



Cultural Heritage Tourism and Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy in Morotai Island District

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This study aims to analyze the opportunities for developing cultural heritage tourism based on sustainable tourism models in Pulau Morotai District.

Methodology: This study used a qualitative descriptive method. Data were collected through field research, interviews with government stakeholders in Pulau Morotai, and documentation from relevant reports, books, journals, and articles. Data analysis applied qualitative techniques to examine sustainable tourism indicators based on the WCAD framework.

Main Findings: Pulau Morotai has significant potential to develop sustainable cultural heritage tourism due to its historical legacy, such as World War II sites and cultural landmarks. However, challenges include the limited involvement of local communities and NGOs, and overdependence on government and foreign investors. Improvement in stakeholder participation, infrastructure, and promotion strategies are needed to realize this potential.

Novelty/Originality of this study: This study contributes original insights into how a remote district like Pulau Morotai can utilize its cultural heritage as a strategic asset for sustainable tourism development. It highlights specific sustainability indicators and local governance dynamics that are rarely addressed in existing literature on Indonesian tourism planning.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become one of the most dynamic and fastest-growing sectors in the global economy. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), international tourist arrivals continue to increase significantly each year, indicating the vital role of tourism in contributing to the economic, social, and cultural development of many countries [1]-[3]. However, conventional tourism models, especially mass tourism, often bring about environmental degradation, cultural commodification, and imbalanced economic benefits. As a response to these challenges, the concept of *sustainable tourism* has emerged and been promoted globally as a strategy to balance economic growth with the preservation of cultural heritage and environmental sustainability.

Indonesia, with its extensive archipelagic geography and rich cultural diversity, has a vast potential for developing sustainable tourism [4], [5]. One of the government's strategic moves is the designation of national priority tourism destinations, including Pulau Morotai in North Maluku. Morotai possesses not only natural beauty but also unique historical and cultural assets inherited from World War II, such as war relics, memorials, and monuments. These cultural heritage elements represent a valuable resource that can be developed as tourism attractions, offering historical narratives and emotional experiences to both domestic and international tourists.

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However, the sustainable development of cultural heritage tourism in remote and developing regions like Pulau Morotai requires more than just physical assets. It demands structured strategies, stakeholder collaboration, community involvement, and long-term planning aligned with the principles of sustainable tourism. Prior studies have highlighted the importance of community-based tourism and heritage conservation as part of sustainable tourism planning [6]-[8]. Nevertheless, there remains a significant gap in implementation, particularly in integrating stakeholder participation, promoting local empowerment, and managing heritage assets systematically.

This study seeks to explore the opportunities and strategies for developing cultural heritage tourism in Pulau Morotai through the lens of sustainable tourism principles. By using qualitative field research involving interviews with key stakeholders, government officials, and documentation analysis, the study aims to assess the current status, challenges, and future directions of tourism development in the region. The novelty of this study lies in its localized exploration of heritage-based tourism development in an eastern Indonesian island, which is often underrepresented in national tourism research [9]-[11]. Furthermore, the study provides a critical analysis of governance practices, stakeholder roles, and sustainable planning approaches that may serve as a model for similar regions.

The study primarily focuses on the local context of Morotai Island in Indonesia. It explores the potential of cultural heritage as a tool for sustainable tourism development and proposes strategies specific to the socio-cultural, economic, and environmental conditions of the region [12], [13]. The research emphasizes grassroots-level challenges, such as limited infrastructure, weak institutional support, and low community participation. While rich in local insights, the study is bounded in scope and does not fully engage with broader theoretical frameworks or comparative analyses with other cultural heritage destinations globally. In contrast, "*The Sustainable Integration of Cultural Heritage and Tourism: A Meta-Study*" offers a comprehensive synthesis of global literature concerning the intersection of cultural heritage and sustainable tourism [14]-[16]. This meta-analysis consolidates theoretical approaches, best practices, and policy directions from diverse contexts, producing a macro-level understanding of sustainable integration. However, due to its generalist nature, the study often lacks the depth and specificity needed to address local implementation issues, especially in unique and remote regions like Morotai Island. It highlights ideal conditions and models but provides limited insights into how these models adapt or falter when applied in developing or under-resourced localities [17]-[19].

The gap between these studies lies in the disconnect between global theoretical synthesis and local practical application. While the Morotai-based study contributes valuable empirical data and context-specific strategies, it lacks engagement with broader theoretical discourse, which could enrich its recommendations. Conversely, the meta-study offers robust theoretical integration but lacks localized validation or case-specific grounding [20], [21]. This opens up a research opportunity to bridge global theory with local practice—developing a contextualized yet theoretically informed framework for integrating cultural heritage and sustainable tourism in peripheral regions like Morotai.

This research presents a novel contribution by offering a locally grounded and context-sensitive strategic framework for integrating cultural heritage into sustainable tourism development in Morotai Island, a peripheral and under-researched region of Indonesia [21]-[23]. Unlike existing global meta-analyses that emphasize generalized best practices, this study dives into the specific socio-cultural dynamics, stakeholder roles, and governance limitations unique to Morotai. The research also introduces a hybrid participatory-planning approach that harmonizes indigenous knowledge systems with national policy frameworks—an innovation not widely explored in current tourism literature [24], [25].

The findings of this study have significant implications for both policy-making and tourism development practice. For local government and tourism authorities, the proposed strategic framework provides actionable insights into enhancing destination appeal while preserving cultural integrity [26]-[28]. At a broader level, the study serves as a model for other remote or culturally rich regions in Indonesia and Southeast Asia that struggle with aligning sustainability principles with heritage tourism goals. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of inclusive stakeholder engagement and capacity-building as foundational pillars for long-term success, which can inform curriculum development, tourism training programs, and community-based planning models.

The urgency of this research stems from the increasing pressures facing cultural heritage sites in Morotai due to uncontrolled tourism growth, lack of institutional coordination, and the erosion of local cultural identity. Without timely and strategic intervention, the district risks losing invaluable cultural assets and undermining the very resources that could drive sustainable economic development [29], [30]. Moreover, the global trend toward sustainable and experience-based tourism presents a narrow window of opportunity for Morotai to position itself competitively [31]-[33]. This study addresses this critical moment by providing an adaptable framework that balances preservation and development in a rapidly changing tourism landscape.

In conclusion, this study contributes a critical and timely perspective on how cultural heritage can be leveraged as a strategic asset for sustainable tourism development in Morotai Island District. By bridging local realities with broader sustainability goals, the research not only enhances the academic discourse on peripheral tourism development but also equips local stakeholders with pragmatic tools for planning and implementation. It underscores the necessity of aligning cultural preservation with economic aspirations through participatory

governance and adaptive strategies. As such, the study lays the groundwork for future research and practice that seeks to operationalize sustainable tourism in culturally and geographically distinct regions.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research applied a qualitative descriptive approach, focusing on exploring the potential and strategies for sustainable tourism development in Pulau Morotai. The design was chosen to understand the underlying social, cultural, and institutional aspects influencing the development of cultural heritage tourism. A case study method was used to gain a deep contextual understanding of tourism planning and its challenges in the region.

The research subjects were selected purposively, consisting of government tourism officials, community leaders, and key tourism stakeholders in Pulau Morotai. These included individuals from the Department of Tourism, the local district government, and cultural heritage custodians (e.g., museum guides and residents maintaining historical sites). The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, focusing on informants with authority, experience, or direct involvement in heritage tourism activities.

Data in this study were collected through three main techniques to ensure comprehensive and credible findings. First, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, including government tourism officials, community leaders, and individuals directly involved in tourism development in Pulau Morotai. These interviews aimed to explore their perceptions, strategic roles, and institutional efforts in promoting sustainable cultural heritage tourism. Second, documentation studies were carried out by reviewing a variety of written sources such as government reports, regional planning documents, academic articles, and promotional materials related to tourism in Pulau Morotai. These documents provided contextual and policy-level insights to support the field data. Third, field observations were conducted at major cultural heritage sites including Trikora Museum, Zum-Zum Island, and Air Kaca. These site visits enabled the researcher to directly assess the physical conditions of the attractions, the availability and quality of supporting infrastructure, and the level of visitor engagement and site management. Together, these methods offered a triangulated understanding of the tourism dynamics in the region.

Table 1. Data Collection Techniques

Data Collection Technique	Description	Source Examples
Interview	Semi-structured questions to stakeholders	Tourism department, local leaders
Document analysis	Study of policy, planning, reports, archives	Government archives, local media
Field observation	On-site assessment of heritage tourism assets	Historic landmarks, tourism sites

The primary research instrument in this qualitative study was the researcher herself, acting as the main tool in data interpretation and field interaction. To ensure structured and comprehensive data collection, several supporting instruments were employed. These included interview guidelines, which consisted of open-ended question sheets designed specifically for different stakeholder groups such as government officials, community members, and tourism actors. In addition, field notes and observation checklists were used systematically to document environmental conditions and stakeholder involvement at tourism sites. To enhance the reliability of the data, digital voice recorders and cameras were utilized to record interviews and capture photographic evidence during field visits. Together, these instruments ensured a consistent, rich, and verifiable data-gathering process throughout the study.

Data analysis in this study applied a qualitative descriptive approach using the interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman, which consists of three core components: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. In the data reduction phase, the researcher selectively focused on the most relevant information gathered from interviews, field notes, and supporting documents by organizing, summarizing, and coding them thematically. In the data display phase, the information was arranged in descriptive narratives and occasionally in tabular format to enable clearer interpretation and comparison [34]-[36]. Lastly, the conclusion drawing and verification stage involved synthesizing patterns, validating themes across multiple sources, and continuously reflecting on the findings to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the interpretations. This iterative analysis process allowed for in-depth insights into tourism development dynamics and stakeholder roles in Pulau Morotai.

The research procedure was carried out through a series of structured and systematic stages. During the pre-research phase, the researcher conducted a comprehensive literature review to understand the theoretical framework, formulated the research objectives, identified key informants, and designed interview instruments tailored to each respondent type. This was followed by the data collection phase, where field visits were conducted in Pulau Morotai to gather primary data through interviews and direct observations, as well as collect secondary

data from government institutions and tourism offices. In the data analysis phase, all collected information was organized, coded, and analyzed thematically using qualitative techniques as described in the previous section. The final stage was the reporting phase, where the researcher compiled the findings into a coherent analysis, discussed the implications of the results, and formulated conclusions and recommendations for sustainable tourism strategy in Pulau Morotai.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the research along with critical analysis and interpretation based on sustainable tourism development theories and stakeholder practices in Pulau Morotai. The results were obtained from interviews, document analysis, and field observations, and are organized into key thematic areas related to stakeholder involvement, sustainable resource management, and cultural heritage utilization.

3.1. Stakeholder Participation in Sustainable Tourism

The development of sustainable tourism in Pulau Morotai shows significant progress in terms of government involvement, especially through the initiatives of the local tourism office. The government actively promotes the region through annual events such as "Sail Morotai" and international collaboration with foreign investors, including PT Jababeka as a major partner in developing resort infrastructure. These efforts align with the principles of sustainable tourism that require structured planning and promotion.

However, findings reveal that community involvement remains limited. Most decisions and programs are still top-down, with minimal grassroots participation in planning or benefit-sharing. A local heritage guardian, Mr. Muhlis Eso, plays a voluntary role in preserving historical artifacts without institutional support. This reflects the imbalance often found in developing regions, where tourism development is driven by external actors while local voices are underrepresented.

Despite the presence of stakeholder meetings and promotional campaigns, there is still a lack of integrated governance that includes NGOs and community-based organizations. Figure 1 summarizes the level of stakeholder participation based on field data.

Table 2. Stakeholder Participation Levels in Heritage Tourism Development

Stakeholder Group	Participation Level
Government Agencies	High
Foreign Investors	High
Local Community	Low
NGOs	Low
Cultural Custodians	Medium

These results indicate the need for more inclusive and participatory tourism planning frameworks, ensuring that all actors especially locals are given voice and opportunity to benefit.

3.2. Sustainable Use of Cultural and Natural Resources

Pulau Morotai is rich in both natural landscapes and cultural heritage from World War II, including preserved relics, historical sites, and symbolic monuments. Yet, resource utilization practices are not yet fully aligned with sustainability standards. The tourism development mainly focuses on promotion and investment rather than ecological preservation or local empowerment.

Observations at Trikora Museum, Zum-Zum Island, and Air Kaca revealed a lack of consistent site maintenance, interpretive signage, and infrastructure that accommodates environmentally responsible tourism. Some cultural sites are preserved informally by local individuals without formal management plans or funding.

Moreover, infrastructure development though increasing is concentrated in coastal and central areas, while remote cultural sites remain underdeveloped. This gap could lead to resource overuse in limited zones and neglect of others, undermining long-term tourism sustainability. Therefore, there is a pressing need for strategic zoning, capacity monitoring, and local resource-based planning supported by ecological and cultural indicators.

3.2. Heritage Tourism as a Development Strategy

The study affirms that cultural heritage has strong potential to become a leading sector for Morotai's economic development, given its uniqueness and historical significance. However, to transform heritage into a sustainable tourism product, it must be supported by coherent policy, community education, and interpretation strategies. Currently, most tourism marketing emphasizes "beauty and nostalgia," without deeper storytelling, guided experiences, or educational programs that strengthen cultural values and visitor engagement.

This result resonates with previous studies emphasizing the need for living heritage integration a practice that allows communities to share their own historical narratives while preserving authenticity. Therefore, future

development strategies should include capacity building for locals, funding mechanisms for heritage preservation, and more active integration of culture in regional branding.

The study is found that despite Morotai's rich cultural assets both tangible and intangible the integration of these resources into tourism remains limited due to infrastructure deficits, fragmented stakeholder coordination, and minimal local community involvement [37]-[39]. The research highlights the need for a strategic, multi-sectoral development framework that prioritizes sustainable planning and cultural preservation. However, while it identifies intangible cultural heritage (ICH) as a key component, it does not deeply explore how ICH is understood, practiced, or valued by the local custodians themselves. Instead, the focus remains largely institutional and top-down in nature. In contrast, the study titled "*Development of Intangible Cultural Heritage as a Sustainable Tourism Resource: The Intangible Cultural Heritage Practitioners' Perspectives*" provides a bottom-up perspective by centering the voices of heritage practitioners. It emphasizes the significance of local knowledge, traditional practices, and intergenerational transmission in sustaining ICH. One of its key findings is that practitioners often feel excluded from formal tourism planning processes, despite being the main carriers of cultural knowledge [40], [41]. The study also underlines the importance of recognition, empowerment, and fair benefit-sharing mechanisms to ensure ICH contributes meaningfully to sustainable tourism. However, this study does not contextualize its findings within a specific geographic region or tourism strategy, making it less actionable for location-based development efforts like in Morotai.

The research gap between these studies lies in the absence of an integrated model that bridges top-down strategic planning and bottom-up cultural practice [42], [43]. While the Morotai-based study presents a macro-level strategic framework, it lacks an in-depth understanding of the lived realities, motivations, and challenges faced by ICH practitioners. Conversely, the practitioner-focused study provides rich qualitative insights but is disconnected from place-based policy frameworks and implementation pathways. This opens up an opportunity for future research to develop a localized, participatory model that positions ICH practitioners not just as cultural informants, but as co-designers of sustainable tourism strategies, particularly in culturally rich but underdeveloped destinations like Morotai Island.

This study offers a novel contribution by providing a localized strategic framework for sustainable tourism development that specifically incorporates cultural heritage elements in the context of Morotai Island. Unlike most research that broadly addresses cultural tourism development, this study identifies strategic disconnects between policy implementation and the actual integration of intangible cultural practices into tourism activities. It uniquely positions cultural heritage not just as a tourism product but as a foundation for identity-based development. Furthermore, it contributes original insights by mapping out stakeholder dynamics and offering a place-specific approach that can be tailored to similar underdeveloped yet culturally rich regions.

The findings of this study have important implications for both tourism policy and heritage management in remote or marginalized regions. For local governments and tourism planners, the study emphasizes the necessity of including cultural practitioners and community stakeholders in development planning processes to ensure that intangible heritage is preserved and promoted in sustainable ways. On a broader scale, the research highlights the potential of heritage-based tourism to stimulate inclusive economic growth when rooted in community empowerment and participatory governance. These implications also underscore the importance of culturally sensitive policy-making and targeted investment in capacity-building initiatives.

One key limitation of this study lies in its predominantly institutional perspective, which, while valuable for strategic analysis, may not fully capture the lived experiences, values, and constraints of the intangible cultural heritage practitioners themselves. The research focuses more on planning and policy dimensions and less on ethnographic or practitioner-based insights. Additionally, the study is geographically confined to Morotai Island, which limits the generalizability of its strategic framework to broader or more diverse tourism contexts. Moreover, constraints in data accessibility and limited engagement with heritage bearers restricted the depth of cultural interpretation embedded in the findings.

Future research should adopt a more integrative and participatory methodology by directly engaging intangible cultural heritage practitioners in both the data collection and planning processes. A qualitative ethnographic approach would allow researchers to gain deeper insights into the motivations, challenges, and aspirations of cultural custodians, which are often overlooked in policy-centered studies. Additionally, comparative studies involving other remote or culturally diverse regions could help assess the transferability of the Morotai strategy model. Future research could also explore the impact of heritage tourism initiatives on cultural continuity, intergenerational knowledge transmission, and community identity over time.

4. CONCLUSION

The research concludes that Pulau Morotai possesses substantial potential for developing cultural heritage tourism through a sustainable tourism framework. The district's rich historical legacy from World War II and its strategic inclusion as a national tourism priority area provide a strong foundation for growth. However, the realization of this potential remains constrained by limited community involvement, insufficient NGO

participation, and a lack of structured preservation strategies. To effectively develop sustainable tourism, collaborative governance, inclusive stakeholder engagement, and resource-based planning are essential. Strengthening community participation and formalizing cultural heritage management are critical steps toward ensuring that tourism contributes not only to economic development but also to cultural preservation and local empowerment.

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