

## **Sustainable Tourism Management Exploration in Merek District, Indonesia**

**Nurlisa Ginting<sup>1,2,3\*</sup>, Sarah Janet Gardiner<sup>4</sup>, N. Vinky Rahman<sup>1,2,3</sup>, Chloe Jane Pagett<sup>3</sup>**

*\*Corresponding Author*

<sup>1</sup> Department of Architecture, Faculty of Engineering, Universitas Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup> Center of Excellence for Sustainable Tourism, Universitas Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

<sup>3</sup> Monitoring Center for Sustainable Tourism Observatory (MCSTO), Universitas Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

<sup>4</sup> Griffith Institute for Tourism, Griffith University, Australia

[nurlisa@usu.ac.id](mailto:nurlisa@usu.ac.id), [s.gardiner@griffith.edu.au](mailto:s.gardiner@griffith.edu.au), [n.vinky@usu.ac.id](mailto:n.vinky@usu.ac.id), [chloejanepagett@gmail.com](mailto:chloejanepagett@gmail.com)  
(+62) 811 608 102

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### **Abstract**

Tourism in Indonesia contributes to the economic growth and well-being of local communities. However, ensuring tourism sustainability is a primary challenge. This study aims to explore the sustainable management framework within the context of tourism in Merek District, North Sumatra, which has tourism potential but is declining in visitors. The research applies a mixed-methods approach to evaluate three tourist destinations: Tongging, Sipiso-piso, and Sapu Juma. The evaluation results indicate that sustainable management in Merek District does not meet established standards and requirements. Therefore, this study highlights the importance of sustainable tourism management in promoting local economic growth and achieving sustainability.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Tourism; Sustainable Management; Merek District

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### **1.0 Introduction**

Tourism is traveling to various destinations, supported by diversified facilities and services provided by local communities, regional governments, and the central government (Kemenparekraf, 2021). Additionally, tourism can stimulate economic growth and increase local income, thereby contributing to the community's well-being (Gunarekha & Binoy, 2017). Tourist destinations can positively impact society and the environment (Ginting et al., 2018). However, improper waste disposal and inadequate management practices often undermine this potential by causing environmental degradation. Furthermore, inadequate infrastructure quality at tourist destinations is frequently attributed to poor management (Nugroho, 2020).

Based on theories of resilience and complexity, management can enhance sustainable tourism development by democratizing policy-making and fostering collaboration among stakeholders (Sharpley et al., 2022). Sustainable tourism must be applied with an emphasis on management elements to establish a sustainable tourism framework. It is defined as tourism that carefully considers economic, social, cultural, environmental, and management aspects in both the present and future (GSTC, 2019; Kemenparekraf, 2021). The development of sustainable tourism is essential for the long-term advancement of the tourism sector. This necessity should be a focal point for the government and local communities concerning sustainable tourism in tourist areas. Indicators of sustainable tourism management will be examined in Merek District, Karo Regency, North Sumatra. It is home to numerous attractive tourist sites that have the potential to thrive if managed effectively. However, the management aspect in this area presents challenges, characterized by a low

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intensity of development. There is a pressing need for community engagement to participate actively, manage resources appropriately, and develop infrastructure to support tourism growth (Ihya et al., 2020). Management involves a state in which various actors within an area build networks and collaborate in decision-making and implementation at a horizontal level through interactions based on trust and cooperation. These actors include relevant regional organizations, academic groups such as universities, and interest groups (Kim & Lee, 2022). The key factor driving successful tourism development is the community itself (Safitri et al., 2021). Policy decisions related to sustainable tourism must reflect the perspectives of each stakeholder on how tourism should be developed.

Sustainable tourism encompasses sustainable management, social and economic sustainability, cultural sustainability, and environmental sustainability (GSTC, 2019; Kemenparekraf, 2021). There has been limited research that investigates the indicators of management aspects within the sustainable tourism context. Therefore, this study aims to explore the sustainable tourism development concept based on sustainable management in three destinations: Tongging, Sipiso-piso, and Sapu Juma in Merek District, Indonesia, because of the potential these destinations offer. Furthermore, this study has an objective to identify the management of each destination and provide suggestions that will function as a guide for stakeholders in managing the destinations. The hope is that sustainable tourism can be established through sustainable management implementation and that the knowledge gap in sustainable tourism research will be addressed.

## 2.0 Sustainable Tourism Management

Sustainable management is crucial for the management processes of tourist destinations to promote positive actions, as well as to achieve tasks related to sustainability and a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders (UNWTO, 2021). In tourism management, there is a relationship between the pressures and changes experienced, the stakeholders involved, and destination management (Nunkoo, 2017). Management is expected to act as a leverage factor for progress and to facilitate transformative changes in tourism (Berliandaldo et al., 2022). Besides instigating various networks associated with convergent relationships among communities, governments, and local tourism, regional tourism management also contributes to the area's evaluation and tourist destinations based on its positive functional roles. Evidence is discerned by examining how tourists perceive the functional role of local tourism management in shaping brand equity and tourism attachment in the region (Kim & Lee, 2022). Thus, sustainable management becomes pivotal to driving positive changes in destination management and enhancing local tourism engagement.

Effective destination management requires planned adaptation and mitigation measures, which necessitate capacity building and collaboration with local and regional governments, along with other tourism stakeholders, particularly for long-term infrastructure and public service investments (Nitivattananon & Srinonil, 2019). Thus, tourism has the potential to enhance the quality of life for communities and ensure sustainability, but it requires community involvement and political sustainability within management models for effective management (Martins & Ribeiro, 2023). Additionally, transparent, open, and participatory management models in tourist destinations can ensure sustainable development and enhance competitiveness by attracting stakeholder participation, coordination, and collaboration (Pulido-Fernández & Pulido-Fernández, 2019). Smart tourism destination management necessitates collaboration, user-oriented services, social innovation, and local community engagement to implement innovative technology and improve competitiveness effectively (Errichiello et al., 2021). Therefore, sustainable tourism management requires cross-sector synergy and active stakeholder involvement to ensure sustainability, competitiveness, and an improved quality of life for communities.

## 3.0 Methodology

This research explores the management-based tourism development concept in Merek District, North Sumatra. The approach employed in this study is mixed-methods, which integrates both qualitative and quantitative methods to provide more comprehensive and accurate findings. The research methodology is sequenced into four stages: (1) location selection, (2) identification of research variables, (3) data collection, and (4) data analysis. The collected data were analyzed based on the sustainable tourism principles implemented in Merek District. Primary data were gathered through field observations, questionnaires, and interviews on sustainable tourism across three tourist destinations.

Based on the indicators of sustainable management, the criteria of samples for interviews are locals, tourists, managers, stakeholders, and guides. However, this study decided to interview the individuals most responsible for the destination because they are credible sources on the destination's condition and management. The questionnaires were distributed to locals and tourists to identify their perceptions of and involvement at the destination to determine the management quality. A total of 50 questionnaires were distributed to each destination, which reached a total of 150 questionnaires.

Secondary data were obtained through two types of searches: manual literature reviews and online searches through official government websites and journals related to the study. The processing of questionnaire data involved calculating average scores based on a Likert scale to determine the overall involvement of individuals. Subsequently, the quantitative data analysis results were integrated with the qualitative data analysis of site observations to address the research problem regarding the development of sustainable tourism management in Merek District, North Sumatra.

## 4.0 Analysis and Discussion

#### 4.1 Destination management

The interdependent functions of destination management, which balance supply and demand, can strengthen overall destination management, with implications for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. In sustainable tourism development, it is essential to clarify and prioritize issues related to destination management responsibilities, appropriate management strategies, and plans, and it is crucial to consider monitoring and reporting frameworks.

In an interview with The Tourism Office of Karo Regency, the informant stated that the responsibility for managing tourism destinations is vested in the Department of Culture and Tourism in Karo Regency. While the Tourism Office is responsible for the overall management of tourism in Karo Regency, each district has a distinctive organization that manages its respective tourist destinations.

The head of Tongging Village informed that Tongging Village already has an organizational structure, with each division entrusted with specific responsibilities for managing tourism. In contrast, Sapo Juma, a privately owned destination, has a management team that is responsible for its operations. Nevertheless, Merek District has a defined responsibility for destination management related to tourism in the area. Observational findings that show the existence of organizations devoted to assisting the government, such as the Tourism Office, report and evaluate sustainable tourism practices lend credence to this.



Fig. 1. Trash scattered at (a) Sipiso-piso tourism and (b) Tongging Village  
(Source: Created by author)

However, there is a notable lack of responsibility in destination management at the Sipiso-piso tourist site, which is evident from Fig. (a) 1, which shows litter scattered throughout the area, and also in Fig. (b) 1, where waste is visible at the Tongging destination.

In developing tourism strategies and action plans, several components must be considered, including accessibility to destinations, tourism amenities, and other supporting factors such as safety, health, quality, and aesthetics (Hapsari et al., 2019). A destination management strategy and action plan have been created in Merek District for the upcoming years, aiming to promote and enhance sustainable tourism.

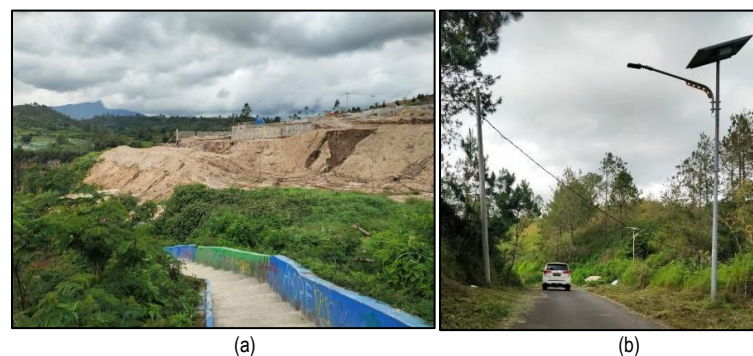


Fig. 2: Construction of facilities in Merek District  
(Source: Created by author)

One informant from the Tourism Office of Karo Regency stated that the strategy and action plan for destination management have been developed for the future, aiming to enhance the visibility of tourism progress to the public by maximizing existing potential in Merek District through sources such as social media. The manager of Sapo Juma echoed this sentiment, adding that the government had installed solar-powered streetlights at the Sapo Juma destination. Therefore, the author concludes that the strategy and action plan for destination management in Merek District is indeed well-implemented, which is evident in Figure (a) 2, which shows ongoing facility development, and Figure (b) 2, where solar-powered streetlights installed at the site. The advancements in tourism in the area can significantly enhance the quality of tourism in Merek District.

Continuous monitoring of the tourism industry is essential for enhancing growth levels, creating a positive image for tourists, and improving the effectiveness of tourism management (Averikhina et al., 2020). A tourism system must be established to monitor and report on the socio-economic, cultural, and environmental impacts induced by tourism activities. In this context, both the Tourism Office

of Karo Regency and the Head of Tongging Village affirmed that monitoring and reporting are ongoing and aimed at assessing tourism development and addressing existing issues.

Based on the interview and observation results, the government, tourism organizations, and locals in Merek District consistently conduct monitoring and reporting to provide information on tourism progress. A strong relationship among the government, managers, and the community is essential, as the impacts of tourism are felt throughout Merek District. Therefore, ongoing monitoring and reporting by tourism management are crucial for ensuring the sustainability of tourism in the area.

#### 4.2 Stakeholder engagement

In a tourist destination, stakeholders can include the involvement of businesses, residents, and visitors, as well as promotion and information dissemination (Saito & Ruhanen, 2017). This indicates that sustainable tourism management must engage stakeholders, including businesses, residents, visitors, and public and governmental sectors, to ensure that continuous communication will foster information exchange and promote tourism to meet sustainability standards (Roxas et al., 2020). Therefore, the diverse involvement of stakeholders—from businesses and residents to visitors and the public sector—is crucial for ensuring interactions that support the promotion of sustainable tourism.



Fig. 3: Tongging Village Enterprise Briefing  
(Source: Instagram @desawisatatongging)

In Fig. 3 business owners are discuss sustainability with managers, which aligns with the statement from the interviewed managers, who emphasize that tourism operators focus on economic advancement by promoting local products and accommodations to visitors. One informant from the Karo Regency Tourism Office noted that the government provisions facilities and information to these businesses to advance the local economy. Furthermore, the interview and observation results conclude that Merek District has effectively involved local businesses, as evidenced by the improving development of these enterprises in the area, as seen in Fig. 4.



(a)



(b)

Fig. 4. Business entities in (a) Sapo Juma and (b) Sipiso-Piso  
(Source: Created by author)

To measure the engagement of stakeholders in each tourism destination, questionnaires were distributed to 150 respondents. The results were then classified by the respondents' age and gender, also the age of respondents were divided into three groups: 15-30, 31-49, and >50.

Table 1. Respondent's demographic

		Age			Gender	
		15-30	31-49	>50	Male	Female
Tongging Village	Local	4	20	3	22	17
	Tourist	4	14	3	6	10
Sipiso-piso	Local	6	9	3	10	13
	Tourist	13	14	5	17	10
Sapo Juma	Local	11	5	0	9	12

	Tourist	13	15	8	14	10
Total		51	77	22	78	22

(Source: Created by author)

Table 2. Stakeholder engagement

	Questionnaire	Tongging Village	Sipiso-piso	Sapo Juma	Average
Resident involvement	Your involvement with tourism	2.5	2.6	3.53	2.94
	Facilities provided for managing tourism	2.81	2.7	3.13	3.01
Visitor Involvement	You feel involved in tourism	2.45	4.1	3.53	3.36
Promotion and Information	You feel that promotion and information about the destination is good	3.1	3.42	3.36	3.29
Climate Change Adaptation	Your understanding of climate change	2.55	2.61	2.71	2.62
Risk and Crisis Management	Your understanding of the crisis procedures in tourism	2.31	2.45	2.47	2.41

Note: Likert Scale Average: Very Good (5-4.2), Good (4.2-3.4), Okay (3.4-2.6), Bad (2.6-1.8), Very Bad (1.8-1)

(Source: Created by author)

From the questionnaire results presented in Table 2, it can be interpreted that residents in Tongging Village (2.5) and Sipiso-piso (2.6) are less supportive of involvement in local tourism. The Head of Tongging Village revealed that community involvement in tourism remains insufficient despite efforts to guide the community towards greater participation in tourism initiatives. In contrast to the Sapo Juma area, residents there agreed (3.53) regarding their involvement in local tourism. This is attributed to the fact that the tourist attractions in Sapo Juma directly involve locals in their operations. Therefore, it can be concluded that community involvement in Merek District is not fully realized, with an average score of (2.94) signifying limited participation in tourism activities.

The questionnaire results indicate that Sapo Juma received the highest score of (3.53) due to the efforts made by the owner to enhance tourism at the destination. The owner regularly provides maintenance for residents' homes, hence contributing to the community's involvement and overall positive impact on tourism development.

From the total questionnaire score (2.94) and the interviews regarding community involvement, it can be concluded that local participation is approaching a satisfactory level. There are programs and support from the government aimed at engaging the community and promoting tourism in Merek District. However, this progress must be bolstered by human resources in the area, and an understanding of sustainable tourism is essential for locals to ensure the continuity and success of tourism in the region.

Visitor involvement can be enhanced by supervising existing facilities and engaging visitors, creating memorable and positive tourism experiences. This involvement reflects a positive and significant influence on the intention to recommend the destination, revisit, and increase visit frequency. If given the opportunity, an individual's intention to return is more likely higher when the tourism experience is impactful (Yuniar et al., 2019).



Fig. 5: The atmosphere of Tongging Village  
(Source: Created by author)

The questionnaire results show that Tongging Village visitors are less supportive (2.45) of involvement in local tourism, which aligns with the observations in Fig. 5, displaying a quiet atmosphere with few visitors. This is attributed to a lack of attractions at the destination. In contrast, visitors to Sipiso-piso agreed (4.1), and those at Sapo Juma rated their involvement (3.53) positively. This is supported by observations in Fig. 6, where attractions such as waterfalls and flower gardens draw visitors. Tourism managers also provide information about the activities available at these sites. Therefore, it can be concluded that visitor involvement in Merek District is not yet completely satisfactory, with an average score of (3.36).





Fig. 6. Tourism Attractions (a) Sipiso-piso Waterfall and (b) Sapo Juma Flower Park  
(Source: Created by author)

To enhance promotional activities and information for tourism development, collaboration among businesses, government, residents, and visitors is essential. This collaboration should focus on promoting various products and services available at tourist sites (Arisandi, 2018). From the questionnaire results, it can be interpreted that the average score for tourist destinations in Merek District concerning promotion and information is moderately satisfactory (3.29). At Tongging Village, efforts to promote the area have been made through past visitors, utilizing photos and information shown in Figure 7. The Head of Tongging Village and residents explained that promotional activities and information dissemination regarding events and products are conducted through social media and the installation of informational signage.



Fig. 7. (a) Product promotion and (b) Tongging Village information  
(Source: Created by author)

Similarly, at Sipiso-piso and Sapo Juma, the government and residents promote tourism through social media and provide information about these attractions, as shown in Figures 8 and 9. Promotions are aimed at improving quality and developing the region. An informant from the Karo Regency Tourism Office stated that guidance has been provided to local authorities and residents to enhance efforts in promoting and disseminating information about tourism in Merek District.



Fig. 8. (a) Product promotion and (b) Sipiso-piso information  
(Source: Created by author)



Fig. 9. (a) Product promotion and (b) Sapo Juma information  
(Source: Created by author)

From the involvement residents (2.94) and visitors (3.36), indicates that both residents and visitors are not yet fully supportive of engaging in tourism in Merek District. The government needs to enhance the quality of human resources and improve the tourism infrastructure that is lacking to foster collaboration with the local community. This will help ensure that tourist arrivals and related activities are well-managed under community supervision. Additionally, it is essential to guide the community regarding sustainable tourism practices.

#### 4.3 Managing pressure and change

Managing pressures and changes requires significant actions to address the need to regulate visitor volume and activities, and manage risks and crises in response to climate change (de Oliveira & Jabbour, 2017). One effectual approach to managing visitor activities at tourist destinations is to record and document the visitors who visit the site. This aims to understand visitor numbers and activities, facilitating the evaluation of the tourism destination. The Head of Tongging Village also emphasized that evaluating based on visitor numbers and activities is necessary to monitor tourism development in the area.

In adapting to climate change, it is essential to establish systems, regulations, policies, and programs aimed at reducing risks and enhancing awareness among the community and tourism businesses (PERKEM, 2021). However, based on Table 2, an average score of (2.62) suggests that Merek District has not yet fully understood the concept of climate change. This lack of understanding can influence government policies addressing damage caused by disasters. The Karo Regency Tourism Office stated that the government is developing initiatives for climate change prevention by implementing plans and strategies.

By having a risk reduction plan, crisis management, and emergency response tailored to the destination, key elements are communicated to residents, visitors, and businesses. Procedures and resources are established to implement the plan, which should be updated regularly (GSTC, 2019). A program aimed at reducing the impacts of disaster risks must be based on a thorough understanding of those risks. Effective crisis management and response involve preventing the causes of risks and crises from occurring. This approach can include planning based on previous crises to anticipate future scenarios.



Fig. 11: Fire on the hill of Tongging Village  
(Source: Googleimages)

Natural disasters, such as forest fires in Tongging Village, Merek District, North Sumatra, highlight significant challenges. According to interviews with the Head of Tongging Village, local government efforts have been made to mitigate the impacts of these crises by addressing the causes of such disasters and providing training for residents involved in tourism. However, there is still a lack of specific crisis management planning, such as Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), typically found in the tourism industry.

#### 5.0 Conclusion

The evaluation of sustainable tourism in Merek District, North Sumatra, was conducted by assessing the management aspect of sustainable tourism in three specific destinations. The findings indicate that the current state of sustainable management in Merek is inadequate and does not meet established standards and requirements. Numerous issues were identified, highlighting the need for governments to improve the tourism infrastructure and increase monitoring and reporting quantity. Also, the analysis of sustainable

management indicators revealed a lack of destination responsibility in Merek, reflected in the involvement of stakeholders, which received a reasonable reliability score. Although this score indicates some level of involvement, many stakeholders remain disengaged from tourism activities, and their understanding of sustainable tourism is limited. Hence, the need for governments to guide the community on sustainable tourism practices. Additionally, the management of pressure and change received a low-reliability score, posing risks to all stakeholders in Merek. Therefore, it is crucial to implement further enhancements to foster a more sustainable tourism environment in the region. Consequently, further research can develop effective frameworks based on the evaluation provided in this study.

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## Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper explores the management aspect of sustainable tourism, specifically in three tourism destinations in Merek District, Indonesia. It highlights the importance of sustainable tourism management in promoting local economic growth and achieving sustainability. The findings suggest how the destinations in Merek District can improve their management to meet the established standards and requirements.

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