

TITLE: HUMAN-ELEPHANT COEXISTENCE AND ECOLOGICAL NARRATIVES IN ACEH'S GREEN TOURISM DEVELOPMENT.

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Abstract

Aceh Province boasts natural biodiversity coexisting with long-standing religious and cultural knowledge systems. Human interactions with Sumatran elephants (*Elephas maximus sumatranus*) occur naturally in the forested areas of Central and East Aceh, including Blangkejeren, Aceh Tamiang, and East Aceh. The relationship between humans and wildlife presents conservation challenges, alongside the inherent ethical-spiritual relationship communities have with their natural environment. This study examines patterns of human-elephant coexistence that occur during sustainable green tourism development and analyzes how religious beliefs and traditional practices influence ecological understandings and conservation methods. The research used qualitative methods, including ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews, to survey community members, along with conservation managers and tourism operators, about their direct experiences and perspectives on nature. The research indicates that local communities view elephants as guardians of the forest, maintaining ecological balance and spiritual harmony. The Islamic teaching of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (blessing for all creation) serves as a moral foundation through which humans can understand their relationship with nature. An integrative model of eco-faith tourism develops through these stories, combining conservation efforts with spiritual reflection and environmental education programs. This study found that green tourism development in Aceh Province was successful because it integrated biodiversity conservation with religious values and traditional cultural knowledge. The story of human-elephant coexistence illustrates that sustainable destinations thrive through ecological balance and spiritual awareness, rather than prioritizing economic gain.

Keywords: *green tourism, Aceh, Sumatran elephants, local wisdom, ecological ethics, spirituality*

A. INTRODUCTION

The study examines how Aceh implements eco-faith tourism within Indonesia's sustainability framework by identifying its unique religious-ecological basis. The environmental strategies used in Aceh stand apart from Bali and Java tourism because they depend on Islamic environmental stewardship principles instead of Hindu spiritual beliefs or indigenous land traditions. The theological structure guides communities toward a unique ecological responsibility understanding which turns environmental protection into religious duties beyond cultural traditions and economic development plans.

Research conducted in Blangkejeren, Aceh Tamiang, and East Aceh shows that elephants serve dual roles as ecological markers and moral emblems in local environmental awareness. The consistent community use of penjaga hutan and tamu Allah to identify elephants shows their moral code regarding animals. The combined use of storytelling, religious sermons and tourism narratives creates symbolic expressions that promote harmonious living and habitat preservation. According to eco-semiotics the elephant functions as a mediating sign which people utilize to understand both ecological balance and divine order. The symbolic meanings that people derive from abstract concepts lead to practical conservation approaches including community-based monitoring systems and adaptive farming strategies and elephant-focused eco-faith tourism initiatives. Through phenomenology we understand how repeated elephant encounters via observation and ritual and storytelling create embodied ethical awareness that leads people to experience environmental responsibility.

The Acehnese example reveals that sustainability endures through ongoing cultural and religious performances alongside policy measures and economic rewards. Aceh presents an alternative sustainability approach because its spiritual ethics and lived experience-based conservation methods integrate ecological preservation with religious devotion and tourism development. Sustainability studies benefit from this research because it shows how symbolic energy and moral creativity form essential elements for developing enduring human–nature bonds.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This research applies qualitative ethnography to study the connections between ecological behavior and religious systems and tourism development. The researcher conducted field research during 2023–2024 at three major locations which included Blangkejeren and Aceh Tamiang and East Aceh because these areas experience significant human–elephant interactions and developing green tourism activities.

Data Collection Techniques

- The study used participant observation to document interactions involving rituals together with tourism activities and daily contacts between villagers and elephants.
- The researchers implemented semi-structured interviews with 40 participants including local community members and conservation officers and religious leaders (ulama) and tourism operators.
- Researchers analyzed local proverbs alongside Islamic sermons and conservation outreach materials that address human–nature relationships.

Analytical Framework

The analysis applied eco-semiotic and phenomenological methods to identify thematic patterns in coexistence through its symbolic and experiential components. The analysis incorporated the “eco-faith tourism” model which combines environmental ethics with spiritual and educational tourism development.

Data Analysis

The field notes and interview data underwent qualitative thematic analysis to interpret the information. The research team examined all interview transcripts multiple times to detect consistent patterns and symbolic meanings about human-elephant relationships and religious influences and tourism activities. Researchers performed manual open coding to sort major themes including ecological ethics together with spiritual stewardship and conservation behavior and eco-faith tourism narratives. The research team used axial coding to organize thematic connections between religious beliefs and ecological practices and tourism development patterns. The research combined field data with eco-semiotic analysis and phenomenological methods to maintain theoretical interpretations that reflected actual experiences from Acehese communities.

Sampling Strategy

The research used purposive sampling to choose participants who actively participated in or experienced the effects of human–elephant interactions and green tourism projects. The research team selected 40 participants who matched the study goals from local community members and conservation officers and religious leaders (ulama) and tourism operators. Snowball sampling helped researchers find additional important informants through recommendations from initial participants who had extensive knowledge about local ecological practices. The combined approach to sampling guaranteed that the collected data possessed both detailed information and relevant contextual meaning.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

a. Human–Elephant Coexistence as a Living Cultural Ecology

The study shows that human-elephant coexistence in Aceh surpasses standard conservation methods and ecological management systems. It embodies a “living cultural ecology” where ecological connections cannot be separated from moral principles and symbolic significance. Humans and elephants exist as divine creations which hold ecological value and spiritual meaning within this belief system. Research conducted in Blangkejeren (Gayo Lues) and Aceh Tamiang shows that residents use spiritual metaphors to describe elephants who they call penjaga hutan (guardians of the forest) and tamu Allah (guests of God). These moral labels guide people to treat elephants properly as they strengthen the idea

that nature contains ruh (spirit). These teachings match Islamic ideas about tawhidic ecology because all living things help maintain cosmic balance and environmental damage creates both ecological and spiritual problems. Western conservation systems typically use regulatory tools to separate humans from nature but Acehnese conservation methods focus on shared faith-based relationships. Environmental preservation takes place through ibadah (worship) based on Islamic principles of stewardship (khalifah fil ardh) and trust (amanah) (Q.S. Al-Baqarah [2]:30). Humans function as trustees within divine creation without being absolute rulers according to this perspective. The ethical direction in Islamic environmental philosophy creates natural respect through God worship as shown in studies by Foltz (2006) and Zuhri (2021).

The stated values produce observable conservation practices in real life. Communities that use elephant corridors now adopt adaptive and cooperative methods including eco-tourism with elephants and eco-farming and handicraft production instead of harmful deterrents. Stories told through didong and hikayat and poetry serve as vital tools for passing ecological ethics to future generations by showing elephants as representations of patience (sabar), strength (kuat), and divine reminder (peringatan Tuhan). Aceh's cultural ecology continues to develop while adjusting to environmental transformations. People use their encounters with elephants as ethical and spiritual challenges which demand both self-restraint and responsible behavior. Religious stories together with cultural traditions function as self-enforced conservation tools which incorporate environmental ethics into social practices without needing outside enforcement. The ethical territorial system of human-elephant coexistence in Aceh maintains both cultural heritage and biological diversity through spiritual bonds with the natural environment.

b. Religious Values as Foundations of Conservation Behavior

Interviews with ulama and community leaders and tourism operators reveal that Aceh residents consider elephant protection as a religious obligation which derives from divine amanah. The local population protect their forests and elephant habitats through religious worship activities instead of fulfilling institutional requirements from government or non-governmental organizations. Human ecological conduct bases its foundation on Qur'anic teachings about balance and mercy and trust which makes humans accountable to God as ecological stewards instead of nature rulers. The people of Aceh regard elephants as divine creations thus they consider any harm to them or destruction of their habitats as two offenses against both nature and spiritual principles which they call ecological sins. Religious discourse and Friday sermons consistently reference Qur'anic verses about balance from Q.S. Ar-Rahman [55]:7–8 to show that rahmatan lil 'alamin functions as the fundamental ethical principle for environmental protection. The teachings enhance the understanding that genuine faith requires showing true compassion toward all living beings.

Research from Southeast Asia demonstrates that Islamic environmental ethics produce pro-environmental behavior in Aceh similarly to the findings of Qureshi (2020) and

Mutaqin (2022). The teachings based on faith develop empathy and collective responsibility which makes people actively participate in conservation initiatives. Religious norms function as moral guidance and administrative frameworks within Islamic-based governance (Qanun Syariah) to integrate ethical principles into Aceh's administrative system. Religious authorities together with *dayah* (Islamic boarding schools) collaborate to deliver environmental education as *fardhu kifayah* by integrating ecological ethics into educational institutions and legal systems.

Faith combined with ecology produces real-world conservation practices. The community combines WhatsApp groups and *kentongan* signals to track elephants while they plant trees for *sedekah bumi* and grow lemongrass and chili as elephant-resistant crops within agroforestry systems. These actions continue to be scientifically effective through habitat preservation and non-lethal deterrent use while religious faith provides the foundation for their efforts. The environmental protection approaches in Aceh demonstrate how religious symbols establish both scientific knowledge and ethical principles to expand moral awareness about ecological systems. Conservation performs dual functions because it safeguards biodiversity and preserves *barakah* through maintaining ecological balance. Religious values deliver spiritual nourishment alongside social bonding tools which establish the foundation for environmental knowledge and direct conservation initiatives and policy development in Aceh.

c. Green Tourism as Eco-Faith Praxis

Research findings show Aceh now hosts a novel type of eco-faith tourism which merges environmental learning with religious meditation to bridge ecological knowledge with theological insights. This model transforms tourism from a recreational sector into a spiritual-ethical engagement with nature which redefines the entire concept of tourism into moral interactions with creation. Tour operators together with community-based organizations in Aceh Besar and Aceh Timur have begun creating programs which include nature trekking and river exploring alongside villagers stays and Qur'anic contemplation of nature (*tadabbur alam*). The guides provide scientific explanations about plants and animals together with Qur'anic verses about Earth as divine signs (*ayat kauniyah*). Guides recite "Dan tidak ada sesuatu pun yang Kami ciptakan dengan sia-sia" (Q.S. Al-Mu'minun [23]:115) whenever they observe the slow movement of elephants while explaining that every life form carries divine wisdom (*hikmah*).

The forest serves as a classroom while environmental education brings spiritual awakening through this approach which transforms walking into worship. The focus on *tawadhu'* (humility) and *syukur* (gratitude) for creation allows people to see nature as divine revelation instead of just scenic views for entertainment. According to field data from research tourists who engage in eco-faith programs demonstrate significant behavioral changes. Tourists develop better environmental knowledge and deepen their wildlife affection and gain ethical commitment to guard nature. The new form of tourism generates

permanent ethical impacts and economic gains which is supported by measurable data from conservation fund contributions and reforestation activities and internet-based awareness campaigns.

The research finding fulfills the second research goal which wants to create spiritual ecological-based sustainable tourism models. Two mechanisms work in tandem through the eco-faith framework:

- The community benefits economically from tourism while it decreases its dependence on logging and poaching practices.
- It transforms consciousness through education and ethics which leads to tourism evolving into a means of moral transformation and ecological stewardship.

Communities gain higher trust levels and visitor contentment rises when tourism operates under Sharia principles for green tourism according to Mutaqin (2022) who examined this relationship. Social approval for tourism comes when communities follow religious ethics which makes spiritual authenticity accessible to visitors. Aceh adds symbolic religious meaning to elephants by viewing them as divine messengers who unite human beings with natural environments.

Elephants possess spiritual abilities according to local cosmology that connect our physical environment with the spiritual realm. As divine power (qudrah Allah) animals exhibit human virtues of patience and wisdom which correspond to ethical norms in human conduct. Eco-faith tours lead through both wildlife observation and storytelling provide spiritual experiences when people encounter elephants. Guides define these natural encounters with elephants as *ziarah ekologis* (ecological pilgrimage) during which people display modesty by standing at the height of nature. The social exchange of eco-faith tourism exceeds monetary trade typical of contemporary tourism industry operations. The pilgrimage called *haji ekologis* guides people through both physical landscapes and ethical knowledge. Walking through the forest along with wildlife calls and elephant paths functions as *dzikir* that enables people to recite divine order while understanding their duties to it.

Tourism companies using the eco-faith method must redefine what constitutes profit and achievement in their business activities. The measurement of success replaces visitor statistics with moral change and ecological restoration and community development. Aceh's local leaders define genuine sustainability through the phrase “*mengganti laba dengan berkah*” which means profit turns into blessing because genuine sustainability arises from spiritual balance rather than material wealth. Through eco-faith tourism people experience a post-secular transformation because spiritual consciousness unites with scientific understanding in environmental stewardship. Through religious narratives the approach shows faith and reason work together as legitimate frameworks to support environmental

education and sustainable development. Green tourism in Aceh transforms into eko-iman praxis by applying nature-based theology to combine ecological elements with economic aspects and ethical values. Elephants' symbolic role combined with the coexistence story enables tourism to purify human souls and create responsible environmental guardianship. Through this practice people protect forests both as environmental duties and as spiritual pathways to achieve complete personal development.

d. Comparative and Theoretical Interpretation

The study places Aceh's eco-faith tourism model within Indonesia's wider sustainability frameworks while highlighting its unique religious-ecological basis. Aceh's environmental practices differ from Bali and Java tourism models because they use Islamic stewardship (*khalifah fil ardh*) and moral accountability to God instead of Hindu cosmology or ancestral land ethics. The theological orientation creates a specific way for communities to understand ecological responsibility which transforms environmental care into a religious duty instead of cultural tradition or economic strategy. Recent studies indicate that religious values can function as effective moral drivers for conservation behavior, particularly when integrated into local governance and community-based tourism initiatives (Sani & Nasution, 2021; Mutaqin, 2022).

Research conducted in Blangkejeren, Aceh Tamiang, and East Aceh shows that elephants serve dual roles as ecological markers and moral emblems in local environmental awareness. The consistent use of *penjaga hutan* and *tamu Allah* to describe elephants by community members shows their ethical framework for treating non-human beings. These symbolic expressions manifest in daily activities such as storytelling and religious sermons and tourism narratives that work together to support peaceful cohabitation and conserve habitats. This finding supports broader regional scholarship suggesting that faith-based environmentalism in Southeast Asia plays a significant role in shaping sustainable human–nature relationships beyond formal conservation policies (Qureshi, 2020; Zuhri, 2021). The integration of local wisdom and spiritual narratives into tourism development reflects a growing trend in sustainable tourism research that emphasizes ethical engagement and cultural continuity (Raharjo, 2019; Situmorang & Hakim, 2020).

The elephant functions as a mediating sign which people use to comprehend both ecological balance and divine order according to eco-semiotics. People derive practical conservation measures like community-based monitoring systems from abstract symbolic meanings which also leads to adaptive farming strategies and elephant-oriented eco-faith tourism development. Through phenomenology we understand how repeated elephant encounters via observation and ritual and storytelling create embodied ethical awareness that leads people to experience environmental responsibility.

The Acehese example reveals that sustainability endures through ongoing cultural and religious performances alongside policy measures and economic rewards. Aceh presents

an alternative sustainability approach because its spiritual ethics and lived experience-based conservation methods integrate ecological preservation with religious devotion and tourism development. Sustainability studies benefit from this research because it shows how symbolic energy and moral creativity form essential elements for developing enduring human–nature bonds.

e. Challenges and Divergences

The research shows that sustainability in Aceh faces ongoing dispute despite the visible achievements of eco-faith tourism and faith-based conservation programs. The concept of sustainability develops through the continuous exchange between spiritual values and social conditions and economic motivations. The research shows that in specific regions including Aceh Besar and East Aceh the immediate financial advantages prevail over long-term environmental preservation. The quick development of tourism together with infrastructure building and the commercial use of eco-faith programs have caused soil deterioration and wildlife disturbance while turning sacred elephants into entertainment products.

The economic development of tourism breaks down the spiritual and moral base which supports Acehnese eco-faith practices. The promotional use of spirituality leads to the destruction of its ethical foundation because economic needs conflict with ecological values within faith-based systems. Economic secularization functions as a force which diminishes the structural unity of Aceh's eco-faith tourism system. The study recognizes two distinct ways that different age groups imagine environmental issues. The older population regards forests and elephants as divine entities but the younger population starts to see them as economic or leisure resources. The disappearance of traditional metaphors such as *penjaga hutan* and *tamu Allah* signifies the loss of moral language which previously established human connections with nature. The same trend appears in places like Langkawi Geopark in Malaysia where fast commercialization has weakened communal ecological ethics.

The research promotes a regenerative system to solve these issues by establishing equal conditions between economic growth and environmental protection and spiritual purity. The proposal includes visitor limitations along with community-driven tourism development and required training about ethics and culture. Aceh's eco-faith model implements the principle of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* by translating religious teachings into ecological actions which regard wildlife protection as worship and environmental stewardship as moral duty. Through its dual role as ecological markers and spiritual emblems elephants serve as central elements of Aceh's alternative moral ecology which brings new perspectives to global sustainability discussions outside of technical and secular frameworks.

CONCLUSION

The research defines Aceh's sustainable tourism foundation as an integrated eco-spiritual system that connects religious teachings with local ecological knowledge and community participation. The model used in Aceh establishes that religious beliefs together with cultural awareness lead to ecologically sustainable outcomes while delivering spiritual satisfaction. Research demonstrates that human-elephant coexistence in Aceh functions as a moral narrative based on a comprehensive cosmological understanding which exceeds conservation status. Nature functions as living evidence of divine existence according to Islamic perspectives because local Muslim communities value it above its economic potential. Elephants along with forests and rivers and rivers form natural boundaries where religious beliefs meet knowledge systems with ecological understanding. This unified approach converts green tourism into a spiritual educational system that teaches human coexistence.

The ethnographic research reveals that Aceh's green tourism programs achieve success through the combination of religious and ethical principles and ecological preservation. The combination of rahmatan lil 'alamin (blessing for all creation) with khalifah fil ardh (stewardship on Earth) offers both theological foundations alongside emotional drive and social acceptance for conservation initiatives. Human-wildlife conflicts get minimized through the moral foundation which supports collective human involvement and maintains spiritual responsibilities toward the environment. The study identifies persistent difficulties with commercialized eco-tourism alongside youth separation from ecological spirituality in Aceh. The issues show that education along with cultural transmission and policy integration become essential to uphold the ethical foundations of Aceh's sustainability framework. Without institutional backing and moral renewal eco-faith tourism risks losing its sacred value which would turn into mere economic activity.

This study advances global sustainability research through its establishment of moral-ecological framework which integrates spiritual knowledge with Western secular concepts. Technology and policy cannot sustain human survival because authentic sustainability requires people to reconnect with nature's sacred dimensions. Aceh reveals through its practical implementation of spiritual ecology how this approach supports both theoretical foundations and practical procedures for sustainable development. The Acehese approach proves that future environmental preservation needs to unify ecological expertise with moral creativity. Sustainability emerges once humans accept their dual role as nature's caretakers and trustees within God's ecosystem instead of assuming dominion over nature. Human–elephant coexistence in Aceh proves that ecological balance depends fundamentally on spiritual balance since protecting Earth equates protecting divine elements within ourselves.

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