

Empowering local communities as tour guides in Kuala Langsa Mangrove Forest Park, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Langsa is one of the coastal cities located on the east coast of Aceh, Indonesia. Along the coastline, mangrove forests protect the coastal area from abrasion. Community engagement aims to assist the tour guide skill for the buffer zone community in the mangrove conservation area. The method used in this activity is a participatory training method, namely brainstorming and practice of guiding tourists. Participants in community engagement are the youth of the village. The results have succeeded in providing a basic understanding of the skills of guiding tourists. The community engagement program is expected to assist in the capacity building of tour guide skills through various related activities and sustainability. We also identified that skills certification is needed for them to become professional tour guides in their villages.

KEYWORDS

Empowering communities; ecotourism, Mangrove Forest Park, tour guides

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1. Introduction

Mangrove forests cover nearly the entire coastline of Aceh, Indonesia, with the majority concentrated along the northern and eastern coasts. The eastern coastline is home to one of Aceh's most biodiverse mangrove conservation areas. Langsa, strategically located along this coastline, is geographically bordered by East Aceh Regency to the west and north, Aceh Tamiang Regency to the south, and the Strait of Malacca to the east and north. Its entire shoreline is a protected mangrove conservation zone.

Driven by a vision of transforming the city into a service hub, the Langsa Municipal Government has developed a Mangrove Forest Park within this conservation area as an eco-tourism destination, constructing eco-friendly infrastructure to support it. The natural beauty of this mangrove park has earned it recognition as one of Indonesia's prime nature tourism spots. Beyond its aesthetic appeal, the park's rich biodiversity has also attracted researchers from across the globe, spurring numerous studies.

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Ecotourism is rooted in sustainable tourism principles (Sangchumnong, 2018). However, our observations have revealed that some local communities within the conservation area engage in illegal logging of mangroves to produce charcoal and gather building materials, particularly when rough seas prevent them from fishing. This illegal deforestation raises concerns about coastal resource degradation and the potential loss of various species within this delicate ecosystem.

Developing this mangrove conservation area as an eco-tourism hub aims to establish it as a conservation-based tourist destination and protect the buffer zone from degradation. While some residents rely on the area's ecological wealth for their livelihoods, others resort to illegal logging. Magigi & Ramadhani (2013) emphasize that successful eco-tourism development requires the active involvement of local communities at every stage, from planning to implementation, ensuring that all tourism activities and products benefit the community. As Friess (2017) recommends, while eco-tourism is developed, it is equally important to consider the potential impacts of tourism on mangrove ecosystems to minimize negative effects.

Overall, the growth of the tourism sector has a ripple effect on the economy by creating jobs, raising wages, increasing tax revenue, and boosting economic growth (Aswadi et al., 2019; Hasan et al., 2023; Mardhani et al., 2021; Aceh et al., 2024). In this case, community involvement efforts were focused on Kuala Langsa Village, one of the buffer zone communities. This village, the largest in Langsa Barat District, spans an area of 1,456 hectares (31.70% of the district's total area) and sits 10 kilometers above sea level. According to Statistics Indonesia (BPS) (2017), it is home to 2,159 people, with the majority working as fishermen.

2. Method

This community service activity was conducted through a structured training program. We organized three main activities during the implementation phase: awareness and material briefing, group discussions, and practical tourist guiding exercises.

In the first phase, which involved awareness-building and material briefing on developing guiding skills, we conducted a session on the importance of this training. We provided in-depth material to enhance participants' understanding. This phase was held indoors to ensure that prospective tour guides could fully comprehend the training content. We incorporated interactive games throughout the sessions to make the material more engaging and prevent boredom.

The second phase was a group discussion session, where participants were encouraged to exchange experiences on guiding techniques for mangrove tourism. For

this discussion, we divided the participants into two groups with different roles—one group acted as tour guides, and the other as tourists.

The third phase was practical tourist guiding. For this practice session, participants were again divided into two groups with the same role differentiation: tour guides and tourists. Although the training did not occur directly in the mangrove tourism area, we simulated a real-world environment to enhance the participants' guiding skills. This hands-on approach was intended to improve the community's proficiency in guiding visitors to their village.

3. Results and discussion

The involvement of the local youth community as tour guides aimed to ensure that the knowledge transfer through this training could be effectively realized. Moreover, a study by Handayani et al. (2016) demonstrated that rural youth communities, especially those far from urban centers, are more prepared to engage in ecotourism development than those closer to the city. Based on this, our decision to empower the youth from rural buffer zones proved strategic.

The training program was divided into three stages: the awareness and material briefing stage, the group discussion stage, and the practical tourist guiding skills stage. As the activity schedule outlines, participants registered to confirm attendance before proceeding with the tour guide capacity development training.

During the awareness and material briefing stage, we began by explaining the objectives and benefits of the community involvement initiative. Following this, we introduced the essential skills for guiding tourists in mangrove conservation areas. At this stage, trainers provided the material, and participants actively engaged by asking relevant questions. This interactive exchange between trainers and participants created an enthusiastic atmosphere throughout the session.

The next stage was the group discussion. Here, we divided the participants into two groups. The goal of the group discussions was to assess participants' understanding of the material covered in the training. Each group was asked to document the outcomes of their discussions, which they then presented to the other group. Their peers provided feedback through suggestions or questions about the presentation. After completing the group discussions, we moved on to the practical tourist guiding stage, where each group practiced guiding tourists while the other observed and offered constructive feedback. This active interaction between participants contributed to their learning experience.

The community's involvement in developing the capacity of local tour guides must be followed up to strengthen the foundation of the local population as nature guides in

the mangrove forest area. This aligns with the community's hopes, which they expressed during the closing session of the training. They voiced a desire for more capacity-building activities to enhance their skills in guiding visitors from various regions of Indonesia and abroad. Providing such capacity development training helps equip the community with comprehensive knowledge, transforming them into skilled and hospitable tour guides (Chang, 2012). In doing so, they can offer high-quality services to tourists, ultimately leading to increased income for the community from tourism.

Moreover, through tour guide training, the community is expected to actively participate in conserving the mangrove ecotourism area, ensuring its sustainability for future generations. A study by Khanom et al. (2011) in Bangladesh suggests that tourists visiting a destination always seek comprehensive information, particularly related to the natural environment and local culture. Therefore, with their knowledge and experience, well-trained tour guides can provide accurate and meaningful information to visitors. Similarly, Min (2011) in Taiwan emphasized the need to enhance tour guiding skills, particularly emotional intelligence, for guided tourism. Arslanturk & Altunoz (2012), in their study of guided tourism in Turkey, also highlighted the importance of developing communication skills among tour guides to enhance visitor satisfaction.

4. Conclusion

Tour guides play a strategic role in the success of any tourism destination, particularly in helping tourists discover unique and memorable experiences during their visit. Therefore, every tour guide must possess sufficient skills and knowledge about their local area. Experiences from several countries have shown that tour guides often face challenges related to a lack of knowledge and skills.

The community of Kuala Langsa Village expresses a strong desire for this partnership to continue, as it will support their efforts to develop skilled tour guides from within their community, ensuring long-term sustainability. The community must be involved in every stage of tourism planning and development in their region to ensure that the benefits are shared with them. For continued success, they also hope the government will enhance the development of supporting infrastructure to attract domestic and international tourists to visit their village.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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