



## Community Movement to Transform the Paradigm from Illegal Logger to Eco-lodger with a Dignity Oriented in Tangkahan Ecovillage

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### Abstract

*This research explores a community movement in Tangkahan Ecovillage, Indonesia, driven by a desire to safeguard their local ecology with dignity at the forefront. The study delves into the mechanisms and outcomes of this shift in approach through a case study, offering insights into community-driven efforts for sustainable forestry practices. It underscores the significance of grassroots movements in advocating for environmental conservation while prioritizing the well-being and respect of local residents. The movement seeks to transform people's perceptions by replacing destructive illegal logging with sustainable eco-logging methods. Through a case study methodology, the research investigates the motivations, strategies, and challenges faced by the community in this transformative process. By examining how the movement empowers the community and instills a sense of ownership over natural resources, the concept of dignity emerges as a central theme. The analysis of Tangkahan's journey in this study aims to provide a replicable model for transitioning from illegal-logging to eco-logging, promoting environmental sustainability and community welfare.*

**Keywords:** *Community Movement, Dignity Oriented, Eco-lodging, Illegal Logging, Tangkahan Ecovillage.*

### INTRODUCTION

The practice of global capitalism as it pertains to the tourism industry has been the subject of considerable criticism from academics and tourism stakeholders alike. This is due to the fact that the activities associated with this practice raise concerns about the sustainability of nature, the well-being of people, and the quality of life for future generations (Winchenbach et al., 2019). Furthermore, the destructive power of the exploitation of nature, people, and available resources is intensified by the lack of awareness and responsibility of tourism stakeholders and capitalist actors to address these issues. The exploitation of natural resources has resulted in significant damage to forests, water reserves, carbon emissions, and air quality. Additionally, the exploitation of human resources, including modern slavery, inadequate labor wages, long working hours, and job demands that are not commensurate with income, has led to a prevalence of depression among tourism workers (Camargo et al., 2022). That reason becomes highlights how the focus on economic gain often leads to the exploitation of nature and human resources, damaging the environment and negatively impacting worker well-being through poor labor practices. The text underscores serious concerns about sustainability and the quality of life for present and future generations, exacerbated by a lack of stakeholder responsibility.

Research shows a positive correlation between ecotourism initiatives in tourist villages and enhanced well-being, economic growth, and increased community purchasing power. Ecotourism provides a sustainable income source, empowering communities and creating employment opportunities in sectors like hospitality and local crafts. This leads to improved living standards, healthcare, education, and housing. (Winchenbach et al., 2019) However, it's crucial to balance the benefits of ecotourism with the potential drawbacks of consumerism. By encouraging responsible tourism practices that prioritize local

well-being and environmental sustainability, ecotourism can contribute to the economy and social fabric of tourist villages, ensuring equitable benefits for all residents. (Rundshagen et al., 2023)

According to I Gede Ardika (Ardika, 2018) in his book *Sustainable Tourism* provides criticism of the old paradigm applied in tourism activities, in his criticism he proclaimed four new paradigms that emphasize human rights in the management and arrangement of tourism destinations. Among them are (1) a new paradigm that emphasizes that tourism is a human right, this opposes the old concept that glorifies that tourism is an industry where the stigma has recently been attached to efforts to exploit and reduce the quality of tourism. (2) Focus on achieving the goal of a quality life, not only for tourists but also for tourism workers, both parties must equally feel happiness and achieve a quality life, not only from the economic aspect but enjoy life based on their respective roles. (3) Focus on building understanding between nations, strong friendships are formed between tourists and tourism workers, this makes the motivation of tourism workers not only reap as much money as possible from tourists, but provide a strong quality of interaction between both. (4) sustainable tourism must focus on environmental preservation and poverty alleviation, this opposes the old paradigm of exploitation of nature, human resources and economic resources.

Research on dignity-oriented ecotourism is crucial to ensure it not only offers economic benefits but also contributes to equitable, sustainable, and inclusive development. This approach acknowledges and upholds the rights, cultures, and traditions of local communities, fostering meaningful engagement between tourists and residents. (Caton, 2016) It also emphasizes the need for equitable distribution of economic benefits, involving local communities in decision-making processes. This inclusivity can enhance cultural heritage and environmental stewardship. Integrating dignity into ecotourism can create a more robust industry, enhancing visitor experience, community resilience, social cohesion, and long-term sustainability of the environment and local economy. This approach can serve as a model for responsible and ethical tourism practices globally. (Manurung et al., 2024). Moreover, the dignity approach in ecotourism emphasizes the importance of respecting the rights of local communities and ensuring their benefit from tourism activities. This entails recognizing local knowledge, culture, and traditional practices as an integral component of the tourism experience. Research findings indicate that community involvement in decision-making and natural resource management can foster a sense of ownership and responsibility for the environment (Camargo et al., 2022)

Tangkahan Ecovillage is situated within the boundaries of Namo Sialang Village, Batang Serangan District, Langkat Regency, North Sumatra Province. This region is included within the boundaries of the protected zone, as it remains within the confines of the Gunung Leuser National Park (GNLP) area. The Tangkahan Ecovillage, located within the Gunung Leuser National Park (GLNP) in North Sumatra, exemplifies the transformative potential of dignity-oriented ecotourism. Before 2000, the region faced severe environmental degradation due to illegal logging, wildlife poaching, and land encroachment (Aina Rahmayani & Sabam Syahputra Manurung, 2022). However, since 2002, Tangkahan has emerged as a pioneering example of community-led transformation—from illegal loggers to sustainable ecotourism managers. This shift not only revived the local economy but also instilled a collective environmental consciousness, aligning with the principles of dignity-oriented development. The ecovillage's 22-year journey offers a unique lens to examine how ecotourism can reconcile conservation with livelihood security while restoring community pride and agency. Tangkahan's relevance lies in its proven ability to address the core challenges of dignity-oriented ecotourism: From Exploitation to Empowerment: Its transition from illegal logging to ecotourism mirrors global struggles to balance conservation and poverty alleviation. Participatory Governance: CBT/CTO structures exemplify inclusive decision-making, a pillar of the dignity framework. Cultural-Environmental Synergy: The community's integration of traditional knowledge with conservation efforts offers replicable insights for other protected areas. By centering Tangkahan's story, this research highlights how dignity is not merely an abstract ideal but a actionable foundation for sustainable tourism.

The success of Tangkahan hinges on the role of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) and Community Tour Operators (CTOs), which democratize ecotourism management and service delivery. This research investigates how dignity is cultivated among local participants, examining two key dimensions: (1) the *mindset shift* from exploitative practices to environmental stewardship, and (2) the *actions* of communities in conserving ecosystems while servicing tourists. By analyzing Tangkahan's model, this study seeks to uncover the forms of dignity displayed by locals—whether through cultural preservation, equitable participation, or ethical visitor interactions—and how these practices sustain both ecological and socio-economic resilience. How is the existence of community based tourism (CBT) and community tour operators (CTO) in managing and implementing ecotourism and providing services to tourists. This

becomes interesting to research. More importantly, this research tries to explore the transformation of the mindset and actions of the community in developing ecotourism, environmental conservation, and serving tourists, whether it is based on dignity. This research aims to find out whether dignity is built in local people who participate in ecotourism in Tangkahan and to find out how the form of dignity displayed by local people who participate in ecotourism in Tangkahan.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study explores the challenges faced by the Tangkahan Tourism Village community in transform the paradigm from illegal logging to eco-lodging, using a dignity oriented. The research employs qualitative methods, including participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. The Participatory Action Research (PAR) model is employed to engage community members in a transformative process, promoting collaboration and empowerment. The community is encouraged to develop practical solutions that reflect their unique circumstances and aspirations. Workshops and focus group discussions provide platforms for brainstorming ideas and envisioning a future where eco-lodging thrives. This collaborative dialogue aligns with the community's values, cultural heritage, and dignity-oriented approach (Munday J, 2020).

The PAR model encourages real-time adjustments and adaptations based on feedback and outcomes, ensuring the transformation is sustainable and rooted in the community's goals and aspirations. The study's Participatory Action Research model not only documents the community's struggles but also empowers them to be active agents of change. By fostering collaboration, ownership, and dignity, the research aims to create a pathway for the community to reclaim their identity, preserve their environment, and build a prosperous future through eco-lodging.

PAR prioritizes co-learning, empowerment, and iterative reflection, aligning with the study's goal of fostering community-led solutions. Below is how each method—interviews, participant observation, and document analysis—is implemented and analyzed within the PAR framework: (1.) Data Collection Methods using In-Depth Interviews (Collaborative Dialogue) with the Semi-structured process interviews are conducted with key stakeholders (former loggers, eco-lodge operators, CTO members, and GLNP officials). Questions focus on their lived experiences, perceived dignity in ecotourism, and challenges in transitioning livelihoods. And next with the PAR Integration process to interviews are designed and refined with community members during workshops to ensure cultural relevance. Participants are invited to co-interpret findings in follow-up focus groups, reducing researcher bias and privileging local voices. (2.) Participant Observation (Embedded Engagement) using process researchers immerse in daily activities (e.g., guiding tourists, lodge operations, conservation efforts) to document behaviors, interactions, and conflicts. Next using PAR Integration how observation are recorded in journals and shared with the community for validation. And how to discrepancies between stated values (e.g., dignity) and observed practices are discussed collectively to identify systemic barriers. (3.) Document Analysis (Co-Constructed Context) using process review of meeting minutes, CBT policies, tourism reports, and historical records on illegal logging. And how to PAR Integration with the community members help select and critique documents, ensuring alignment with their priorities. Past decisions (e.g., ecotourism rules) are revisited in workshops to assess their dignity implications.

## FUNDING AND DISCUSSION

### Profile Tangkahan Ecovillage

Tangkahan Ecovillage is nestled within the breathtaking Gunung Leuser National Park (GLNP), the largest protected area in Southeast Asia. This 1,095,192-hectare area is home to a gorgeous stretch of protected forest that spans the provinces of North Sumatra and Aceh. The lovely folks at Tangkahan Tourism Institute and the kind folks at Gunung Leuser National Park have come together to create the Tangkahan Ecotourism Area! This special designation helps to clarify the boundary of the management area within the scope of the cooperation agreement (Memorandum of Understanding) signed by the two parties on April 22, 2002 and July 23. In 2006, it expanded to 17,500 ha, in line with the 2004 Minister of Forestry Regulation on working together to conserve nature and make the most of the amazing environmental services that GLNP has to offer (LPT, 2006)(Objek et al., 2022).

This lovely area at the source of the Batang Serangan River and Bulu River is a wonderful tourist destination that's all about wildlife conservation, forest preservation, and enjoying the great and fresh nature. Tangkahan is known as a conservation area for wild Sumatran elephants through the Conservation Response Unit (CRU). And also the attractions of tangkahan ecotourism are such as: tropical forest

expeditions, a beautiful and calm natural atmosphere, tubing at the river, interacting with elephants and enjoying local culinary specialties. Because of that many media : both foreign and local media call the term tangkahan as “the hidden paradise in north sumatera”



**Figure 1.** Site in Tangkahan Ecovillage  
*Source : Befor Monday Document*

Tangkahan Ecovillage began to show its potential after being developed in a pentahelix and integrated manner by many stakeholders. Stakeholders who play a role include GNLP management, Indonesian Ecotourism Network (INDECON), Fauna Flora International, Conservation International, as well as UNESCO, the ministry of tourism, local government and local communities. Assessment and development was carried out gradually from 2000 to 2006, and many other parties were involved in helping and supporting the Tangkahan Tourism Institute (LPT) to be independent. In February 2004, Tangkahan tourism attraction launched an ecotourism package and began the adventure of selling this ecovillage to domestic and foreign tourists.(Syahputra Manurung, 2023).



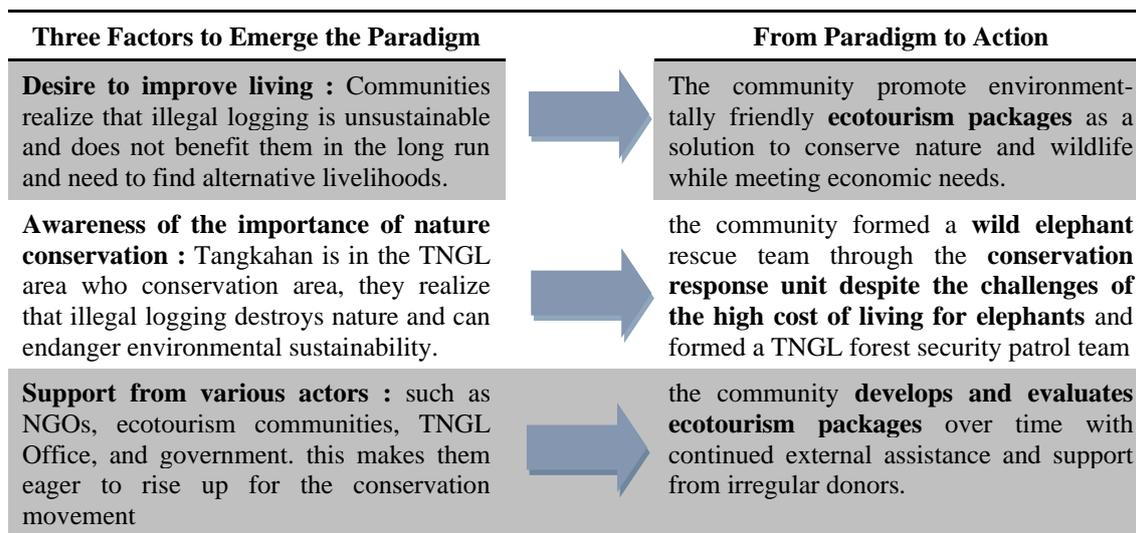
**Figure 2.** Overview Attraction in Tangkahan Ecovillage

### Transformation Process From Illegal Logging to Eco Lodging

The informant, Mr. Ika, stated that the lack of ecotourism activities in the Tangkahan area may result in the destruction of the forest, as the residents of the area were previously engaged in illegal logging activities. Mr. Ika emphasized the need for sustainable livelihoods and the challenges faced by those involved in illegal logging, noting that they resort to any means necessary to survive. Prior to the year 2000, the Tangkahan area was characterized by a significant prevalence of illicit logging activities. Many local residents were incarcerated and subjected to legal proceedings as a consequence of their involvement in these activities. It can be seen that the imposition of prison sentences can act as a deterrent and foster awareness within the community, prompting a shift in mindset and actions towards a more positive trajectory. This has resulted in the emergence of a community that is committed to safeguarding the Tangkahan area from illegal logging. In 2001, a ranger organization was established, comprising

individuals who were aware of the importance of tourism. Based on the shared vision and collaboration between the local community and external stakeholders, an ecotourism work team was established in the region. Following the formation of the team, local members underwent training on ecotourism principles, forest and river conservation, and the development of village regulations pertaining to forest and animal protection.

In its progress, ecotourism managed by the Tangkahan Tourism Institute (LPT) has slowly succeeded in changing the paradigm of the community. Namely the transition from illegal logging workers to eco-lodging. The transition was formed from community awareness of the importance of preserving and sustaining the forests and nature they inhabit. There are three factors to changes the paradigm among them are :



### Role of Ecotourism Actor Emerge a Dignity

The role of ecotourism actors in the Tangkahan Ecovillage is pivotal in fostering a sense of dignity and self-worth within the community. Community-based tourism has been systematically developed, assigning diverse roles to various members of the community, including rangers, homestay managers, elephant keepers, search and rescue (SAR) team members, forest security surveyors, office staff at the tourism information center, culinary providers, souvenir creators, environmental security teams, interpreter, and cleaning crews. This multifaceted involvement not only empowers individuals but also enhances the collective identity of the community, as approximately 50 families rely on Tangkahan ecotourism for their livelihoods. The commitment to managing public facilities, such as homestays, pedestrian bridges, gazebos, and other communal spaces, reflects the community's dedication to sustainable practices. These facilities are constructed using wood-based materials sourced from discarded forest products, showcasing a resourceful approach that minimizes waste and promotes environmental stewardship.



**Figure 3.** Managed Homestays with wood-based principle (Eco-Lodging Prinsip)

By adhering to eco-lodging principles, the community ensures that their tourism infrastructure aligns with the values of sustainability and respect for nature. This conscientious development not only attracts visitors seeking authentic experiences but also fosters a deeper connection between the community and its

natural surroundings. Moreover, as community members take pride in their roles and responsibilities, they cultivate a sense of ownership over their environment and resources, reinforcing the dignity-oriented approach central to this ecotourism initiative (Rundshagen et al., 2023). Ultimately, the active participation of community members in various capacities not only enhances their economic prospects but also empowers them to play a crucial role in preserving their cultural heritage and natural resources, creating a model of ecotourism that is both equitable and sustainable. This transformation from reliance on unsustainable practices to a dignified, community-driven ecotourism model exemplifies the potential of local actors to effect positive change while enriching their lives and environment

### **The Embodiment of Dignity in Tangkahan**

Dignity in the ecotourism community in Tangkahan is formed through a long process including (1) Ecotourism workers realize their value and contribution they are very significant in preserving GLNP. (2) Ecotourism workers in Tangkahan are given training and opportunities to develop their spirit and skills and knowledge by interacting directly with nature, tourists and ecotourism activists. (3) They are given responsibility in serving tourists and managing nature to meet their needs and transmit the passion they have. (4) An ecosystem has been formed in which ecotourism workers in Tangkahan work together to build a sense of solidarity and support each other to share knowledge, experience and resources to improve their collective welfare. Dignity is formed through awareness, empowerment, skill development, better work standards, recognition, and solidarity in the ecotourism worker community.

The community's ecotourism initiatives are not just for economic gain, but also for the protection of forests and wildlife from illegal logging. They continue to support ecotourism despite fluctuations in tourist numbers. The toughest test was during the Covid-19 period in 2020 until 2022, tourists were very quiet, the community was dwindling, elephant conservation needed operational costs, needed maintenance of public facilities, but they did not abandon their responsibility to continue conservation efforts. These efforts by local communities in Tangkahan have helped to shape a sense of dignity as ecotourism actors. This sense of dignity has transformed Tangkahan into a valuable destination for nature education, conservation education, and experiences with nature. The dignity shown by the tourism actors is connected to the tourists who visit Tangkahan, and after leaving Tangkahan, there are many new impressions and commitments from tourists to have awareness of preserving the environment in their respective environments.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates how a dignity-oriented approach has enabled the Tangkahan Ecovillage community to transition from illegal loggers to eco-lodgers, reconciling environmental conservation with socio-economic empowerment. By examining the mechanisms of this transformation—through participatory governance, cultural-environmental synergy, and community-based tourism (CBT)—the research highlights how dignity acts as a catalyst for sustainable change. Findings reveal that the community's shift was driven by three interconnected factors: (1) the pursuit of sustainable livelihoods, (2) heightened ecological awareness, and (3) external support from NGOs and government actors. These elements fostered a mindset shift from exploitation to stewardship, embodied in practices like eco-lodging, wildlife conservation, and equitable tourism management. The study underscores that dignity is not merely aspirational but actionable, manifested through (a) Recognition of local agency how the community members now derive pride from their roles as rangers, homestay managers, and conservationists. (b) Collective resilience how they are despite challenges like COVID-19, the community upheld conservation efforts, reinforcing their commitment to dignity and sustainability. (c) Cultural-environmental integration how the traditional knowledge and eco-lodging principles became pillars of Tangkahan's ecotourism identity.

To sustain this model, the paper offers two recommendations (1) Prioritize quality over quantity: Scale dignity-based practices across all community members to institutionalize a culture of respect and ownership. (2) Diversify livelihoods: Expand into agroforestry, waste recycling, and elephant care technologies to reduce reliance on tourism volatility. Tangkahan's success provides a replicable blueprint for other regions grappling with similar tensions between conservation and poverty. By centering dignity, this research advances a paradigm where ecotourism transcends economic metrics to nurture environmental, social, and cultural well-being—fulfilling the promise of its title: a community-led movement from illegal logging to eco-lodging with dignity at its core.

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