

ANALYSIS OF POTENTIAL IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF TANGKAHAN ECOTOURISM, LANGKAT REGENCY, NORTH SUMATRA, INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT: This study evaluates the internal and external aspects of the Tangkahan destination in order to develop a development scheme that harmonizes economic aspects with tropical forest conservation. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data was collected through direct observation in the field, documentation studies, and in-depth interviews with relevant stakeholders. The findings of the research through a SWOT analysis revealed that Tangkahan has a strong internal foundation with a score of 1.85, which is driven by the unique appeal of the Sumatran elephant as its main icon. However, the progress of this area is still constrained by severely damaged road infrastructure and limited telecommunication connections. From the external side, the great interest of foreign tourists in conservation activities is the main opportunity (score 0.80), but the sustainability of the ecosystem is threatened by the expansion of oil palm plantations which have an equally large threat score. The results of the IFAS and EFAS matrix mapping placed Tangkahan's strategic position at the coordinates (1.05; 0.00), which is between the aggressive and diversified strategy zones.

Keywords: *Tangkahan Ecotourism, SWOT Analysis, Development Strategy, Sustainability.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The world of international tourism is currently transforming from the concept of mass tourism to ecotourism, which is a special interest tourism model that prioritizes sustainability aspects. Ecotourism is understood not only as a recreational activity in the outdoors, but also includes a commitment to preserving the ecosystem and supporting the living standards of the local community. The concept is in line with the definition of *United Nations World Tourism Organization* which views tourism as a social, economic, and cultural phenomenon that occurs due to the movement of people outside their area of residence for personal or work purposes, where the person is categorized as a visitor [1]. Ecotourism itself is a form of tourism that is managed with the principle of conservation, namely the sustainable use of nature and community culture. Meanwhile, conservation is an effort to maintain the sustainability of natural resources so that they can still be used in the present and the future [2]. Ecotourism today has

developed into one of the important economic activities because it provides an opportunity for tourists to experience firsthand experiences related to nature and culture, as well as learn and understand the importance of preserving biodiversity and local culture [3].

Basically, ecotourism that is oriented towards the preservation and utilization of nature and community culture applies stricter principles than the usual concept of sustainability. Environmentally friendly ecotourism development is considered more effective in preserving nature than just sustainable development, because ecotourism does not exploit natural resources, but utilizes environmental services and community wisdom to meet the knowledge, physical, and psychological needs of tourists. In many ways, ecotourism is even considered a form of tourism that leads to the concept *Metatourism*, where what is sold is not just the destination, but the philosophy contained in it. With this approach, ecotourism has the potential not to experience market saturation because the value offered is

deeper and continues to grow and the development of tourist attractions can only take place optimally if managed effectively.

Good management has an important role in determining the development of the tourism sector, because the smooth and successful of a tourist attraction is highly dependent on the quality of management applied. [4]. Ecotourism can be interpreted as a tourist trip to a natural area. Although it is often adventurous, tourists can still enjoy it. The concept of ecotourism emphasizes the importance of maintaining the quality, integrity, and preservation of the local environment and culture, while ensuring alignment with the local community [2]. The statement shows that tourism is not just a travel activity, but a form of complicated interaction between travelers, local communities, and service managers at a tourist attraction. This phenomenon has a wide range of influences, ranging from regional economic development, ecosystem sustainability, to changes in the socio-cultural order of the community at the destination location [5]. These conditions have a wide range of multidimensional influences, ranging from regional economic development and ecosystem sustainability to changes in the socio-cultural order of local communities. In addition, this impact also shapes the experience and perspective of travelers who visit the destination [6]. North Sumatra is one of the regions in Indonesia that has a strategic position for the development of ecotourism, especially in the area that intersects with the Gunung Leuser National Park (TNGL).

In Lalat Regency, there is a leading destination called Tangkahan which has gone global with the nickname "*The Hidden Paradise of Sumatra*". The unique attraction of this area lies in the unity between the conservation of Sumatran elephants (*Elephas maximus sumatranus*) with the recreation of tropical forests and river streams. [7]. The principles of sustainability in the tourism sector aim to make a positive contribution to the environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects of local communities. This approach ensures that the tourism products offered are in line with the values of local wisdom and ensure the preservation of natural resources for long-term benefits [8]. This method emphasizes the alignment between economic progress, strengthening the social role of the community, and protecting the ecosystem. This step not only aims to improve the living standards of the local population, but is also carried out to maintain the uniqueness and allure of the tourist attractions themselves [9]. Efforts to advance a tourist destination require a comprehensive assessment

of the ease of access and quality of supporting infrastructure in order to strengthen the attractiveness of the area [10]. The progress of tourism development in a region is highly determined by the ability to recognize tourism assets that have the greatest competitive advantage [11]. The effectiveness of the strategy in developing the tourism sector requires integration between the assessment of the physical feasibility of land and indicators of potential regional development [20].

Effectiveness in managing natural tourism destinations is largely determined by the balance between the availability of supporting facilities or amenities and the carrying capacity of the environment in the region [21]. The development of a sustainability-based regional tourism sector requires the mapping of tourist routes that integrate various points of natural potential into a single interconnected region [22]. Efforts to achieve the standards of world-class tourist destinations are still hampered by poor road infrastructure conditions, lack of supporting facilities, and the risk of environmental damage due to human activities. The quality and availability of transportation routes are a very decisive factor in supporting the tourism sector, because roads are the main components that affect the smooth access and attractiveness for tourists to visit a location [23]. In addition, the provision of infrastructure—especially road access—plays a vital role in accelerating economic activities and encouraging development progress in a region [12]. In general, the improvement of the quality of infrastructure has a positive relationship with the increase in population movement as well as the efficiency of the logistics system, which in turn will strengthen productivity in various relevant economic sectors [24]. In addition, the existence of competition with similar natural attractions requires Tangkahan to implement a flexible and measurable development strategy. Therefore, an in-depth study is needed to map the current situation using the SWOT method (*Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats*). This analysis is crucial in determining effective and targeted policy directions and development steps.

This paper intends to evaluate the various internal and external potentials that Tangkahan has in order to formulate an integrated solution that can align the economic benefits of the tourism sector with sustainable tropical rainforest conservation efforts in the Lalat Regency area. This study specifically reviews the potential of ecotourism in Tangkahan located in Namuilang Village, Batang Serangan District, as the main driving force for development in Langkat Regency [25]. This 17,000-hectare ecotourism

destination is a habitat for wild elephants as well as a buffer area for Gunung Leuser National Park (TNGL). The area has been successfully transformed independently by the local community into a natural tourist attraction that prioritizes the principle of sustainability [26]. The great potential and allure of the Tangkahan tourist attraction has triggered the North Sumatra Provincial Government to prioritize development acceleration programs, especially in terms of repairing road facilities which are currently in a damaged condition. This step was taken because the quality of road infrastructure is considered a crucial element that determines the ease of access and interest of tourists visiting the destination [27].

Nevertheless, the development of ecotourism in Tangkahan is still plagued by the issue of land use allocation and the need to improve the quality of governance from local community leaders. These challenges include land optimization efforts to align with conservation principles and the need for encouragement from community leaders in improving the development standards of the area [28][25]. Starting in 2001, local residents initiated the formation of Tangkahan Simalem Ranger, a community organization that spearheaded the transformation of forest areas and rivers into sustainable tourist destinations. This step was taken as a real effort to stop various practices of destruction of nature, especially illegal logging activities that were previously rampant in the area [25][29].

The change in the role of the community from previously illegal logging to tourism managers has become a distinctive symbol of the region. This transformation shows a very meaningful shift in behavior while making a real contribution to strengthening the community-based tourism model [30]. This achievement makes Tangkahan a prototype for integrated ecotourism development, where the active involvement of local residents has a real impact on the preservation of Gunung Leuser National Park while encouraging regional income growth [26]. This method reflects the principle of sustainable development through the integration of natural resource management with the strengthening of the socio-economic aspects of the local population as well as efforts to preserve the ecosystem as a whole [31]. Therefore, this study is focused on comprehensively examining how strengthening the potential of Tangkahan ecotourism can play a key role as the main foundation in strengthening the economic resilience of the community in Langkat Regency through sustainable development schemes [31].

2. METHODS

Descriptive qualitative research is a methodological approach that focuses on the exploration and in-depth understanding of social phenomena through narratives and interpretations, rather than numerical data [32][33]. This method is designed to accurately describe phenomena, both natural and man-made, with the aim of understanding the meaning inherent in individual or group experiences [34]. The research was carried out through direct field observation to review the physical condition, attractions, and tourist supporting facilities. Primary data was obtained through *informal conversational interviews* with stakeholders, including area managers, local communities, and tourists to obtain in-depth information about the perceptions and realities of management in the field. In addition, the data is strengthened through documentation techniques that include an archive of area profiles, location maps, and other supporting records. This primary data was obtained through direct interaction with the source, which was then analyzed using a descriptive method [35][36].

This primary data is generally in the form of interview texts, obtained from research informants such as tourism office staff, community leaders, or community members [37]. This primary data collection technique through interviews allows researchers to ask questions adaptively and spontaneously, in order to obtain more in-depth information and criticize the answers given by the informant [38]. All collected data is then processed and analyzed using the SWOT (*Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats*) Analysis method. The analysis stage begins by identifying internal factors in the form of regional strengths and weaknesses, as well as external factors that include opportunities and threats faced. The results of the identification are then entered into the SWOT Matrix to synergize strengths and opportunities in order to minimize weaknesses and anticipate threats. Through this approach, the research aims to formulate a comprehensive and applicable development strategy for the sustainability of ecotourism in Tangkahan. This strategy planning technique, introduced by Albert S Humphrey in the 1960s, helps in formulating strategies based on existing conditions and evaluating improvements to the work programs that have been implemented [39][40]. This approach stems from research funded by the Fortune 500, aiming to identify the causes of business planning failures and develop strategic solutions [41]. Since then, SWOT analysis has developed rapidly and is widely adopted by

business and non-business organization leaders as well as researchers to understand internal and

external conditions [42].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the interview with the manager show that the "Unique Selling Value" (*Unique Selling Point*) Tangkahan lies in the integration between tourism and conservation. The development of ecotourism requires the identification of a unique selling proposition (USP) that distinguishes it from other destinations, because displaying all the advantages at once can make it difficult for the community to recognize tourist villages [43]. The manager emphasized that elephants are not just a spectacle, but a partner in forest patrols to prevent illegal logging. This potential is considered very high because it provides an emotional experience for tourists through direct interaction, such as bathing an elephant. However, the manager revealed that the constraints on the capacity of human resources in mastering foreign languages and digital marketing management are still limited.

Through informal conversations with tourists (especially foreign tourists), the potential of Tangkahan is assessed as an "Anti-Mainstream" destination. In the global context, the concept of "anti-mainstream" often refers to the rejection or

departure from the dominant norms, values, or practices in the international community, encompassing aspects such as politics, culture, and economics [44]. Tourists really appreciate the tranquility and authenticity of nature which is not too commercial compared to other destinations. They mentioned that river clarity and clean air are key assets. On the other hand, almost all tourists complain about accessibility (road conditions) that are severely damaged as the main inhibiting factor that can reduce the interest in repeat visits (*Revisit intention*).

Interviews with locals reveal the potential for an inclusive economy. The community feels the direct benefits by switching professions from forest loggers to tour guides, managers *Homestay*, or transportation service providers. This social potential is very strong because of the sense of belonging (*sense of ownership*) that are high relative to the area. However, the community hopes that there will be further guidance on the diversification of creative MSME products so that income does not only depend on guide services. This guidance is crucial considering that product diversification is an essential strategy for the sustainability of MSME businesses in the midst of ever-growing market dynamics [45][46].

Table 1. Weighting of the SWOT Rating of Ecotourism Development Strength Capture

Internal factors of strength	Weight	Rating	Score (BXR)
Unique Sumatran elephant icons	0,20	4	0,80
The authenticity of the TNGL ecosystem	0,15	4	0,60
Strong local community participation	0,15	3	0,45

The analysis internal factors in the aspect of strength show that Tangkahan Ecotourism has very solid resource capital with a total score of 1.85. The unique Sumatran elephant icon is the main force with the highest weight of 0.20 and a maximum rating of 4, resulting in a score of 0.80 which confirms Tangkahan's position as a competitive conservation destination at the global level. This is supported by the condition of the authenticity of the Gunung Leuser National Park

(TNGL) ecosystem which obtained a score of 0.60, indicating that the quality of the environment in the field is in the very prime category to support ecotourism activities. In addition to physical and fauna aspects, social strength in the form of strong local community participation also made a positive contribution with a score of 0.45, which reflects the stable community support for the sustainability of tourism development in the region.

Table 2. Weighting of SWOT Ratings of Ecotourism Development Weaknesses

Internal factors of weakness	Weight	Rating	Score (BXR)
Road access severely damaged	0,20	1	0,20
Lack of telecommunication network	0,15	2	0,30
Supporting facilities are not standard	0,15	2	0,30

Analysis of internal weakness factors shows that Tangkahan Ecotourism faces significant challenges with a total weakness score of 0.80. The main obstacle lies in the condition of heavily damaged road access, which has the highest weight of 0.20 but only gets a rating of 1, resulting in a low score of 0.20. This low score

indicates that transportation infrastructure is the most crucial weak point that can hinder the accessibility of tourists to the region. In addition, the lack of telecommunication networks and supporting facilities that have not met their respective standards contributed to a score of 0.30 with a rating of 2. This shows that the

limitations of digital connectivity and supporting infrastructure facilities in the field are still real

obstacles that limit the comfort of tourists while in these destinations.

Table 3. Weighting of the SWOT Rating of Ecotourism Development Capture opportunities

External factors of opportunity	Weight	Rating	Score (BXR)
Interest from foreign tourists is high	0,20	4	0.80
Regional tourism policy	0,15	3	0,45
Back to nature trends	0,15	3	0,45

The analysis of external factors shows that Tangkahan Ecotourism has very prospective development opportunities with a total score of 1.70. The high interest of foreign tourists is the main opportunity with a weight of 0.20 and a maximum rating of 4, which results in the highest score of 0.80. This indicates that the attraction of elephant conservation and the tropical forest of Tangkahan has a very high compatibility with the needs of the international market. This

opportunity is supported by regional tourism policies and *back-to-nature lifestyle trends* at the global level, each of which contributes a score of 0.45 with a rating of 3. The combination of these three factors confirms that the current external environment is very supportive of accelerating the development of Tangkahan as a leading ecotourism destination if it can be responded to with the right managerial strategy.

Table 4. Weighting of SWOT Ratings for Ecotourism Development Threat Capture

External factors of threat	Weight	Rating	Score (BXR)
Expansion of oil palm plantations	0,20	4	0.80
Competition with Lawing Hill	0,15	3	0,45
Risk of animal-human conflict	0,15	3	0,45

The analysis of external threat factors shows that Tangkahan Ecotourism faces serious environmental challenges and competition with a total threat score of 1.70. Oil palm plantation expansion is the most dominant threat with a weight of 0.20 and the highest rating of 4, resulting in a significant score of 0.80. This indicates that the pressure of land conversion around the region is the external factor that most threatens the integrity of the tourism ecosystem. Meanwhile, the competition factor with the destination of Bukit Lawang and the risk of conflict between animals and humans each contributed a score of 0.45 with a rating of 3. The high value of these threat factors requires a strong mitigation strategy, especially in maintaining forest corridors and increasing the competitiveness of destinations so that the sustainability of Tangkahan ecotourism is maintained in the midst of the dynamics of the external environment.

With the completion of the analysis of the four documents, the following is a recapitulation of the values for determining strategic positions: (1) Total Internal Score (IFAS): Strength Score (1.85) - Weakness Score (0.80) = 1.05 and (2) Total External Score (EFAS): Opportunity Score (1.70) - Threat Score (1.70) = 0.00. Position Conclusion: The calculation results show that the coordinates are at the point (1.05; 0.00). This puts Tangkahan Ecotourism right on the middle line between aggressive and diversified strategies.

4. CONCLUSION

The most recommended strategy is to use large internal forces (elephant icons and community support) to minimize the impact of external threats that are also high, especially oil palm plantation pressure. Despite having a very dominant internal force through the Sumatran elephant icon and the authenticity of the TNGL ecosystem, this development is overshadowed by equally great external threats, especially from the expansion of oil palm plantations. The main implication is that managers must use competitive advantages in the form of strong community participation to create a more progressive buffer zone system to minimize land conversion pressure. Operationally, development strategies must be focused on improving accessibility and connectivity aspects that have been crucial weak points. The use of opportunities from the high interest of foreign tourists and the trend of *back to nature* in the world will only be optimal if the heavily damaged road infrastructure is immediately repaired through advocacy for regional tourism policies. In addition, to face competition with similar destinations such as Bukit Lawang, Tangkahan must strengthen its positioning as a center for conservation education and animal-human conflict mitigation, so that the threat of competition can be transformed into a unique added value that attracts the special interest tourism market

Tangkahan Ecotourism has a very solid internal strength with a total strength score of

1.85. The unique Sumatran elephant icon is the main attraction (score 0.80), supported by the authenticity of the TNGL ecosystem (0.60) and the active participation of local communities (0.45). However, this development is still hampered by internal weaknesses in the form of heavily damaged road access (score 0.20) and limited communication networks and supporting facilities. Development opportunities are very wide open in line with the high interest of foreign tourists in conservation issues (score 0.80) and lifestyle trends back to *nature* in the world. Nonetheless, a serious threat arises from the expansion of oil palm plantations that have a high threat score (0.80), which has the potential to undermine the integrity of the region's ecosystem.

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