that the development of Ranca Upas Nature Tourism Area always prioritizes environmental sustainability to avoid harming the forest ecosystem. The implementation of the Ecologically Sustainable principle is also evident, as Ranca Upas' management considers the balance between natural resource utilization, environmental conservation, and the well-being of local communities.

The management of Ranca Upas Nature Tourism Area generally has a strong understanding of environmental education principles. They recognize the importance of maintaining environmental balance and conserving natural resources to ensure the sustainability of their operations. They also understand that ecotourism should provide economic, social, and cultural benefits to local communities. Management acknowledges that satisfied tourists are more likely to return and recommend the destination to others, ultimately contributing to the economic sustainability of both the ecotourism business and the local community. The local community, represented by the Edelweiss Cooperative, serves as an operational partner for attractions and activities at Ranca Upas Nature Tourism Area. Community members are organized into various coordination groups based on their respective business areas.

Interviews with several informants regarding their perceptions of ecotourism principles at Ranca Upas indicate that the local community may not fully understand the theoretical concepts of ecotourism but has already implemented them in their activities as community partners. The community can be regarded as direct respondents in the field, even without receiving formal stimuli regarding ecotourism. Most of their practical applications are influenced by direct experience.

Regarding the Nature-Based aspect of ecotourism principles, the community perceives that tourism development at Ranca Upas prioritizes forest conservation. The development process does not alter the natural landscape, as Ranca Upas is based on natural forests. Local ecotourism communities generally understand the significance of environmental education, recognizing its role in raising public awareness about conservation and encouraging environmentally friendly behavior.

The community views ecotourism as an important factor in improving their well-being, as the influx of tourists to Ranca Upas provides tangible benefits. They understand that establishing good relationships and meeting tourists' needs can enhance visitor satisfaction and generate economic advantages. The formation of management perceptions is influenced by various internal and external factors, which play a role in decision-making at Ranca Upas. These factors affect the management's perception of ecotourism principles at Ranca Upas Nature Tourism Area. Meanwhile, the community's perception is largely shaped by direct field practice rather than theoretical or formal training. Unlike theoretical learning, local communities gain their understanding through direct involvement as partners.

According to the theory of perception formation, four key elements are involved: environment, stimulus, organism, and response. Management's perception is shaped by an environment that emphasizes the company's vision and mission, which serve as guidelines

for program development. Perhutani's vision is to be a sustainable forest management company that benefits society. Its mission comprises three main objectives: sustainable forest resource management, community and environmental care, and optimized forestry business operations based on good corporate governance principles.

The stimulus or message drives Perhutani to implement its vision and mission across all organizational levels. The stimulus in this study is represented by Perhutani's programs, particularly in environmental education and conservation efforts, such as direct field activities to preserve flora. The organism refers to all staff working at Ranca Upas Nature Tourism Area, while the response is their collective participation in achieving the company's vision and mission.

Management considers the relationship with the community an essential aspect of ecotourism principles, as reflected in their economic policy of revenue sharing with the Edelweiss Cooperative. The partnership between Perum Perhutani and the Edelweiss Cooperative ensures operational efficiency, where Perhutani provides land, supervision, and training, while the cooperative handles operational tasks. The ecotourism principle of fostering community engagement aligns with the existing practices at Ranca Upas Nature Tourism Area.

The analysis indicates that Ranca Upas Nature Tourism Area's management does not solely focus on commercial aspects but is also committed to environmental sustainability, community education, and providing significant economic and social benefits to local communities. This approach reflects sustainable ecotourism management, which is economically viable while preserving the natural environment.

According to the theory of perception formation, the local community's perception is shaped by their daily environment. This makes them flexible in their understanding of ecotourism, as their practical experiences take precedence over theoretical developments. The local cooperative, Edelweiss, serves as a medium for community involvement in managing Ranca Upas Nature Tourism Area. The community members around Ranca Upas act as the "organism" in perception formation theory, supported by the cooperative, which unites local residents in managing ecotourism activities.

The final element, response, is evident in the revenue-sharing mechanism, where 10% is allocated to Perhutani, 10% to the cooperative, and the remaining 80% to local businesses. The selection process of perception stimuli is influenced by internal and external factors. Internal factors include psychological needs, background, experience, personality, attitudes, and general beliefs. Meanwhile, external factors include family background, information access, knowledge, surrounding needs, intensity, size, contrast, repetition, movement, novelty, and familiarity of an object. External factors shape individuals' perspectives and influence how they perceive and interpret their environment (Dari, 2023).

The findings highlight significant differences in perception between management and the community regarding ecotourism management at Ranca Upas. Educational background and work experience play a crucial role in shaping management's perception of ecotourism. In contrast, the community's perception is predominantly influenced by direct field practice rather than theoretical or formal training. This aligns with Juwita et al. (2017), who found that community perceptions significantly impact participation in developing Ciburial Tourism Village. As communities recognize the benefits of tourism, their willingness to contribute increases. This emphasizes the importance of hands-on experience in shaping their understanding of ecotourism principles. Meanwhile, management has a more theoretical grasp, leading to perceptual differences between the two groups.

Another key difference lies in decision-making and evaluation. Ecotourism management decisions at Ranca Upas generally involve discussions between management and the community. However, major decisions often originate from central management, which can delay local responses to field situations. These differences align with the internal and external factors influencing perception. Overall, these factors interact and influence the perception and implementation of ecotourism principles at Ranca Upas Nature Tourism Area. Continuous improvement in information access, community participation, and sustainable management is crucial for maximizing ecotourism benefits, as suggested by

Rahmafitria & Rahmafitria (2018) regarding the awareness of residents in Kawah Putih Tourism Area about the importance of training for sustainable tourism business practices.

4. Conclusions

Based on research on the implementation of ecotourism principles at Wana Wisata Ranca Upas, several conclusions were drawn. First, the management's perception of ecotourism at Ranca Upas aligns with Perhutani's vision and mission, ensuring that tourism development prioritizes not only economic benefits but also environmental sustainability and ecotourism principles. Second, the local community does not fully understand ecotourism terminology, leading to differences in knowledge between management and the community. While the community is familiar with conservation-related terms, their practical work in collaboration with management and the Edelweiss Cooperative already reflects ecotourism principles, even without formal theoretical knowledge. Third, there are significant differences in perception between management and the community regarding ecotourism management, influenced by factors such as access to information, background, interests, decision-making processes, and trust.

This research contributes to ecotourism studies and has practical implications for various stakeholders. For the local community, it can enhance understanding of ecotourism principles, both theoretically and practically, particularly at Wana Wisata Ranca Upas. For the Resort and Leisure Management study program, it serves as a reference for tourism ecology courses on ecotourism implementation. For the government, it provides insights into developing more flexible policies that encourage greater community participation in ecotourism. Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed. The local community is encouraged to develop a shared understanding with the government and management to maximize ecotourism principles at Ranca Upas. The government is advised to strengthen education and outreach on ecotourism theories to ensure comprehensive community understanding. Future researchers are encouraged to expand the study beyond regional levels to national and international contexts for broader insights into ecotourism implementation.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Fitri Rahmafitria, SP., M.Si., my academic advisor, for her guidance throughout the preparation of this scientific paper. I also extend my appreciation to the management of Wana Wisata Ranca Upas for allowing me to conduct research at the site.

Author Contribution

The authors hopes that this study will benefit the community by enhancing their understanding of ecotourism principles, serve as a reference in tourism ecology courses, and provide the government with insights for implementing flexible ecotourism policies that benefit the local community.

Funding

This research received no external funding

Ethical Review Board Statement

Not available.

Informed Consent Statement

Not available.

Data Availability Statement

Not available.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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