

Enhancing Destination Competitiveness: A Thematic Approach to Nature-Based Tourism in Sikka Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province

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Abstract

This study aims to identify existing condition of nature-based tourism, community participation and formulate strategic directions for its future development. A qualitative approach was adopted, involving in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, including tourism industry representatives, local communities, and academics. The findings highlight two primary themes in nature-based tourism development, namely: terrestrial and marine tourism. However, the integration and implementation of these themes remain inadequate, leading to limited destination competitiveness. Moreover, the community participation in creating nature based tourism product is still low as well. To address this issue, this study proposes a theoretical model for enhancing the development of nature-based tourism. The novelty of this research lies in the strategic positioning of core and supporting themes within the product positioning framework, enhancing the region's competitive edge in the nature tourism sector.

Keywords: Communication, conflict management, goal setting, clear vision.

INTRODUCTION

Nature-based tourism has become a crucial sub-sector in contemporary tourism phenomena. Muga et al. (2024) highlight the global trend of tourists returning to nature, driven by strong motivations for sustainability, serenity, and spirituality. In response to this trend, the development of nature-based tourism products is essential to accommodate the shifting dynamics of the tourism market. Such preparedness serves as a key factor in welcoming visitors. Within this context, the appeal and uniqueness of tourism products

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become primary attractions for tourists. Consequently, innovation and creativity are imperative in the development of tourism products at destinations.

The development of nature-based tourism must involve local communities from the planning to the evaluation stages. This is because local communities should not only be beneficiaries but also active participants in the process. Achieving nature-based tourism without full support from the local community is a formidable challenge. Nature-based tourism emphasises sustainability, encompassing social, economic, and environmental quality aspects within the destination. Therefore, its development necessitates the involvement of various stakeholders. The objective is to foster synergy in tourism development, ensuring that emerging social issues are addressed in accordance with the capacities of each stakeholder. Nature-based tourism has been recognised as a means to mitigate environmental concerns (Rice, 2019).

Sikka Regency boasts an extensive array of natural resources, including vast rice fields, arid hills, coastal landscapes, and breathtaking marine biodiversity. These assets position Sikka Regency as a prime candidate for sustainable tourism development. However, efforts to realise this potential remain suboptimal. Consequently, ongoing community-based tourism research is crucial to identifying the appropriate positioning for sustainable tourism development in Sikka Regency. This aligns with the Regional Tourism Development Master Plan of Sikka Regency, Chapter IV, Article 9(a), which advocates for the principle of sustainable development (Sawu, 2024).

In general, regional tourism development policies in this context refer to the Regional Tourism Development Master Plan of Sikka Regency. The development of regional tourism destinations encompasses several components, including the zoning of tourism areas, the development of tourism attractions, accessibility and transportation infrastructure, public facilities, tourism facilities, community empowerment through tourism, and investment expansion in the tourism sector. However, in reality, the progress of tourism destination development remains significantly limited. This shortfall is primarily attributed to the lack of academic research aimed at enhancing regional tourism destination development.

Tourism data from Sikka Regency indicate that innovation in nature-based tourism products remains relatively low, despite the region's immense tourism potential. While certain nature-based tourism activities have emerged in specific tourism zones, such as Kojia Doi Tourism Village, Egon Buluk Tourism Village, and Kolisia B Tourism Village, most visitors primarily engage in sightseeing (Sawu, 2024). This is due to the underdevelopment of tourism attractions and activities, with the exception of snorkelling

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and diving in Koja Doi Tourism Village. Consequently, this issue has become a critical theme in the discourse on nature-based tourism development in Sikka Regency. Addressing this concern requires serious attention to enhance the region's tourism competitiveness moving forward.

This study focuses on the existing conditions of nature-based tourism development, the involvement of local communities, and the formulation of future development strategies. Such an approach is essential for understanding the trajectory of nature-based tourism development in the coming years. The ultimate goal is to foster innovation in nature-based tourism products, thereby increasing visitor interest. This, in turn, is expected to contribute to economic growth within local communities and improve environmental quality at tourism destinations, ensuring sustainability and high-quality experiences. Additionally, the benefits of tourism development should ensure that no rural community is left behind. Nature-based tourism has the potential to serve as a passport to prosperity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nature Based Tourism

NBS emerged from ecological management systems and were primarily aimed at resolving environmental issues; particularly protection against flooding, drought or erosion. An example is NBS “sponge-city” projects; whereby tracts of nature act as a “sponge” to absorb rainfall and help reduce the threat of flooding (Dong and Han, 2011; Liang and Langong, 2018; Li et al., 2017; Van Rooijen et al., 2005; Argent et al., 2008; Xia et al., 2017). Nature-based tourism involves a large number of different outdoor activities, such as hiking, backpacking, skiing, boating, camping, angling, hunting, kayaking, and biking – many of which are performed by individuals, families and friends with only minor involvement of commercial operators (Margaryan & Fredman, 2017). Nature-based tourism is a broad category that represents some elements of several additional tourism forms including ecotourism, adventure tourism, sustainable tourism and even cultural tourism (Weaver, 2001a).

Antecedents of Community Participation

Previous studies have identified two key themes in community participation: means and ends (Bello et al., 2018; Hung et al., 2011). The integration of these two themes is essential to achieve a holistic understanding of community participation (Hung et al., 2011). Identifying the factors influencing participation provides an in-depth

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comprehension of community involvement in tourism destination development. Additionally, Hung et al. (2011) propose a community-based tourism approach by integrating the factors that affect community participation. This approach adopts the Motivation-Opportunity-Ability (MOA) model, aiming to observe, examine, and interpret the level of local community participation in tourism development within conservation areas.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative method with a case study approach. The researcher conducted observations of both emerging and underdeveloped nature-based tourism destinations in Sikka Regency, focusing on island and terrestrial tourism zones. The findings indicate that the preparation of tourism products remains significantly inadequate. However, at the same time, there is vast untapped potential for nature-based tourism development. Several key informants provided in-depth insights into the progress of nature-based tourism, including representatives from the Department of Tourism and Culture, the tourism industry, local communities, and academics from Cristo Re Polytechnic. Ultimately, the study reveals that the strategic direction for nature-based tourism products has yet to be implemented effectively and efficiently. The collected data will be analysed using a qualitative thematic approach.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Existing Conditions of Nature-Based Tourism

The development of nature-based tourism product components is essential as a foundation for advancing the tourism sector. These components serve to attract visitors, facilitate interactions between tourists and local communities, and meet tourists' needs during their visit. From a regional tourism perspective, nature-based tourism in Sikka Regency has been progressing but requires further enhancement. The current situation indicates that existing tourist attractions have already become key destinations for visitors. Additionally, interactions between local communities and tourists have been generally positive. However, further improvements are necessary to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of future tourism development.

The development of tourism attractions is a crucial aspect of both the present and future regional tourism orientation in Sikka. Attractions play a pivotal role as a primary pull factor for tourism destinations. As the core element in destination development, tourism attractions encompass both tangible and intangible uniqueness and beauty. The

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presence of compelling attractions significantly influences tourists' preferences, motivations, perceptions, and expectations. Therefore, tourism attractions can be regarded as the essence of the tourism phenomenon. The growth and sustainability of a tourism destination heavily rely on its attractions to offer transformative experiences for visitors.

Table 1.1 Nature Tourism in Sikka Regency

Types of Nature Tourism	Tourist Destinations		
	Koja Doi Tourism Village	Egon Buluk Tourism Village	Kolisia B Tourism Village
Stone Bridge, Ancient Rock Hills, Plant and Coral Transplantation, Mangroves, Natural Swings, Sunset and Sunrise, Panda Bay Beach.	√		
Egon Nature Park, Waterfalls, Hot Springs, and Trekking		√	
Rice Fields, Hills, Mangrove Forests, Agrotourism, Coastal Zone			√

Source: Researcher (2025)

Based on the data above, Sikka Regency possesses abundant natural tourist attractions. The researcher selected Koja Doi Tourism Village, Egon Buluk Tourism Village, and Kolisia B Tourism Village as representative samples of tourism development in the region. These locations were chosen because the growth of nature-based tourism in Sikka Regency is largely centred around these areas. The existing conditions of these natural attractions have successfully drawn a considerable number of visitors during peak seasons. The attractions remain highly authentic, offering tourists unique and memorable experiences. An excerpt from an interview with the Department of Tourism and Culture of Sikka Regency highlights this perspective:

"Destinations such as Koja Doi Tourism Village, Egon Buluk Tourism Village, and Kolisia B indeed hold great potential for nature-based tourism development. However, further guidance is needed, particularly in terms of product marketing for future growth."
(Department of Tourism and Culture of Sikka Regency, 2025)



Local Community Involvement in Nature-Based Tourism Development

Fundamentally, the development of nature-based tourism must consider and leverage the motivation, opportunity, and ability of local communities. This approach is crucial for designing training programmes, creating supportive conditions for participation, and encouraging active involvement in decision-making processes. By integrating these three factors—motivation, opportunity, and ability—an environment can be fostered where community participation becomes meaningful in achieving sustainable tourism goals. Conceptually, community participation is a critical mandate in nature-based tourism development. When local communities engage in tourism, their level of participation is shaped by various influencing factors. According to Hung et al. (2011), motivation, opportunity, and ability are the three antecedents of community participation, which are essential in observing, examining, and interpreting local participation in tourism, particularly in conservation areas.

In Sikka Regency, local communities exhibit strong motivation to benefit economically from nature-based tourism development. Economic diversification is crucial in this region, as livelihoods have traditionally depended on the agriculture and plantation sectors. Economic disparities remain high, and many residents face difficulties securing stable employment to improve their living standards. From an opportunity perspective, the region holds significant potential due to government policies that strongly support tourism as a strategy to generate new rural economies. Empirically, local communities already possess the ability to present nature-based attractions that are deeply embedded in their traditional way of life. This authenticity has been positively received by tourists, who admire the uniqueness and beauty of the destinations. However, local communities still struggle to organise and manage nature-based tourism businesses effectively. An excerpt from an interview with an academic expert highlights this issue:

"Sikka Regency possesses enormous potential for nature-based tourism. However, its development remains limited, and significant innovations are needed moving forward."(Academic Expert, 2025)

The development of nature-based tourism in the three selected destinations is primarily driven by local communities. However, product innovation remains underdeveloped. Currently, most tourism experiences revolve around sightseeing, while interactive attractions and activities have yet to be significantly developed. Consequently, tourists spend only short durations at these destinations due to the lack of engaging activities. A local community member shared their perspective on this matter:



"Visitors usually come here to admire the natural beauty. After that, they leave. We have not yet developed activities to retain tourists for longer."

(Local Community Member, 2025)

Strategic Directions for Nature-Based Tourism Development

Collaborative development is a vital aspect as a mechanism for organizing stakeholders in natural tourism development. Collaborative development is capable of helping to enhance the capacity of the local community to manage, give tourist satisfaction, and stakeholders participation in order to create natural tourism. The legacy of community based tourism has been dominant in community development, and collaboration has become a primary key in the development of tourism. Natural tourism development in Sikka Regency requires a collaborative approach to advance the products it possesses in its area. Community based tourism practice is intended to reconcile development and conservation, but is undertaken by a diverse set of stakeholders, representing stakeholders' wide-ranging intents. Immediate stakeholders are community members with diverse opinions, interests, and aspirations. Other stakeholders are donors, international organisations, NGOs, and regulatory agencies. The effects of different social actors representing a wider community are different interests. It is important to note the role power plays in collaboration efforts. Researchers argue that collaborative development can reduce the limitations faced by local communities. These limitations include a shortage of tourism human resources, limited social capital, and insufficient financial resources to develop facilities and infrastructure. This necessitates support from other stakeholders to enhance the development. Collaborative management is the key to success in rural tourism development (Muga & Sawu, 2024).

The development of nature-based tourism products should be synchronised with the tourism industry. This is essential because market access primarily lies within industry networks. Additionally, academic institutions must play a pivotal role in formulating an integrated tourism development plan to ensure a well-structured product development strategy. Beyond this, the full support of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) is also crucial in building the capacity of local communities. Such support is essential to enhance community awareness and skills in developing tourism within their region. An excerpt from an interview with a tourism industry representative highlights this issue:



"Many tourists visiting this area prefer nature-based destinations. However, nature tourism packages in Sikka Regency are not yet well-integrated, and there are limited structured activity-based attractions."

(Tourism Industry Representative, 2025)

In response to this, community capacity-building is imperative to enable them to independently develop and manage tourism initiatives. This effort should begin with human resource development and financial capital access. Currently, these aspects remain underdeveloped, particularly in Egon Buluk Tourism Village and Kolisia B Tourism Village. Addressing this gap is critical to fostering innovation in rural nature-based tourism products. Establishing synergy among stakeholders is essential for effectively organising and managing rural nature tourism. A representative from an NGO emphasised the importance of this approach:

"There is indeed a need to enhance community capacity. However, this should not only focus on skill development but also provide financial capital support for local communities." (NGO Representative, 2025)

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the existing conditions of nature-based tourism, community participation, and strategic directions for the development of nature tourism in Sikka Regency. The findings indicate that despite Sikka Regency's significant natural tourism potential, the development of tourism products remains suboptimal. The integration between land-based and marine tourism has not been effectively implemented, leading to a low destination competitiveness. Moreover, local community participation in tourism development remains limited. Motivation, opportunity, and capability are key elements in fostering community involvement. However, several challenges persist, including a lack of innovation in tourism products and the underdevelopment of activity-based attractions that could extend tourists' length of stay. This study recommends a tourism development model that establishes core and supporting themes within a strategic tourism product framework to enhance the competitiveness of nature-based tourism destinations. Synergy among various stakeholders such as the government, the tourism industry, academia, and NGOs is essential to strengthen local communities' capacity to manage and develop nature-based tourism. Through a more integrated and innovative approach, Sikka Regency has the potential to evolve into a highly competitive and sustainable nature tourism destination



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