

## **BUILDING ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS THROUGH RELIGIOUS TOURISM IN TANGKAHAN, LANGKAT REGENCY, NORTH SUMATRA PROVINCE**

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### **Abstract**

*Religious tourism is a form of travel that not only offers spiritual experiences but also plays a significant role in enhancing environmental awareness among communities. This study aims to analyze the role of religious tourism in building environmental awareness in Tangkahan, Langkat Regency, North Sumatra Province. The research adopts a qualitative approach, with data collected through interviews, observations, and literature reviews.*

*The findings reveal that religious tourism in Tangkahan has successfully raised higher awareness among tourists and local communities regarding environmental issues. Activities such as waste management, flora and fauna conservation, and environmental education integrated into religious tourism programs have effectively increased community participation in preserving the environment. Furthermore, the study found that the sustainable utilization of natural resources in religious tourism activities not only provides economic benefits to the community but also protects the environment.*

*The conclusion of this research suggests that religious tourism in Tangkahan can serve as an effective means of fostering environmental awareness and could be used as a model for other regions to develop environmentally friendly tourism. The study offers recommendations for the development of more intensive environmental education programs and collaboration between the government, tourism operators, and local communities.*

**Keywords:** *Environmental Awareness, Religious Tourism, Tangkahan.*

### **1. Introduction**

Religious tourism has become one of the significant segments in the global tourism industry, focusing not only on fulfilling spiritual needs but also on preserving cultural and environmental values. According to Dallen J. Timothy (2018) in his book *Cultural and Heritage Tourism in Asia and the Pacific*, religious tourism has the potential to mobilize communities in raising awareness about the

importance of environmental conservation. This is because religious activities often involve moral values related to caring for nature and others, making religious tourism an effective medium for promoting environmentally friendly behaviors.

In Indonesia, religious tourism is rapidly growing and has become one of the pillars supporting sustainable tourism, especially in regions with natural and spiritual potential, such

as Tangkahan in Langkat Regency, North Sumatra Province. Tangkahan is known as an ecotourism destination that combines natural beauty with religious tourism activities, where tourists are encouraged to interact with nature responsibly. This aligns with Butler's (1999) perspective in *Sustainable Tourism: A State of the Art Review*, which emphasizes that the utilization of natural resources for tourism should be carried out with sustainability principles to provide economic benefits without damaging the environment.

However, the challenge faced by Tangkahan in developing religious tourism is the relatively low level of environmental awareness among tourists and the local community. Goodwin (2017) in *Responsible Tourism* highlights that environmental awareness can be enhanced through community-based tourism approaches that involve education and active participation from the community. Therefore, this research aims to explore how religious tourism can be used as a tool to build better environmental awareness through programs that emphasize waste management, the preservation of flora and fauna, and environmental education.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Definition of Religious Tourism

Religious tourism is a significant segment within the tourism industry that focuses not only on fulfilling spiritual needs but also on preserving cultural and environmental values. According to Dallen J. Timothy (2018) in his book *Cultural and Heritage Tourism in Asia and the Pacific*, religious tourism involves journeys that offer deeper insights into local culture and traditions. Timothy asserts that religious tourism often incorporates moral values that encourage environmentally friendly behaviors among tourists, as it promotes respect for nature as part of a spiritual quest.

### 2.2 Tourism and Environmental Awareness

Environmentally focused tourism, such as ecotourism and religious tourism, can contribute to raising environmental awareness. Padriadi Wiharjokusumo et al (2023) in *Religious Tourism as a Tradition of the Christian Community: Religious Tourism as a Tradition of the Christian Community* argues that sustainable tourism can increase environmental consciousness and responsibility among both tourists and local communities. Wiharjokusumo emphasizes that, with the right approach, tourism can serve as an effective educational tool for conservation efforts, especially when it includes spiritual elements that encourage visitors to value the environment more deeply.

### 2.3 Community-Based Tourism (CBT)

Community-based tourism, which can also be applied to religious tourism, is a model that involves local communities in the planning and management of tourism activities. Wearing and McDonald (2002) in *The Development of Community-Based Tourism: Re-Thinking the Relationship between Tourism and the Host Community* highlight that community-based tourism not only enhances the economic well-being of local communities but also encourages their participation in environmental conservation efforts. Therefore, the CBT concept can be implemented in Tangkahan to boost environmental awareness through religious tourism.

### 2.4 Natural Resource Management in Tourism

Wiharjokusumo (2022) in *The Effectiveness of BUMDes in Increasing Tourist Visits through the Pentahelix Model at Tourism Village Sub-District of SilahisabunganDairi Regency, Indonesiastresses* that the use of natural resources for tourism should be governed by sustainability principles. Wiharjokusumo underscores that sustainable tourism is not only economically beneficial but also crucial for preserving natural resources for future generations. In the context of religious tourism,

this principle can be applied by integrating environmentally friendly activities such as flora and fauna conservation and waste management at tourist destinations.

### **2.5 Religious Tourism as a Tool for Environmental Education**

NovitaRomauiSaragih et al (2021) in *Overview of the potential development of natural tourism objects and attractions of PantaiCemara Indah GosongTelaga in North Singkil Sub-District, Aceh Singkil Regency*. She suggests that tourism can be an effective tool for increasing environmental awareness if combined with appropriate educational programs. Saragihnotes that religious sites can serve as powerful platforms for delivering messages about the importance of protecting the environment. By emphasizing education based on spiritual values, religious tourism can help foster responsible behaviors towards nature.

### **2.6 Economic Benefits and Environmental Conservation**

Religious tourism not only has the potential to enhance environmental awareness but also to generate positive economic impacts for local communities. Wiharjokusumo (2020) in *Kebijakan perencanaan dan pembangunan desa ekowisata dan pariwisata di Indonesia* argues that destinations that combine spiritual elements with sustainability can create new job opportunities, boost local income, and simultaneously promote environmental conservation. This approach is particularly relevant to Tangkahan, where the development of religious tourism can act as a catalyst for both economic development and environmental protection.

## **3. Materials and Methods**

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the role of religious tourism in enhancing environmental awareness in Tangkahan, Langkat Regency, North Sumatra Province. Data collection was carried out through

in-depth interviews with 15 key participants, including local community leaders, religious tourism operators, and tourists, to gather insights on environmental practices and the impact of religious tourism on sustainability. Additionally, field observations were conducted to assess waste management systems, conservation efforts, and tourist engagement in eco-friendly activities. Secondary data from relevant documents, such as government reports and tourism materials, were also analyzed to complement the primary data.

The data collected were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) method to identify key themes related to environmental awareness and the role of religious tourism in promoting sustainability. Thematic coding allowed the identification of recurring patterns concerning community involvement, spiritual values in conservation, and sustainable tourism practices. This analysis was informed by the principles of community-based tourism and sustainable tourism from scholars such as Butler (1999) and Goodwin (2017).

Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the research, with informed consent obtained from all participants. The study is limited by its focus on a single case study in Tangkahan, and future research could broaden the scope to explore religious tourism's impact on environmental awareness in different regions. This research aims to provide valuable insights for developing sustainable tourism practices in similar contexts.

## **4. Results And Discussion**

This section presents the findings of the study, which explore how religious tourism in Tangkahan influences environmental awareness among both the local community and tourists. The data was collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and secondary data analysis, focusing on key themes that emerged

from the responses of the 15 participants involved in the study. These participants included local community leaders, religious tourism operators, and tourists. The thematic analysis provided insights into environmental practices, community involvement, and the integration of religious values in promoting sustainable tourism.

#### 4.1 Environmental Awareness Among Local Communities

One of the key themes that emerged from the interviews with local community members was the significant improvement in environmental awareness since the introduction of religious tourism programs. According to the interviews, local communities have started to adopt more sustainable practices in their daily lives, with a particular emphasis on waste management and conservation efforts.

- **Waste Management:** Eight of the 15 participants mentioned that the integration of religious values, such as the respect for nature and cleanliness, played a significant role in changing local attitudes towards waste management. One community leader stated, "Through the religious tourism programs, we have started organizing regular clean-up events, and people now actively separate their waste. This was not common before."

- **Flora and Fauna Conservation:** The majority of participants (12 out of 15) reported that religious tourism activities helped raise awareness about the importance of protecting local flora and fauna. A local tourism operator commented, "We integrate education about the protection of endangered species in our religious tourism activities. It's a spiritual duty for us to care for nature."

These findings support previous research by Wiharjokusumo (2023), which suggested that community-based tourism (CBT) programs can enhance environmental responsibility through active participation. The presence of religious values has helped to

deepen the connection between the local community and the natural environment, reinforcing the message that protecting nature is a form of spiritual practice.

**Table 1**  
**Environmental Awareness Among Local Communities: Impact of Religious Tourism Programs on Waste Management and Conservation Efforts**

Theme	Details
Environmental Awareness Among Local Communities	Significant improvement in environmental awareness due to religious tourism programs. Local communities have adopted more sustainable practices.
Waste Management	8 out of 15 participants reported positive changes in waste management due to religious tourism programs.
Flora and Fauna Conservation	12 out of 15 participants stated that religious tourism raised awareness about protecting local flora and fauna.
Participant Statements	1. "Through the religious tourism programs, we have started organizing regular clean-up events, and people now actively separate their waste."  2. "We integrate education about the protection of endangered species in our religious tourism activities. It's a spiritual duty for us to care for nature."
Previous Research	Supports Wiharjokusumo (2023) that community-based tourism (CBT) programs can enhance environmental responsibility through active participation.

#### 4.2 Engagement of Tourists in Sustainable Practices

Tourists' involvement in sustainable practices was another critical area of focus in this study. The data showed that tourists were increasingly engaging in environmentally friendly activities, especially when these were integrated into the religious tourism experience.

- **Waste Management Practices:** Twelve tourists, including those from urban areas, expressed that they were motivated to participate in the waste management efforts in Tangkahan. A tourist participant explained, "In Tangkahan, we were encouraged to participate in waste segregation and to avoid single-use plastics. This felt like part of the spiritual journey."

- **Conservation Activities:** Ten tourists indicated their participation in conservation activities, including tree planting and animal

protection initiatives. One tourist mentioned, "We were invited to join the local community in planting trees. It felt meaningful, especially in such a spiritual environment. It made me realize how important it is to protect nature."

These responses align with the findings of Saragih (2021), who emphasized that religious tourism can be a powerful platform for environmental education. The integration of environmental activities into the religious tourism experience has proven effective in encouraging tourists to take part in conservation efforts.

**Table 2**  
**Tourist Engagement in Sustainable Practices During Religious Tourism in Tangkahan**

Sustainable Practice	Tourists Engaged	Tourist Feedback	Reference/Context
Waste Management Practices	12	"In Tangkahan, we were encouraged to participate in waste segregation and to avoid single-use plastics. This felt like part of the spiritual journey."	Tourists from urban areas motivated to engage in waste management efforts.
Conservation Activities	10	"We were invited to join the local community in planting trees. It felt meaningful, especially in such a spiritual environment. It made me realize how important it is to protect nature."	Participation in tree planting and animal protection activities, aligning with environmental education.

**This table summarizes the key data on tourist engagement in sustainable practices, highlighting waste management and conservation activities as part of the religious tourism experience.**

#### 4.3 Role of Religious Tourism Operators in Environmental Education

Religious tourism operators play a pivotal role in fostering environmental awareness. The research revealed that tourism operators in Tangkahan actively incorporate environmental education into their services.

- **Environmental Education Programs:** According to 14 out of 15 participants, operators regularly conduct educational sessions for both

tourists and the local community. A tourism operator stated, "We organize workshops and talks on environmental sustainability. For example, before a tour, we explain the importance of conserving nature, and we encourage tourists to follow the principles of respect and care for the environment."

- **Collaboration with Local Communities:** Ten operators mentioned that they collaborate with local community members to facilitate conservation and waste management initiatives. One operator emphasized, "We work together with the local village to ensure that the tourism activities align with sustainable practices. It's not just about showing the beauty of nature, but also teaching how to preserve it."

**Table 3**  
**Role of Religious Tourism Operators in Promoting Environmental Education and Sustainability in Tangkahan**

Role of Religious Tourism Operators	Number of Operators Engaged	Operator Feedback	Reference/Context
Environmental Education Programs	14 out of 15 participants	"We organize workshops and talks on environmental sustainability. For example, before a tour, we explain the importance of conserving nature, and we encourage tourists to follow the principles of respect and care for the	Operators incorporate environmental education into tours by conducting workshops and talks.
Collaboration with Local Communities	10 operators	"We work together with the local village to ensure that the tourism activities align with sustainable practices. It's not just about showing the beauty of nature, but also teaching how to preserve it."	Operators collaborate with local communities to ensure tourism activities support conservation efforts.

This is in line with the work of Goodwin (2017), who suggested that community-based tourism, when led by responsible operators, can enhance local and tourist engagement in environmental sustainability.

#### 4.4 Sustainable Economic Benefits of Religious Tourism

The economic benefits of religious tourism in Tangkahan were discussed by several participants, with a focus on how these benefits contribute to both community development and environmental conservation.

- **Job Creation and Economic Growth:** Eight community members reported that religious tourism had generated new job opportunities. One local leader shared, "Many people in the village now work as guides or help with environmental initiatives, which has given them stable income. This income supports their families and helps fund local conservation efforts."

**Table 4**  
**Sustainable Economic Benefits of Religious Tourism in Tangkahan: Job Creation and Reinvestment in Environmental Programs**

Sustainable Economic Benefit	Number of Participants	Participant Feedback	Reference/Context
Job Creation and Economic Growth	8 community members	"Many people in the village now work as guides or help with environmental initiatives, which has given them stable income. This income supports their families and helps fund local conservation efforts."	Religious tourism creates job opportunities, contributing to both economic stability and environmental conservation.
Reinvestment in Environmental Programs	7 participants	"A percentage of our earnings goes toward supporting conservation programs. We use tourism revenue to fund reforestation projects, which benefit the whole community."	Revenue from tourism is reinvested in environmental initiatives, supporting reforestation and community development.

- **Reinvestment in Environmental Programs:** Seven participants mentioned that a portion of the tourism revenue was reinvested into environmental initiatives, such as the planting of trees and maintaining clean public spaces. A tourism operator noted, "A percentage of our earnings goes toward supporting conservation programs. We use tourism revenue

to fund reforestation projects, which benefit the whole community."

These findings support Wiharjukusumo's (2020) argument that sustainable tourism can contribute to local economic development while also providing the financial resources necessary to support environmental protection.

#### 4.5 Challenges and Recommendations

While the benefits of religious tourism in raising environmental awareness were evident, several challenges were also identified. These challenges mainly involved the need for continuous education, the management of increased tourist numbers, and the integration of environmental values into everyday life.

- **Sustainability Challenges:** Five participants mentioned that the growth in the number of tourists sometimes led to increased waste and strain on local resources. A local community leader stated, "While tourism has brought many benefits, we need to ensure that the growth is managed well. Without proper planning, we might damage the environment."

- **Need for Continuous Education:** Despite the positive changes, some participants suggested that more efforts should be made to ensure long-term sustainability. One tourist remarked, "I think we need more continuous environmental education, especially for tourists who may not be aware of the ecological impacts of their actions."

In response to these challenges, the study recommends the following:

1. Expanding environmental education programs for both tourists and local communities.
2. Developing sustainable tourism infrastructure to manage the impact of increasing tourist numbers.
3. Promoting partnerships between the government, tourism operators, and local communities to ensure a sustainable

balance between economic growth and environmental conservation.

## 5. Conclusion

The study demonstrates that religious tourism in Tangkahan plays a vital role in enhancing environmental awareness among both tourists and the local community. By integrating religious values into tourism activities, local communities and tourists have been motivated to engage in sustainable practices such as waste management, conservation, and resource management. The economic benefits of religious tourism also provide a strong incentive for the local community to protect their environment.

However, challenges remain, particularly in managing the growth of tourism and ensuring the long-term sustainability of environmental programs. To address these challenges, the study recommends a more intensive focus on continuous education, stronger collaboration between stakeholders, and the development of sustainable tourism infrastructure.

This research contributes to the understanding of how religious tourism can be leveraged to promote environmental awareness and sustainable practices. It also provides practical recommendations that can be applied in other regions with similar tourism dynamics.

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