



Pros and Cons Tourism Development in Komodo National Park, Indonesia

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Article

Article History

Received: 2023/ 09/ 14

Reviewed: 2023/ 11/ 02

Accepted: 2023/ 12/ 28

Published: 2023/ 12/ 30

DOI:

doi.org/10.29313/mimbar.v39i2.2755

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Volume : 39

No. : 2

Month : December

Year : 2023

Pages : 292 - 300

To cite this article (APA Style):

Septi Fahmi Choirisa. (2023). Pros and Cons Tourism Development in Komodo National Park, Indonesia. *Jurnal Mimbar*. 39(2), 292-300. <https://doi.org/10.29313/mimbar.v39i2.2755>

Abstract

The rapid tourism development of Komodo National Park (KNP) as part of the restructuring of the Labuan Bajo strategic tourism area in Indonesia has aroused concerns. The conservation area within the biosphere reserve plays a pivotal role in preserving the natural environment and essential resources necessary for the survival and habitat of Komodo dragons. The global dissemination of social, economic, environmental, and conservation issues through the media has garnered significant attention. This study examines the local perspectives on tourism development in KNP. A qualitative method was employed through in-depth interviews with stakeholders such as local communities, government, NGOs, educators, indigenous, entrepreneurs, and travel agencies. This study found that destination development has altered their socioeconomic which is perceived as benefits and drawbacks. This study contributes to tourism development literature. This research suggests that KNP management, government, and stakeholders involved in the project planning need to consider local involvement to facilitate sustainable outcomes.

Keywords: Komodo National Park; Pros and Cons; Tourism Development; Socio-economic impact.

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Introduction

Tourism is a critical component of national economic development and has long been regarded as one of the essential pillars of a country. The country's foreign exchange is currently aided by the growth of tourism sectors. In Indonesia, for example, tourism comes in fourth place in terms of national foreign exchange profits, behind oil and gas, coal, and palm oil. Therefore, the Indonesian government expects it to become a substantial source of foreign exchange, surpassing three other commodities (Kodir et al., 2019).

The KNP has already been affected by tourism and the pollution that comes with it, and additional infrastructural measures have escalated the harm. Outside the protected region, the most rapid development has been seen in Labuan Bajo, which has emerged as the core business district and the center of the tourism industry (Walpole & Goodwin, 2000). A study conducted in 2015 has shown that residential and tourism infrastructures have skyrocketed in the areas of Labuan Bajo (Lasso & Dahles, 2021). By 2020, the project was extended to protected areas of World Heritage Sites by UNESCO to develop tourism infrastructure that the media said was a Jurassic Park Theme instead of nature-based tourism (Choirisa et al., 2021).

Komodo dragons live on five islands off the coast of eastern Indonesia, with four island populations in Komodo National Park (KNP) and many scattered populations on the more oversized island of Flores (Ciofi & De Boer, 2004; Jessop et al., 2004, 2007). As a result, the range of the Komodo dragons is restricted, with isolated populations. Its content is thought to have shrunk significantly over the last few decades (Ciofi, 2002). The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has designated the Komodo dragon as "vulnerable" due to population decrease and limited distribution (IUCN, 2012). However, Jurassic Park's development on Rinca Island has raised concerns about pollution, illegal fishing, and the Komodo dragon's health. Thus, some locals and Indonesian people protested the park's extensive tree loss, especially those surrounding the protected areas. This caused several ecologists and reformists to express their displeasure with the government's decision to destroy the Komodo dragon's habitat (Mahaseth & Karthikeyan, 2022).

This research addresses a concern by Cochrane (2013), who claims that the Komodo Co-Management initiative failed to create and implement tourism management strategies, particularly regarding stakeholders' involvement. This can happen due to KNP tourism policies remaining complex since the Directorate General of Forest Protection and Natural Conservation of the Ministry of Forestry manages Komodo National Park on behalf of the Indonesian government. A project on Rinca Island, where more than one-third of the park's dragons are thought to live on typically hot and dry terrain, is part of the multimillion-dollar tourism development. The project includes an upgraded ranger station, viewing platform, boat dock, bathrooms, and other infrastructure (Milko, 2021). It is believed that increasing numbers of tourists will affect the animals' mating habits. Some concerns are not new; they surfaced a couple of years back, leading to a discussion regarding banning tourist visitation in 2018, as 176.000 enthusiasts visited the park that year. As the construction at the park triggered an outpouring of anger amongst Indonesians, Wiratno, a senior environment ministry official, said rangers would ensure the safety of dragons roaming near the construction, which will include an elevated deck, a dam, and an information center, to be completed in June 2022. He said they would intensively check whether the Komodo dragons, remnants of buildings, and trucks carrying material were under the buildings.

United Nations officials expressed worries about possible tourism consequences on this unique wildlife-rich park; such include the projects' decrease of the park's wilderness zone to one-third of its previous size, the establishment of tourism concessions on the site, the lack of comprehensive environmental impacts assessment to a goal of drastically increasing visitor numbers. (Milko, 2021). UNESCO has provided a statement on this Rinca Island project. They have confirmed that the authorities did not inform them regarding the expansion plans, as they must do so by operating guidelines. As the organizations requested, Indonesia submitted a report. After being reviewed by UNESCO, the government has asked not to continue with the project. The Komodo Dragons are endangered species, and it is unknown what will happen if this project continues (Mahaseth & Karthikeyan, 2022)

The revitalization of KNP destinations has spread rumors to local people surrounding the conservation area to be allocated to other places. Given these views, locals protested against the government and insisted on staying with Komodo dragons as they believed Komodo were their ancestors (Roberts, 2019). However, according to research conducted in 1993, the size of the human population in the protected areas was expressed concern in the management plan (Hitchcock, 1993). In contrast, local people in Rinca agreed that Komodo is a protected species (Sunkar et al., 2020). Given these views, this study aims to evaluate the destination development in Komodo National Park from local perspectives to contribute to the research on Tourism Development and Tourism in Protected Areas. Furthermore, the result of this study can enhance the KNP management to better understand local people's perceptions of supporting Indonesian tourism development.

Tourism Development in Komodo National Park

Developing tourism in Komodo National Park (KNP) in Indonesia is one of the methods to boost state revenues. Currently, the government focuses on building KNP infrastructure and facilities to accommodate super-premium destination categories. As of August 2021, most of the construction projects completed will continue on Rinca Island, which has reached 95% (Kaehler & Getty, 2021).

The infrastructure alters the way people interact with Komodo Dragon. People used to have a chance to see Komodo Dragons from a distance. However, the construction built a deck for tourists to walk above so they do not come into direct contact with the Komodo Dragon. According to a researcher from Sunspirit for Justice and Peace based in Labuan Bajo, Indonesia, Infrastructure development on Rinca Island has changed the substance and paradigm of nature tourism, possibly mistreating the Komodo Dragon as if they are in a zoo. Built infrastructure in nature tourism also raises concerns about socio-economic, small enterprises, tourism paradigm, and the Komodo Dragon habitat environment, leading to a climate crisis (Kaehler & Getty, 2021).

Tourism and Economic Growth

Many governments emphasize supporting and promoting tourism as a possible source of growth and jobs and a sector that adds value to cultural, natural, and other capital at no cost to the consumer. On the other side, academics have an increasing interest in the relationship between tourism and economic growth, particularly from an empirical standpoint (Brida et al., 2020). However, the theoretical basis for such a relationship has yet to be established. Balague and Cantavella-Jorda (2002) are the critical papers that formalized the so-called tourism-led-growth hypothesis (TLGH), thereby providing a theoretical and empirical link between tourism and economic growth. Many publications analyzed prior support of TLGH and offered positive and statistically significant estimates (Brida et al., 2020). Many publications on economic development and tourism use the number of international tourists arriving or their expenditure as a metric to define tourism's relevance (Rossello-Nadal & HE, 2019). Moreover, Brida et al. (2020) research found that tourism is widely acknowledged to contribute to economic growth, both direct and indirect.

Sustainable Tourism Concept

The field of sustainable tourism has progressed significantly. Sustainable tourism, which began as a response to worries about tourism's harmful effects and was influenced by the more significant sustainability movement, was plagued by definitional debates and a lack of progress in its early stages (Bramwell & Lane, 2005). The initial focus was on eco-nature-based and alternative tourism, with the idea that a balance between economic, social, and environmental aims was required. However, it has become clear that compromises between goals are frequently needed to account for context and time-related situations (Bramwell et al., 2017). Moreover, before 2012, sustainable tourism was mainly focused on ecotourism, animal welfare, visitor activities, and limited geographic focus (Ruhanen et al., 2018.)

The sustainable tourism concept has been linked to the preservation of ecosystems and biodiversity, human welfare, inter-and intra-cultural equity, public participation in tourism-related decision-making, and access to socio-cultural tourism outcomes by all stakeholders; sustainability can be a policy or development goal for most types of tourism activity or environment, regardless of scale (Bramwell, 2015; Lane, 2009; Moscardo, 2008; UNEP and UNWTO, 2005). According to Sulaeman et al. (2019), a tourist destination's sustainability in KNP if use some managerial concepts and points of view, such as re-evaluating or comparing the current management with the basic eco-tourism concept, immediately improves the KNP sustainability as well as satisfies visitors' expectation of seeing local certified people in the direction and working with the relevant authority to enforce the rules in reducing the impact on the protected areas.

Conservation Destination

There was a study conducted in Komodo National Park that examined the impact of human activities on the Komodo dragon, which suggested developing methods to achieve socio-ecological sustainability that benefit people as well as dragon wildlife conservation since there was a potential negative consequence from competition and predation (Praharawati et al., 2023; Ardiantiono et al., 2018). In the same vein, the study by Sunkar et al. (2020) confirmed the significance of incorporating local cultural values into conservation support structures.

The Empowerment of Local People

Cole (2006) defines empowerment as the ability of individuals or groups within a community to make decisions about their own lives and exert influence over issues that impact them. Empowerment, according to Cole, is the "upper end" of a participation ladder that ranges from minimal input and impact at the bottom to complete control at the top. Scheyvens (1999) investigates tourism development processes using a multidimensional model that distinguishes between economic,

social, political, and psychological components of empowerment related to a similar conceptual construct (Schmidt & Uriely, 2018). According to Benu et al. (2020), community-based tourism in Komodo National Park potentially improves by at least two percent. It gains economic growth by not less than one percent per capita as long as there is an awareness conservation program and community involvement.

Research Method

The current study used a case study methodology. A case study is an appropriate research method in social studies (Yin, 2011, 2017). This method provides a non-hierarchical and in-depth interview to investigate how local people perceived the tourism development in Komodo National Park. This technique examines the specific roles and perspectives involved by government officials, residents, travel agencies, non-government organizations, educators, and tourism entrepreneurs. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather information via online meetings during the pandemic situation in 2021. This study followed the standard practice of case study research in data analysis, embracing both within-case and cross-case investigations (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Table 1. summarises the demographic profile of the interviewees in this study.

The secondary data was gathered through document analysis to provide a more in-depth study, such as the government statistic website - Badan Pusat Statistik Manggarai Barat and other supporting documents. Thematic analysis is used to analyze the data in this study, where the interview results are analyzed. The theme analysis procedure is divided into several stages. Before finding the findings of the interview transcript from multiple participants, the researcher wrote and compiled the transcript as a result of the interview. Then, coded the data to find the outcomes of interviews were grouped according to the discussion theme. Lastly, the results are based on the preset themes (Bryman, 2016). Furthermore, the in-depth interviews were conducted through an online meeting application in the third and fourth quarters of 2021 and focused on local people to understand their perspectives on three main questions:

1. How do locals perceive the tourism development in Komodo National Park?
2. What are the impacts of tourism development in Komodo National Park on the local quality of life in a social and economic context?
3. Do locals support the tourism development in Komodo National Park?

The secondary data was gathered to supplement the primary data. The secondary data collected for this research was compiled from various sources to increase the data reliability, namely research reports and government publications about tourism in Komodo National Park.

Table 1.
A Summary of Data Sources

P	Gender	Age Range	Education Background	Position
P1	Male	41 - 56 years old	Undergraduate Program	Tourism Entrepreneur
P2	Female	27 - 40 years old	Postgraduate Program	Destination Marketing Organization
P3	Male	18 - 26 years old	Undergraduate Program	Local Travel Agency
P4	Female	27 - 40 years old	Postgraduate Program	Non-Government Organization
P5	Female	27 - 40 years old	Postgraduate Program	Local Community
P6	Female	27 - 40 years old	Postgraduate Program	Educator
P7	Male	27 - 40 years old	Undergraduate Program	Indigenous/Naturalist Guide
P8	Female	27 - 40 years old	Postgraduate Program	Educator
P9	Male	27 - 40 years old	Undergraduate Program	Non-Government Organization
P10	Male	above 57 years old	Postgraduate Program	Local Government
P11	Male	27 - 40 years old	Undergraduate Program	Local Tour Guide
P12	Male	27 - 40 years old	Undergraduate Program	Local Resident
P13	Male	27 - 40 years old	Undergraduate Program	Local Tour Guide

Source: Author Data Collection

Results & Discussion

Following the findings of this study, local environmental activists and people who live within the surrounding Komodo National Park (KNP) boundaries are concerned about the project. To answer the fi. Subsequently, this study found that the economic and social impacts of tourism development in KNP have affected their quality of life. Lastly, this study found that most locals who live near the destination eventually support tourism development in KNP, which can be explained in the following discussion. Tourism development in protected areas has raised concern at the research questions; this study explored several aspects as local people shared their positive and negative perspectives about the KNP development beginning of its project. Most of the local people felt threatened during uncertain circumstances of their livelihood. Along with the government socialization of the project, local people continue to be educated that the premium destination label in KNP is one of the strategies to boost their quality of life. Many participants expressed their gratitude to the government for focusing on developing the KNP:

“There are a significant number of visitors after the government promotes our destination, and the trend keeps rising yearly. By having numerous tourists, locals have opportunities to broaden their business. This applied not only to big companies but also small enterprises.” (P10)

“Many locals change their profession from farmers to souvenir sellers, naturalist guides, travel agencies, hotel, resort, restaurant employees, open their small business in the culinary or cultural product. These widely open job vacancies for local people.” (P13)

However, there are contradictory perspectives as responses from locals to KNP as a project toward Super Premium Destination in Indonesia, as explained:

“Our local people were not ready to be involved in the Super Premium Destination concept, which has been sounded worldwide by the central government. Human resources, especially people who live in remote areas, have limited access to develop their skills to compete with qualified people.” (P5)

“This project will destroy nature-based tourism. Massive infrastructure development potentially alters Komodo Dragon habits, such as spot-points where they usually gather and the ecosystem where endangered species are supposed to explore their habitat. We need to evaluate the conservation over current infrastructure development.” (P3)

The second question was to determine the impacts on local people’s quality of life towards tourism development in KNP. Many participants expressed the aspects of economic and social as the following discussion.

Economic Impacts

The tourism sector is one of the areas where Indonesia may benefit from a boost in its economy. Economics is the most visible manifestation of residents in tourism development. The Komodo National Park project helped the residents in three ways. Initially, tourism has become a critical financial source for residents replacing traditional fishing and farming with small businesses, including travel agencies and small companies such as souvenir shops and food and beverages. However, the allocation of tourism revenue still needs to be solved. Some locals have expressed concerns about tourism regulations promoting their destinations and the government’s lack of conservation policies. Meanwhile, ecotourism has provided additional financial resources and job opportunities for local people (i.e., small businesses for souvenir providers, local travel agencies, tour guides, and transport services) (Walpole & Goodwin, 2000; Walpole, 2001), while the komodo islander does not always make a profit from fishing because many are in debt to local skippers (Hitchcock, 1993).

“When visitors gradually increase, this directly impacts our economic development. Many tourism sectors have offered beneficial effects on our livelihoods. Our family was mostly fishermen, but since there are intruders and limited areas, currently, we rented our boat for tourism purposes.” (P7)

In contrast, many participants explained that numerous potential foreign visitors frequently asked their staff about the progress of the KNP project. The concern mostly led to the dismissal of nature-based tourism, then changed to modern tourism. Therefore, the selling point was gone along with the super-premium destination design.

“Many of our potential clients canceled their trip once they noticed the KNP was closed to open a new concept of wildlife tourism.” (P12)

These findings are similar to prior studies showing that locals claim their livelihoods as tour guides, boat drivers, and souvenir sellers dependent on the area’s natural beauty (Milko, 2021). Therefore, travel agencies need to explain more comprehensively the KNP development as a strategy for them to thrive in this business.

Social Impacts

The KNP tourism development has a vast social effect on local people and the lives and livelihoods of those affected by it. This project has caused several benefits, including eliminating poverty and providing better education and job opportunities. Residents may have different attitudes toward tourism development. Several participants struggled with the vast movement of people's behavior due to the tourist activities and the authenticity of local culture.

"We experience culture shock in our land. We changed our behavior from traditional to modern ways rapidly. Having multicultural visitors and colleagues with dynamic circumstances makes us absorb new things. To avoid the acculturations or assimilations, this should be supported by maintaining our culture's values, norms, and customs as one of the exposures." (P12)

"This area used to be one of the left-behind communities in Indonesia. Once we are promoted as a super-premium destination, the government focuses more on infrastructure development without balancing the human resources skills and capabilities. The government should create programs that support the country's objectives to achieve the international quality standard. Currently, we have one polytechnic in Labuan Bajo and vocational schools to prepare human resources for the Indonesian tourism industry." (P6)

Tourism development has a variety of positive impacts on social aspects and a negative side if there is a lack of control and evaluation towards its development. The empowering tool to be used on a local level effectively by enhancing local education to have equal abilities in the benefits of tourism development. The educators have shown that many future generations in that region must be fully equipped with skills and knowledge.

Local People's Involvement

Most of the participants in this study shared similar insight that stakeholder involvement was the critical point who lost from this project. Likewise, according to Liestiandre et al. (2019), Komodo National Park Management should be more transparent in conservation funds by involving communities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as stakeholders.

"We hope that this development in KNP and Labuan Bajo is considering going through the strong brainstorming process for locals. Hence, we can involve and collaborate on the project with our expertise." (P11)

The conflict between local people's perspectives for being pro and contra the KNP project is debatable. The "Jurassic Park" concept with real wild Komodo as an endangered species is not solely an attraction to new tourism concepts. The proper accommodation, standardized services, and facilities are considered critical in putting its destination to the international level. Even though controversies among the public related to this project raise various concerns, locals have expressed their support, as explained below:

"I support the KNP tourism development since we grasp that tourism is the only sector that potentially develops and helps our society to the next level. With inherent infrastructure, sustainable tourism can be established by focusing on economic development, socio-culture, and the other supporting areas." (P10)

"Our communities are actually in acceptance stages. We have seen the positive side of the KNP development and its benefits to our society. Yet, paying attention to small enterprises needs more effort to ensure they survive from big companies' competition" (P1)

"The KNP tourism development eventually provides safety and security for visitors and management. On one side, the elevated deck from its project will minimize the risk of injury due to close interaction between visitors and the Komodo Dragon and well-maintained facilities to give them convenient experiences. On the other side, the naturalist guide will have a proper workplace, well-organized Standard Operating Produce (SOP), and regular maintenance to ensure the management and operations run smoothly with ethical values." (P4)

Through participation in the KNP tourism development project, the local people are supposed to be involved in the process, such as brainstorming, decision-making, planning, execution, monitoring, and evaluations. If any problem should be solved, they understand that the KNP project will benefit the people involved and result in comprehensive support from stakeholders (Tamrin & Lubis, 2023).

Conclusions

This study has described and analyzed local people's pro or contra perspectives toward the Komodo National Park project as tourism development in protected areas. To analyze the attitudes,

impacts, and development support, this study has examined the case study, particularly from the local people affected by this project. Moreover, the in-depth interviews with the local people showed that although many controversies have raised concern among them, they support the development agendas that bring their communities and society a better quality of life in the future, as they understand it is inevitable. However, the development in tourism sectors, especially in conservation areas as a part of the World Heritage Site, should wisely consider the holistic impact on the socio-economic and environmental effects. The tourism business will eventually turn down the other companies if there is a need for more management strategies and proper evaluation.

Moreover, along with destination promotion and infrastructure development, human resources and local empowerment are critical to embark new scheme of living from nature-based to a well-maintained destination. In addition, this study indicates that the KNP management should reinforce some aspects of involvement and empowerment. Balancing its development, local well-being, nature conservation, and Komodo dragons' welfare must be carefully managed. This project could significantly impact the stakeholders disturbed by its development and the endangered species living.

The growth of the KNP tourism destination in the World Heritage Site should be linked to a large part of the future conservation agenda of UNESCO. Synergizing strategies top-down is critical for stakeholders to implement the new tourism agendas. This study contributes to the tourism research literature on sustainable tourism development and destinations in protected areas, both methodological and conceptual. Alongside this study, the findings are helpful for tourism sector management. They proceed with its growth and focus on nature conservation, socioeconomic development of residents, and stakeholder involvement to get a better understanding and holistic perspectives before the decision-making process. Having vital considerations to minimize problems rising among residents is substantial during the transformational tourism concept.

Acknowledgment

This study is supported by the Research and Innovation Centre at Universitas Multimedia Nusantara, No. 019/PI/LPPM-UMN/III/2021.

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