

Showcasing The Uniqueness Of A Marine Destination By Adopting Local Wisdom

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Abstract. *Development based on local wisdom and indigenous practices can be particularly effective since local wisdom is often the only asset the local people control, and certainly one with which they are very familiar. Yet, literature on marine tourism development shows a scarcity of studies that draw from local wisdom, even though local community participation is underlined as one of the most important factors in successful marine tourism development. This paper explores the role of adopting local wisdom and indigenous practices in marine tourism development in showcasing the uniqueness of marine tourism destinations, with the case study of Misool, Raja Ampat, Indonesia. Misool is one of the islands in Raja Ampat which attracts marine tourists from around the world due to its abundance marine life. Using a conversational method for data collection, this paper analyzes how the integration of local wisdom and indigenous practices in tourism takes place and how tourists appreciate them. Findings from conversations with local people who worked as tour guides and dive guides show that the guests expressed appreciation when being asked to follow specific things according to their local wisdom and indigenous practices when visiting some of the tourist attractions or dive sites. Some of their guests stated that Misool is unique because of these practices. These findings reveal that adopting local wisdom and indigenous practices in a marine tourism destination emphasizes the uniqueness of the place. Moreover, the unique culture of the local community can also be an added value to the total tourism experience.*

Keywords. *Uniqueness; Marine destination; Local wisdom*

INTRODUCTION

With the force of globalization, the tourism development needs to focus on its positive attribute which is improving a stronger sense of cultural identity of the local people (Macleod, 2013). The relationships built between tourists and the local community, consequently impacting the community, local economy, and community's ideas and attitudes. These relationships can increase the local community's awareness of their own distinct features in connection with tourists from outside their area, hence "a stronger sense of local identity might develop" (ibid.: 196). Identity makes a destination unique, and it reflects in the tourist attractions, whether it is the people, the place, or the custom and traditions. One of the traditions that have been passed on from generation to generation is the local wisdom. Besides local wisdom, there are other terms used interchangeably in the context of indigenous communities, such as: "indigenous knowledge", "local knowledge", "folk knowledge", and "traditional knowledge" (Mistry, 2009, p. 371). Local wisdom or indigenous knowledge can be broadly defined as "the knowledge that an indigenous community accumulates over generations of living in a particular environment. This definition encompasses all forms of knowledge – technologies, know-how skills, practices, and beliefs – that enable the community to achieve stable livelihoods in their environment" (United Nations Environment Programme, 2007, para. 1). It is also defined as a set of perceptions, information, and behaviours that guide local

community members' uses of land and natural resources which accumulates over generations of living and interacting with a particular environment, that enable the community to maintain stable livelihoods in their environment (World Wildlife Fund, n.d.; United Nations Inter-Agency Support Group on Indigenous Peoples' Issues, 2014; Semali and Kincheloe, 1999). Indigenous knowledge is integral to a cultural complex that also encompasses language, systems of classification, resource use practices, social interactions, ritual and spirituality (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2016). These unique ways of knowing are important facets of the world's cultural diversity (ibid.). This view is supported by Labelle who highlights "just as the world needs genetic diversity of species, it needs diversity of knowledge systems" (as cited in Ngulube, 2002: 96).

In addition to economic, geographic, and political backgrounds as central foundations of development, cultural background has also been perceived as another fundamental factor in tourism development (Nuryanti, 2016). It is important to maintain equilibrium of local people's economic benefits and cultural ethics (Salazar, 2012), as well as of cultural promotion and preservation (United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2018). Cultural features of local people also influence the forms of their participation in tourism development (Timothy, 1999). Adapting indigenous culture of the local people addresses general problems with local approaches (Nuryanti, 2016) in "culturally sensitive ways" (Salazar, 2012, p. 19), while preserving the indigenous culture at the same time (Lynch, Duinker, Sheehan, & Chute, 2010). Since local wisdom and indigenous practices play an important role in shaping ethnic identity (Vos, 2006), the utilisation of local wisdom and indigenous practices in marine tourism development may emphasise uniqueness related to tangible and intangible values symbolised by place, along with its specific geographic location.

One objective that is constantly shared in community-based tourism development is long term sustainability by involving indigenous people in the existing tourism development (Hinch and Butler, 1996, 2007). In establishing successful empowerment of the indigenous people, it is important to make sure that indigenous people are provided with sufficient knowledge about tourism and negotiation skills, and guaranteed access to economic resources (Ramos and Prideaux, 2014). In a study of indigenous ecotourism operators in New Zealand, Carr (2007) suggested that indigenous ecotourism business could offer not only the economic benefits, but also the nourishment of personal cultural identity by connecting with ancestral land. This cultural identity influenced the ecotourism product development and the cultural values of the indigenous land completed the holistic tourist experience. The chance to work on their

indigenous lands was a privilege for the indigenous people where they could share their indigenous perspectives and personal identity of their cultural heritage as a part of natural and cultural landscape experiences. Relating personal family or tribal history to visitors was viewed as a chance to acknowledge their identity and sense of place by conveying their ancestral and spiritual connections with culturally important lands. Statements of identity were also used in marketing which could highlight their uniqueness and increase their sense of pride.

The rapid change in the way of life of local communities has largely accounted for the loss of indigenous knowledge (Ngulube, 2002). Indigenous peoples will always be challenged by the impact of globalization and existing modern colonization in the 21st century, and it is something that they have to cope with in developing local approaches of problem solving by using local wisdom as the foundation (Semali & Kincheloe, 1999). By using local wisdom and indigenous practices, indigenous peoples can preserve their unique culture, which could lead to strengthening their local identity and showcasing their uniqueness. The recognition of the ancestral community knowledge becomes an important factor in terms of strengthening self-esteem and ethnic socio-cultural identity (Trueba, as cited in Ortiz, 2007). This view is supported by Smith and Richards (2013) who argue that the utilization of local culture in tourism can potentially increase local people's self-esteem and their sense of pride in their unique culture and identity.

In regard to the marine tourism context, the unique heritage and cultural features of local communities in coastal areas are indeed becoming more promising components in marine tourism development (J. C. Wilson and Garrod, 2003). The use of local wisdom and indigenous practices can be of paramount importance to maintain a sustainable relationship between the local people with their marine environment (Garrod and Wilson, 2003), as well as to highlight the unique cultural identity of the local community (Vos, 2006). The importance of using indigenous knowledge in marine ecotourism development is also supported by C. Cater and E. Cater (2007: 126) who stated:

The incorporation of indigenous knowledge in marine ecotourism is vitally important. Not only can it present an alternative approach to environmental management, often constituting a more holistic overview, but also it can constitute an important resource for marine ecotourism.

Local wisdom and beliefs, along with indigenous practices, values, lifestyles, traditions, crafts, performing arts, and artefacts, are parts of cultural resources that can become important resources for marine tourism. Not only they provide a deeper understanding of traditional livelihoods, but they also serve as a means of maintaining and strengthening cultural identity, creating a sense of pride, highlighting the uniqueness, and therefore empowering and

facilitating the preservation of indigenous culture (C. Cater and E. Cater, 2007). These cultural resources can bring uniqueness in marine tourism products and also indicate the inseparable connection between natural resources and cultural practices, as believed by some indigenous people. This holistic view of nature of the indigenous culture is very different from the western point of view (Berkes, 2012), which potentially creates uniqueness in marine tourism destinations.

The local community's participation has always been highlighted as an important principle of marine tourism development; preferably through significant contribution in every aspect of its development and at each stage of decision making in planning, managing, and monitoring (Garrod & Wilson, 2003). For marine tourism to become effective, local involvement has to be set as a central attribute. This will increase the sense of belonging of the local community, which is necessary to make marine tourism practice works in the long run (ibid.). In the same vein, this study aims to provide approaches for a sustainable marine tourism development by adopting local community's wisdom and indigenous practices, which can shape local identity and bring uniqueness in marine destinations.

One of the activities of marine tourism is scuba diving (J. C. Wilson & Garrod, 2003), which is considered to be one of the fastest growing sectors in tourism trade (UNWTO, 2001). Each scuba diving destination has its own uniqueness, so it is important to look at the things that differentiate one destination from another by asking who we are and what we have to offer (Krauskopf, 2014). It is crucial for the scuba diving industry to be involved with the local community and be aware of the issues that affect the destination because both parties are using the shared resources of the shared community. For that reason, the scuba diving industry needs to respect the local community. Moreover, the unique culture of the local community can also be a part of the total diving experience. According to L. J. Wilson (2014), it is not uncommon where the dive is not the only highlight on a dive trip. When divers start to explore the cultural area of the community, the experience of learning about another culture can make a difference in forming the total diving experience and in creating a positive image as being a unique diving destination (Jones and Shimlock, 2014).

Located in the heart of the Coral Triangle within the West Papua Province of Indonesia, Raja Ampat is currently listed in UNESCO's World Natural Heritage Tentative List. Its outstanding universal values consist of exceptional habitat diversity and rich fish fauna, the good condition of the reef compared to most other parts of Indonesia, as well as a superb aesthetic value on both above water and underwater sceneries (UNESCO-World Heritage

Centre, 2017). Raja Ampat has been renowned over the years and is simultaneously becoming one of the most revered marine tourism destinations in the world, due to its phenomenal variety of marine life (McKenna, Allen, & Suryadi, 2002). Misool is one of the islands in south Raja Ampat, which is known for its rich marine biodiversity, making it one of the best marine destinations for snorkelling and scuba diving. The island's population of 10,162 is spread over four sub-districts: Misool, South Misool, West Misool, and East Misool (Statistics Bureau of Raja Ampat District, 2016). The indigenous communities in Misool consist of *Matbat* or People of the Mountain and *Matlou* or People of the Sea. The majority of residents earn their income by fishing or through employment at Yellu Mutiara Pearl Farm that was opened in Misool in 1994. Tourism was first introduced in 2008 when a resort was opened in South Misool, continued by the opening of the first locally owned homestay in Misool in 2011, also located in South Misool. Domestic and international tourists come to Misool for scuba diving, snorkelling, and sightseeing or island-hopping.

METHOD

The fieldwork was conducted in five tourism villages in Misool, Raja Ampat, Indonesia. Its aim was to investigate best practice approaches in incorporating local wisdom and indigenous practices into marine tourism development. This study was qualitative, where the researcher was cognizant of indigenous research issues. Indigenous methodology is a methodology that focuses on “relational accountability” (S. Wilson, 2001: 177) where cultural protocols, beliefs, and values become integral parts of the methodology (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012) and the research methods and measures are tailored to the culture of the research participants (Chilisa, 2012). Thus, one of the methods applied was conversational method as it is compatible with indigenous methodology (Kovach, 2010).

The conversational method is “a means of gathering knowledge found within Indigenous research, based on oral story telling tradition congruent with an indigenous paradigm” (Kovach, 2010: 40). This kind of method fits well with indigenous epistemology because a relationship is built when relating to a personal narrative (S. Wilson, 2001). The conversational method praises orality as a way of conveying knowledge and supports the relationship which is important to maintain a collective tradition. Telling story, through conversation, is an interpersonal process that is associated with specific procedure consistent with local wisdom and indigenous practices identified as guiding the research (Kovach, 2010).

During the fieldwork, 47 participants were recruited including local people who worked in tourism sector and villagers. The conversations created dialogues with participants regarding their local wisdom and indigenous practices, how they integrate their local wisdom and indigenous practices into tourism development, and how their guests appreciate the use of local wisdom and indigenous practices in tourism. Kovach (2009) suggests that indigenous methodology has to have a strong narrative component as part of its method and presentation of findings, as narration is methodologically well-suited with indigenous subjects. Moreover, S. Wilson (2008) proposes the method used in analysis in indigenous research has to complement the data collection method. For the above reasons, both field notes and transcriptions were being analysed using narrative analysis with thematic approach (Bamberg, 2012; Slembrouck, 2015) to explore participants' viewpoints around the topic.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All of the local participants (35 people) indicated the importance of keeping their traditions alive. These traditions and values were formed by the knowledge, perceptions, information, and behaviours they obtained over generations from living in a particular marine environment. Some of these traditions have translated into indigenous practices such as asking permission when visiting certain marine tourism sites. The *Misoolese* people believe every place has its own guardian spirit, especially in caves and uninhabited islands, as one participant said:

[I believe every] land has its occupant, let alone an empty island. ... So we have to introduce ourselves, even though we can't see them. But they [land, an empty island] do have at least one [invisible] occupant, like *tuan tanah* [landlord]. So we are obliged to introduce ourselves to them. ... We have to ask permission by taking the sand with a finger then put it on our forehead. It's like asking permission from the spirits to enter their area and that we, in Misool, appreciate our traditions. I got this [tradition] from my parents and elders. We don't want this kind of thing disappears. The consequence [for not doing this] is if someone said [or did] the wrong thing [that offended the spirits], he/she will suffer. So before we enter [the place] we have to introduce ourselves, ask for permission. (local tour guide, conversation, October 10, 2015)

Indigenous knowledge is a cultural system where spirituality plays a big part of its integrality (Appiah-Opoku, 2007). Indigenous beliefs in the spirits have been studied by many scholars from different fields (e.g. Robbins, 2004; Ntiamoa-Baidu, 2008; Kaartinen: 2016). One of the three kinds of spirits that was studied by Kaartinen in Eastern Indonesia is the guardian spirit which is the "owners' or 'guardians' of trees, springs, and various sites in the forest and along the coast" (2016: 220). The above findings show that indigenous people of Misool, which is located in Eastern Indonesia, do too believe in these guardian spirits. In the

above narrative, the local tour guide used the word “*tuan tanah*” (landlord) to describe the spirit who guards the land or the empty island. This idea is consistent with that of Kaartinen (2016) who suggested that the overall concept of spirits as *tuan tanah* (landlord) indicates the belief of Eastern Indonesians that places and landscapes are not only owned by humans, but also owned by spirits.

The local tour guide then explained how he integrated this indigenous practices into his work as a tour guide:

Every time we [my guests and I] go to an island or a cave for the first time, I always ask them to grab the sand with their finger then put it on their forehead to ask permission from the spirits to enter their area. ... I explained to them that we are obliged to introduce ourselves to the spirits; [like] you cannot just enter someone else’s ‘house’ without permission. You have to ask permission by putting the sand on your forehead. It’s like a permission that you have arrived in Misool and you have to respect *Misoolese* custom and tradition. ... I also introduce my guests to the spirits, speaking [quietly] in *Misoolese* saying “grandfather, grandmother, I am your grandson. These are my guests, they came nicely, please don’t let any disturbance happens to them”. That’s something that we need to communicate to them. ... I apply this to tourists who visit the Crying Princess Cave, Banos [island], the Sacred Cave. ... This tradition was from my elders. I won’t let it disappears. (local tour guide, conversation, October 10, 2015)

He continued telling a story about how his guests appreciate this practice:

During dinner yesterday, one of my guests told me that he thought what I made them do [grab the sand with a finger then put it on the forehead] was so unique. He said he has been to north Raja Ampat several times and visited some marine sites, but the local people there never made him do that. He told me, “I think that what makes Misool special..., different than north Raja Ampat. People here still hold their indigenous culture strongly. Please don’t ever lose that, because that is a part of *Misoolese* identity and that what makes you unique”. (ibid.)

The above findings support those observed in earlier studies. Carr (2007) explored the relationship between New Zealand’s Maori nature tourism businesses with the land. Relating personal family or tribal history to visitors was viewed as a chance to acknowledge their identity and sense of place by conveying their ancestral and spiritual connections with culturally important lands. The *Misoolese* tour guide was conveying his ancestral and spiritual connections with culturally important lands to his guests, by asking and explaining to his guests about “ask permission from the spirits”, which was highly appreciated by the guests as something unique that represents *Misoolese* identity. This resonates with the importance of the preservation of local wisdom and indigenous practices as Vos (2006) suggest local wisdom and indigenous practices can shape the community’s identity and bring out the uniqueness of the place.

Another participant, a local dive guide, commented on the importance of asking permission from the spirits before going scuba diving, which he too applies to his guests:

My parents and elders reminded me that [when scuba diving] I will go down to another world that is not human world, so I have to respect that. ... So before I decided to become a dive guide, I have already learned those things and asked my parents. Because this [under the sea] is a different world, this is not my world, this is the fish' world, which can give me livelihood. So I have to think about the spirits that take care of that world. That is my guideline. ... In the old days, what our elders did was throwing coins into the sea. It's a symbol of sharing what you get with the spirits of underwater world. ... [Doing] that is also for safety, that the underwater spirits will keep them safe. So now, I also do the same. When I take my scuba diver guests to places that my parents said are like sacred, like in Balbulol, I always bring coins with me. Just before we get out of the boat, I give each guest a coin and ask them to 'talk' to the coin with their own belief, and then throw it into the sea. The key is to speak [to the spirits]. We pray for our safety. Before we start diving, I always speak to them in *Misoolese*: "these [coins] are a part of my sustenance that I share with you. Please do not harm my guests. They are good people, they came here just to see. Hopefully in the future they will bring more people to come". Every guest that I took scuba diving with me never had any accidents; in fact, they'd be more curious and said they wanted to come back. (local dive guide, conversation, November 19, 2015) [emphasis added]

Such findings display the utilization of *Misoolese* local wisdom and indigenous practices in scuba diving tourism. The way the local dive guide incorporates the indigenous practice of throwing coins into the sea before diving demonstrates his way of maintaining relationship between him and his natural and spiritual environment. As mentioned earlier, Garrod and Wilson (2003) acknowledge the vital importance of integrating local wisdom and indigenous practices in marine tourism to maintain a harmonious relationship between the local communities and their marine environment, which includes natural and spiritual environment. Maintaining a harmonious relationship with the spirits is viewed as a holistic approach in marine tourism development in an area where indigenous people live (C. Cater and E. Cater: 2007). The scuba divers who came to Misool became "more curious" when they were asked to follow the procedure, hence they "wanted to come back". These findings further support the idea of adopting local wisdom and indigenous practices in marine tourism can create a different experience for marine tourists, which can generate a good image for the place as being a unique marine destination (L. J. Wilson, 2014; Jones and Shimlock, 2014). The uniqueness that the scuba divers experienced when diving in Misool made them wanted to come back as the *Misoolese* people displayed their identity (Krauskopf, 2014) through the practice of their local wisdom.

CONCLUSION

This study found that adopting local wisdom and indigenous practices in marine tourism development emphasizes the local identity in Misool, Raja Ampat, which showcased the uniqueness of the place. By asking the guests to follow specific things according to the local indigenous practices when visiting some of the tour/dive sites, the guests could experience

fascinating insights into Misool's local wisdom and indigenous practices, which represents its uniqueness and identity. In line with Vos (2006) and Carr (2007), the findings showed that the utilization of local wisdom and indigenous practices strengthen indigenous people's identity and sense of place by conveying their ancestral and spiritual connections to visitors. The findings also provide evidence of the importance of using local wisdom and indigenous practices in marine tourism development, not only in maintaining the holistic relationship between the indigenous people with their marine environment (Garrod and Wilson, 2003; C. Cater and E. Cater, 2007), but also in shaping the identity and uniqueness of a marine tourism destination (Krauskopf, 2014; Jones and Shimlock, 2014).

As was mentioned in the introduction, statements of cultural identity are used in marketing which could highlight the uniqueness of the tourism destination and increase the sense of pride of the local people. In the era of digital transformation, "boosting technological adoption in tourism" (UNWTO, 2023, para. 2) becomes one of the strategies of the UNWTO "to offer innovative solutions and promote development, taking into account local communities as well as natural and cultural heritage" (ibid., para. 4). These statements suggest the importance of promoting not only the natural beauty of a tourism destination but also the cultural heritage of the local community, through digital marketing. In the case of Misool, tourism operators should include information on Misool's local wisdom and indigenous practices in their websites and social media platforms to showcase Misool's uniqueness as one of the leading marine destinations in Indonesia.

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