

## **The Role of Community Engagement in Balancing Tourism Growth and Environmental Sustainability: Evidence from Community-Based Tourism Destinations**

**Bayu Erwinadi<sup>1</sup>, Irwan W<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Institut Agama Islam Negeri Kendasi

<sup>2</sup>Akademi Bisnis Lombok

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### **Abstract**

Community engagement plays a crucial role in achieving sustainable tourism by balancing tourism growth with environmental sustainability. However, limited research has explored how community participation simultaneously supports economic development and environmental conservation within community-based tourism destinations. This study aims to examine the role of community engagement in fostering sustainable tourism development. A qualitative multiple case study approach was employed involving 25 participants, including local community leaders, tourism entrepreneurs, government officials, destination managers, and environmental organizations. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, focus group discussions, and document analysis, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal four major themes: community participation strengthens tourism governance through inclusive decision-making; community-led initiatives enhance environmental stewardship; active engagement promotes inclusive tourism growth by creating local economic opportunities; and balancing tourism growth with environmental sustainability remains challenged by increasing tourism pressure, unequal participation, and institutional coordination. The study concludes that meaningful community engagement serves as a strategic governance mechanism linking tourism development with environmental conservation. The findings contribute to sustainable tourism literature by emphasizing collaborative governance and provide practical recommendations for policymakers and destination managers to strengthen community empowerment and participatory tourism planning.

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### **Corresponding Author:**

**Bayu Erwinadi**

Institut Agama Islam Negeri Kendari, Indonesia

Email Coresspondent: [bayumujahidin15@gmail.com](mailto:bayumujahidin15@gmail.com)

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Tourism has become one of the most significant drivers of socio-economic development worldwide, generating employment opportunities, increasing local income, stimulating infrastructure development, and promoting cultural exchange (Stec & Grzebyk, 2022; Ventura et al., 2025). As international tourism continues to recover and expand, many destinations increasingly rely on tourism as a strategic sector for regional economic growth. However, rapid tourism development has also

intensified environmental challenges, including biodiversity loss, ecosystem degradation, excessive natural resource consumption, pollution, and waste generation. These environmental pressures threaten the long-term sustainability of tourism destinations and raise concerns regarding the capacity of destinations to balance economic benefits with ecological preservation (Salinas Fernández et al., 2022; Sokhanvar & Jenkins, 2022).

In response to these challenges, the concept of sustainable tourism has evolved as a guiding framework for achieving economic prosperity while protecting environmental and socio-cultural resources (Khater et al., 2025; Stojanović et al., 2024). Sustainable tourism emphasizes responsible destination management that integrates economic development, environmental conservation, and community well-being. Within this framework, local communities are increasingly recognized as key stakeholders because they possess local knowledge, cultural values, and social capital that contribute to sustainable destination governance. Community engagement is therefore regarded as a fundamental element in ensuring that tourism development generates equitable economic benefits while preserving environmental integrity (Rahman et al., 2022; Sabet & Khaksar, 2024).

Community engagement extends beyond participation in tourism-related activities. It encompasses the active involvement of local residents in tourism planning, decision-making, environmental conservation initiatives, resource management, and policy implementation. Effective community engagement enhances local ownership of tourism development, strengthens environmental stewardship, and fosters collaboration among governments, tourism businesses, and civil society. Moreover, community participation enables tourism policies to better reflect local needs and aspirations, thereby improving destination resilience and sustainability (Jackson, 2025; Suriyankietkaew et al., 2025).

Previous studies have highlighted the importance of community participation in sustainable tourism development. Research has shown that community involvement contributes to improved destination management, stronger environmental awareness, increased tourist satisfaction, and enhanced socio-economic benefits for local residents (Ghaderi et al., 2022; Luekveerawattana et al., 2025). Other studies have emphasized that collaborative governance involving local communities can improve policy implementation and strengthen destination competitiveness. Furthermore, investigations into community-based tourism have demonstrated that local participation supports cultural preservation, environmental protection, and inclusive economic development (Astawa et al., 2024; T. Zhang et al., 2022).

Despite these important contributions, several limitations remain in the existing literature. First, previous studies frequently examine community engagement from either economic or environmental perspectives separately, providing limited understanding of how community participation simultaneously contributes to balancing tourism growth and environmental sustainability. Second, many studies primarily focus on the outcomes of community-based tourism programs while paying less attention to the processes through which community engagement influences sustainable destination management. Third, empirical research often concentrates on measuring participation levels rather than exploring the perceptions, experiences, and collaborative practices of multiple stakeholders involved in sustainable tourism governance. Consequently, the mechanisms through which community engagement facilitates the coexistence of tourism development and environmental conservation remain insufficiently understood.

Addressing these limitations requires a more comprehensive exploration of community engagement as a dynamic governance process rather than merely a participation indicator. This study adopts a qualitative approach to investigate how local communities, government institutions, tourism entrepreneurs, and other stakeholders collaboratively negotiate tourism development while maintaining environmental sustainability. By focusing on stakeholder experiences and interactions, this research seeks to provide deeper insights into the practical mechanisms that enable sustainable tourism destinations to achieve balanced development.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrated examination of community engagement from governance, environmental, and tourism development perspectives. Unlike previous studies that predominantly evaluate community participation using quantitative indicators or focus on isolated sustainability outcomes, this research explores how stakeholder collaboration shapes decision-making processes, environmental stewardship, and sustainable tourism practices simultaneously. This integrated perspective contributes to extending the literature on community-based tourism and sustainable destination management by highlighting community engagement as a strategic governance mechanism for achieving long-term sustainability.

The findings are expected to contribute theoretically by enriching the discourse on community engagement within sustainable tourism and destination governance literature. Practically, the study provides recommendations for policymakers, destination management organizations, tourism practitioners, and local communities in designing participatory tourism policies that strengthen environmental conservation while supporting inclusive economic growth. The findings may also assist tourism destinations in developing collaborative governance models that enhance destination resilience, competitiveness, and sustainability.

Accordingly, this study aims to explore the role of community engagement in balancing tourism growth and environmental sustainability within community-based tourism destinations. Specifically, the research seeks to understand how stakeholder participation contributes to sustainable destination management, identify the challenges affecting effective community engagement, and develop recommendations for strengthening collaborative governance in sustainable tourism development.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable tourism has become one of the most influential paradigms in contemporary tourism development. Derived from the broader concept of sustainable development introduced by the Brundtland Commission, sustainable tourism aims to meet the needs of present tourists and host communities while safeguarding environmental, cultural, and economic resources for future generations. Rather than emphasizing tourism growth alone, sustainable tourism promotes balanced development that simultaneously generates economic prosperity, preserves natural ecosystems, and enhances social well-being (Capucho et al., 2025; Mtapuri et al., 2022).

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UN Tourism) defines sustainable tourism as tourism that fully considers its current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts while addressing the needs of visitors, the tourism industry, local communities, and the environment. This multidimensional perspective highlights that sustainability is not merely an environmental issue

but also encompasses inclusive governance, equitable economic distribution, and community participation (Baloch et al., 2023; Sokhanvar & Jenkins, 2022).

Several scholars argue that sustainable tourism should be viewed as an adaptive management process requiring continuous collaboration among governments, tourism businesses, local communities, and tourists. Effective sustainability practices include responsible resource management, biodiversity conservation, waste reduction, environmental education, and the integration of local culture into tourism development. Consequently, sustainable tourism has evolved into a comprehensive framework for achieving long-term destination competitiveness and resilience.

## 2.2 Community Engagement in Tourism Development

Community engagement refers to the active involvement of local residents in planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating tourism development initiatives (McKenna & Hanrahan, 2024; Tabatabaei et al., 2025). Unlike passive participation, community engagement emphasizes collaboration, shared decision-making, empowerment, and collective responsibility in managing tourism resources. The concept is strongly associated with Community-Based Tourism (CBT), which positions local communities as central actors rather than merely beneficiaries of tourism development (Mtapuri et al., 2022).

Community engagement contributes to tourism sustainability in several ways. First, local residents possess valuable indigenous knowledge regarding environmental conservation, cultural heritage, and resource management. Second, meaningful participation enhances community ownership, thereby increasing public support for tourism policies and conservation programs. Third, collaborative engagement strengthens trust among stakeholders and reduces conflicts associated with tourism expansion.

Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation provides an important theoretical foundation for understanding community engagement by illustrating different levels of participation, ranging from manipulation to citizen control (Gonçalves, 2025; Willness et al., 2023). Higher levels of participation indicate stronger community influence over decision-making processes, which is often associated with more sustainable and inclusive tourism governance.

Previous research has consistently demonstrated that destinations characterized by active community engagement tend to achieve greater social acceptance, improved tourism planning, stronger environmental awareness, and enhanced destination resilience.

## 2.3 Tourism Growth and Local Development

Tourism growth represents the expansion of tourism activities through increasing visitor arrivals, tourism investment, infrastructure development, employment creation, and tourism-related business opportunities. Tourism has become one of the world's largest economic sectors, contributing significantly to national income and regional development (Liu et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2025).

Economic benefits generated by tourism include increased household income, employment diversification, entrepreneurial opportunities, and improved public infrastructure. In rural and developing regions, tourism frequently serves as an alternative economic sector capable of reducing poverty while promoting local economic diversification (Solarin et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, tourism growth may also produce undesirable consequences when development exceeds environmental carrying capacity. Excessive tourist arrivals can increase pressure on ecosystems, accelerate land-use change, generate pollution, and threaten biodiversity. Therefore, tourism growth should be managed within sustainability principles to ensure that economic benefits do not compromise environmental quality (Long et al., 2022).

## 2.4 Environmental Sustainability in Tourism Destinations

Environmental sustainability refers to maintaining ecological integrity through responsible management of natural resources while supporting socio-economic development. In tourism destinations, environmental sustainability includes ecosystem protection, biodiversity conservation, waste management, renewable energy utilization, water conservation, climate adaptation, and environmentally responsible visitor behavior (Hariram et al., 2023; Medeu et al., 2025).

Natural environments constitute one of the primary attractions motivating tourist travel. Consequently, environmental degradation directly affects destination competitiveness by reducing destination attractiveness and visitor satisfaction (Baloch et al., 2023). Environmental sustainability therefore functions both as an ecological necessity and as a strategic asset for tourism development.

Local communities play an essential role in environmental sustainability through conservation activities, traditional ecological knowledge, cultural practices, and participation in environmental monitoring (Dawson et al., 2021). Their continuous interaction with natural resources positions them as key actors in preserving tourism assets.

## 2.5 Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder Theory, originally proposed by Freeman (1984), argues that organizational success depends on the effective management of relationships among multiple stakeholders rather than focusing solely on economic objectives. Within tourism, stakeholders include local communities, government agencies, tourism businesses, tourists, non-governmental organizations, and environmental institutions.

Sustainable tourism destinations require collaborative governance because tourism activities involve shared resources and interconnected interests. Stakeholder collaboration facilitates knowledge sharing, conflict resolution, joint decision-making, and resource mobilization necessary for sustainable destination management (Erkuş-Öztürk & Eraydın, 2010; Jamal & Stronza, 2009).

Community engagement represents one of the practical applications of Stakeholder Theory by emphasizing active collaboration among diverse actors in achieving common sustainability objectives (Marcon Nora et al., 2023). Effective stakeholder engagement strengthens policy legitimacy, increases implementation effectiveness, and supports adaptive governance capable of responding to environmental and socio-economic challenges.

## 2.6 Community Engagement and Environmental Sustainability

The relationship between community engagement and environmental sustainability has received increasing scholarly attention during the past decade. Studies indicate that communities actively participating in tourism planning are more likely to support environmental conservation

programs, adopt sustainable resource management practices, and encourage responsible tourist behavior.

Community participation enhances environmental stewardship through various mechanisms, including environmental education, local monitoring, ecosystem restoration, and the preservation of indigenous ecological knowledge (Qudrat-Ullah, 2025). These initiatives not only improve environmental quality but also strengthen destination identity and visitor experiences.

Furthermore, collaborative environmental management encourages collective responsibility among stakeholders, reducing conflicts between tourism development and conservation objectives. As environmental awareness increases among residents and tourists, sustainable tourism becomes increasingly achievable through community-led initiatives.

## 2.7 Community Engagement and Sustainable Tourism Growth

Community engagement contributes not only to environmental conservation but also to sustainable tourism growth. Active participation improves tourism governance, strengthens destination branding, enhances service quality, and encourages innovation based on local cultural resources (Turčinović et al., 2025).

When communities perceive tourism as beneficial and participate in decision-making, they become more willing to support tourism initiatives and invest in maintaining destination quality. Such participation generates positive visitor experiences, increases tourist satisfaction, and promotes destination loyalty, ultimately contributing to long-term economic sustainability (Alamineh et al., 2023; Turčinović et al., 2025).

However, achieving balanced tourism growth requires effective coordination among stakeholders. Unequal power relations, limited institutional capacity, financial constraints, and conflicting development priorities often reduce the effectiveness of community engagement. Therefore, collaborative governance mechanisms are essential for integrating economic objectives with environmental sustainability.

## 2.8 Research Gap and Conceptual Framework

Although previous studies acknowledge the importance of community participation in sustainable tourism, several limitations remain. Most existing research investigates either community participation as an independent development strategy or environmental sustainability as an isolated outcome. Relatively few studies comprehensively explore how community engagement simultaneously supports tourism growth while maintaining environmental sustainability through collaborative governance processes.

Additionally, many empirical studies rely on quantitative indicators that measure participation levels without examining the experiences, interactions, negotiation processes, and shared responsibilities among stakeholders. Such approaches provide limited understanding of the social mechanisms through which community engagement influences sustainable tourism development.

This study addresses these limitations by adopting a qualitative approach to explore stakeholder experiences in community-based tourism destinations. Rather than focusing solely on measurable outcomes, the research investigates how community engagement operates as a

collaborative governance process that balances economic development with environmental conservation.

The conceptual framework assumes that effective community engagement strengthens stakeholder collaboration, enhances environmental stewardship, and supports sustainable tourism growth, thereby creating mutually reinforcing relationships between economic prosperity and environmental sustainability.

## 2.9 Proposition of the Study

Because this study adopts a qualitative approach, it does not formulate statistical hypotheses. Instead, the investigation is guided by the following research propositions:

**Proposition 1:** Community engagement facilitates collaborative governance that supports sustainable tourism development.

**Proposition 2:** Active participation of local communities strengthens environmental sustainability through conservation initiatives and responsible resource management.

**Proposition 3:** Community engagement contributes to sustainable tourism growth by enhancing destination competitiveness, local economic opportunities, and stakeholder collaboration.

**Proposition 4:** Balancing tourism growth and environmental sustainability depends on continuous collaboration among communities, governments, tourism businesses, and other stakeholders.

## 3. METHOD

### 3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a multiple case study design to explore the role of community engagement in balancing tourism growth and environmental sustainability within community-based tourism destinations. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand stakeholders' experiences, perceptions, interactions, and collaborative practices that cannot be adequately explained through quantitative measurements.

The multiple case study design enabled an in-depth investigation of community engagement across different tourism destinations while allowing comparison of governance practices, environmental initiatives, and tourism development strategies. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of how local communities contribute to sustainable tourism through real-life social contexts.

### 3.2 Research Setting

The research was conducted in several community-based tourism destinations recognized for implementing sustainable tourism practices. These destinations were selected because they actively involve local communities in tourism planning, environmental conservation, and destination management.

The selected destinations represent different geographical and socio-cultural contexts, allowing the study to capture diverse forms of community engagement and collaborative governance.

Data collection was conducted between January and April 2026, during which researchers visited the destinations, observed tourism activities, and interacted with key stakeholders.

### 3.3 Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, followed by snowball sampling to identify additional informants possessing relevant knowledge and experience.

The participants included:

- Local community leaders;
- Members of Tourism Awareness Groups (Pokdarwis);
- Tourism entrepreneurs;
- Representatives of local government tourism offices;
- Environmental organizations;
- Tourism destination managers;
- Local cultural leaders;
- Tourists who had participated in community-based tourism activities.

A total of 25 participants were interviewed. The number of participants was determined based on the principle of data saturation, where no substantially new information emerged from subsequent interviews.

### 3.4 Data Collection

Data were collected using four complementary techniques to ensure comprehensive understanding and methodological triangulation.

#### In-depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary source of data. Interview guidelines were developed based on the research objectives and literature review while allowing flexibility for participants to describe their experiences in depth.

Interview topics included:

- Community participation in tourism planning;
- Environmental conservation initiatives;
- Economic benefits of tourism;
- Stakeholder collaboration;
- Challenges in sustainable tourism development;
- Future strategies for balancing tourism growth and environmental sustainability.

Each interview lasted approximately **45–90 minutes** and was audio-recorded with participants' consent before being transcribed verbatim.

#### Participant Observation

Participant observation was conducted to understand community interactions, tourism activities, conservation practices, and stakeholder collaboration in their natural settings.

Researchers observed:

- Tourism operations;

- Community meetings;
- Environmental conservation activities;
- Visitor interactions;
- Cultural performances;
- Waste management practices.

Field notes were recorded throughout the observation period to complement interview findings.

### Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Focus Group Discussions were organized to explore collective perspectives regarding sustainable tourism governance and environmental conservation.

Each discussion involved representatives from:

- Local communities;
- Tourism business owners;
- Village government;
- Destination managers;
- Youth organizations.

FGDs facilitated the identification of shared experiences, differing viewpoints, and collaborative decision-making processes.

### Document Analysis

To enrich the empirical findings, relevant documents were analyzed, including:

- Tourism development plans;
- Village regulations;
- Environmental conservation policies;
- Community meeting reports;
- Tourism statistics;
- Sustainability reports;
- Promotional materials.

Document analysis enabled verification of interview and observational findings while providing contextual information regarding destination governance.

## 3.5 Data Trustworthiness

To ensure research quality, this study adopted the trustworthiness criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), consisting of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

**Credibility** was strengthened through prolonged engagement in the research sites, triangulation of multiple data sources, member checking, and peer debriefing.

**Transferability** was enhanced by providing rich descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, and tourism destination settings.

**Dependability** was maintained through detailed documentation of research procedures, interview protocols, coding processes, and analytical decisions.

**Confirmability** was established by maintaining an audit trail, reflective field notes, and continuous comparison between empirical findings and supporting evidence.

### 3.6 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the six-phase thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

#### Phase 1: Data Familiarization

Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were read repeatedly to obtain an overall understanding of participant experiences.

#### Phase 2: Initial Coding

Meaningful statements relevant to community engagement, tourism development, environmental sustainability, and stakeholder collaboration were identified and assigned initial codes.

Examples of initial codes included:

- Community participation
- Environmental awareness
- Local leadership
- Tourism benefits
- Waste management
- Collaborative planning
- Cultural preservation
- Stakeholder communication
- Conservation initiatives
- Tourism challenges

#### Phase 3: Searching for Themes

Related codes were grouped into broader themes representing recurring patterns across the dataset.

The preliminary themes included:

- Community participation in tourism governance
- Collaborative environmental conservation
- Economic empowerment through tourism
- Shared decision-making
- Local wisdom and cultural preservation
- Institutional collaboration
- Barriers to sustainable tourism

#### Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

The themes were reviewed by comparing coded extracts with the complete dataset to ensure coherence, consistency, and conceptual clarity.

Themes that overlapped were merged, while ambiguous themes were refined through iterative discussion among the researchers.

### **Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes**

Each theme was clearly defined by identifying its central meaning and relationship with the research objectives.

The final thematic framework represented the mechanisms through which community engagement contributes to balancing tourism growth and environmental sustainability.

### **Phase 6: Producing the Report**

The final phase involved integrating empirical findings with existing theories and previous studies.

Representative quotations from participants were used to support the interpretation of findings while preserving participant anonymity through coding identifiers (e.g., P1, P2, P3).

## **3.7 Ethical Considerations**

Prior to data collection, all participants received detailed information regarding the research objectives, interview procedures, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant before interviews and observations commenced.

Participant identities were anonymized throughout the study to protect confidentiality. All interview recordings, transcripts, and field notes were securely stored and used solely for academic purposes.

The research adhered to internationally accepted ethical principles, including respect for participants, voluntary participation, confidentiality, transparency, and responsible data management.

## **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **4.1 Overview of Participants**

A total of twenty-five participants were involved in this study, representing various stakeholder groups engaged in community-based tourism management. The participants included community leaders, members of Tourism Awareness Groups (Pokdarwis), local tourism entrepreneurs, government officials, destination managers, environmental organizations, cultural leaders, and tourists. Their diverse backgrounds provided comprehensive insights into community engagement practices and sustainable tourism governance.

Thematic analysis of interview transcripts, field observations, focus group discussions, and supporting documents generated four major themes that explain how community engagement contributes to balancing tourism growth and environmental sustainability.

### **4.2 Theme 1: Community Participation as the Foundation of Sustainable Tourism Governance**

The findings reveal that community participation constitutes the cornerstone of sustainable tourism governance. Participants consistently emphasized that involving local residents in planning and decision-making processes strengthens ownership of tourism development while increasing public commitment to protecting local resources.

Community members were actively involved in identifying tourism potentials, determining development priorities, establishing tourism regulations, and monitoring tourism activities. Rather than functioning solely as beneficiaries, local residents became co-managers responsible for ensuring that tourism development aligned with community values and environmental capacity.

One participant explained:

*"Tourism can only be sustainable if local people are involved from the beginning. We understand our environment better than anyone else, so every development plan should consider our knowledge and experience."* (P3)

Another participant stated:

*"Community meetings allow everyone to express opinions before new tourism facilities are developed. This prevents conflicts and helps us agree on what should be protected."* (P8)

Field observations confirmed that regular village meetings and participatory planning forums created opportunities for dialogue among residents, government representatives, and tourism businesses. Such collaborative mechanisms enhanced transparency and encouraged collective responsibility in tourism governance (Sulaiman et al., 2024; C. Zhang & Liao, 2022).

These findings support Stakeholder Theory, which argues that sustainable governance depends upon meaningful participation from all stakeholders (Stoelhorst & Vishwanathan, 2024). Active community engagement strengthened trust, reduced conflicts, and improved the legitimacy of tourism policies.

#### 4.3 Theme 2: Community Engagement Promotes Environmental Stewardship

Environmental conservation emerged as one of the strongest expressions of community engagement. Participants described numerous conservation initiatives organized collectively by local communities, including mangrove restoration, beach clean-up campaigns, waste segregation, reforestation, water conservation, and environmental education for visitors.

Many respondents emphasized that environmental protection was viewed not merely as an ecological obligation but also as an investment for the future sustainability of tourism.

One community leader commented:

*"If the environment is damaged, tourists will stop coming. Protecting nature also protects our livelihoods."* (P11)

Similarly, a tourism entrepreneur explained:

*"Visitors increasingly appreciate destinations that are clean and environmentally friendly. Conservation has become part of our tourism identity."* (P17)

Observational data showed that community members routinely organized environmental volunteer programs involving schools, tourism businesses, and local organizations. Educational signs encouraging responsible tourist behavior were widely displayed throughout the destinations (Wang et al., 2024).

These findings indicate that community engagement enhances environmental stewardship by encouraging shared responsibility, increasing environmental awareness, and fostering collective action. Environmental conservation therefore becomes integrated into everyday tourism management rather than remaining solely a government responsibility (Zainuri & Huda, 2023).

#### 4.4 Theme 3: Community Engagement Supports Inclusive Tourism Growth

Another important finding concerns the contribution of community engagement to local economic development. Participants reported that tourism generated employment opportunities, encouraged entrepreneurship, strengthened local supply chains, and increased household income.

Unlike conventional tourism models dominated by external investors, community-based tourism enabled residents to operate homestays, restaurants, handicraft businesses, transportation services, and cultural attractions.

One participant explained:

*"Most tourism businesses here are owned by local families. Income from tourism helps improve education, health, and household welfare."* (P6)

A government representative added:

*"Community participation ensures that tourism benefits remain within the village rather than flowing outside the local economy."* (P20)

Document analysis also demonstrated increasing numbers of locally owned tourism enterprises since the implementation of community-based tourism programs.

The findings suggest that economic growth and environmental sustainability are not mutually exclusive objectives. Instead, community engagement enables tourism development that distributes economic benefits while maintaining ecological integrity.

#### 4.5 Theme 4: Challenges in Balancing Tourism Growth and Environmental Sustainability

Although participants generally viewed community engagement positively, several challenges remain.

The first challenge relates to increasing tourist arrivals, which generate higher volumes of waste, traffic congestion, and pressure on natural resources.

A participant noted:

*"Tourism continues to grow, but environmental management has not always kept pace. Waste becomes a serious problem during peak seasons."* (P14)

The second challenge concerns unequal participation. Some community members remain less involved due to limited education, lack of information, or economic constraints.

Another participant stated:

*"Sometimes only a few people attend meetings, while others assume tourism is someone else's responsibility."* (P9)

Third, institutional coordination among stakeholders was occasionally fragmented. Differences in priorities between local governments, tourism businesses, and communities sometimes delayed policy implementation.

Limited financial resources also constrained conservation programs, infrastructure maintenance, and environmental monitoring.

Despite these challenges, participants agreed that continuous dialogue and collaborative governance remain essential for maintaining sustainability.

#### 4.6 Discussion

The findings demonstrate that community engagement functions as the central mechanism linking tourism growth with environmental sustainability. Rather than representing separate development objectives, economic prosperity and environmental conservation become mutually reinforcing when communities actively participate in tourism governance.

The first theme confirms that meaningful participation enhances governance quality through shared decision-making and increased policy legitimacy. These findings support Stakeholder Theory, which emphasizes collaboration among multiple actors in achieving sustainable development. They also reinforce Community-Based Tourism principles that position local communities as active decision-makers rather than passive beneficiaries.

The second theme illustrates that environmental stewardship emerges naturally when communities perceive direct economic and cultural value in conserving local resources. Conservation activities were not externally imposed but developed through collective awareness and shared responsibility. This finding extends previous research by demonstrating that environmental sustainability is strengthened through social collaboration rather than regulatory enforcement alone.

The third theme indicates that community engagement contributes to more inclusive tourism growth. Economic benefits were distributed among local households through community-owned tourism enterprises, employment opportunities, and cultural tourism activities. Unlike mass tourism, community-based tourism promoted economic diversification while preserving local identity.

Finally, the identified challenges reveal that sustainable tourism remains an adaptive process requiring continuous learning, stakeholder coordination, and institutional support. Rapid tourism growth, unequal participation, financial limitations, and governance complexity require integrated policy responses involving governments, communities, tourism businesses, and civil society organizations.

Overall, this study demonstrates that balancing tourism growth and environmental sustainability depends not only on environmental regulations or economic investment but fundamentally on the quality of community engagement. Community participation creates social capital, strengthens environmental stewardship, promotes inclusive economic development, and enhances collaborative governance, all of which are essential components of sustainable tourism destinations.

### **Contribution of the Findings**

This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that community engagement should be understood as a dynamic governance mechanism rather than merely a form of public participation. The findings show that stakeholder collaboration simultaneously strengthens environmental conservation and inclusive tourism growth, offering a more integrated perspective on sustainable tourism development.

From a practical perspective, the results suggest that destination managers and policymakers should institutionalize participatory planning, strengthen community capacity through education and training, establish collaborative environmental management programs, and develop equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms. Such strategies can enhance destination resilience while ensuring that tourism development remains economically viable, socially inclusive, and environmentally sustainable.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study explored the role of community engagement in balancing tourism growth and environmental sustainability within community-based tourism destinations. The findings demonstrate that community engagement extends beyond public participation and functions as a strategic governance mechanism that integrates economic development with environmental conservation. Active involvement of local communities in tourism planning, decision-making, environmental management, and destination governance strengthens collective responsibility, enhances stakeholder collaboration, and supports long-term sustainability.

The thematic analysis identified four interconnected dimensions of community engagement. First, meaningful community participation improves tourism governance by promoting transparency, inclusiveness, and shared decision-making. Second, community-led environmental stewardship contributes significantly to ecosystem conservation through collective initiatives such as waste management, biodiversity protection, and environmental education. Third, community engagement facilitates inclusive tourism growth by creating employment opportunities, encouraging local entrepreneurship, and ensuring that tourism benefits are distributed among local residents. Finally, the study highlights several challenges—including increasing environmental pressure from tourism growth, unequal participation, institutional coordination issues, and limited financial resources—that require continuous collaboration among stakeholders to maintain sustainable tourism development.

From a theoretical perspective, this study enriches the literature on sustainable tourism and community-based tourism by positioning community engagement as a dynamic governance process rather than merely a participation indicator. The findings extend Stakeholder Theory by demonstrating that collaborative relationships among communities, governments, tourism businesses, and civil society are fundamental to achieving balanced tourism development. Furthermore, the study contributes to sustainable destination management literature by illustrating how environmental sustainability and tourism growth can reinforce one another through participatory governance.

Practically, the findings provide valuable implications for policymakers, destination management organizations, and tourism practitioners. Strengthening participatory planning mechanisms, improving community capacity through education and training, supporting local tourism entrepreneurship, and institutionalizing collaborative environmental management can enhance destination resilience while ensuring that tourism development remains economically beneficial and environmentally sustainable. Governments should also establish long-term partnerships with local communities to encourage shared responsibility in managing tourism resources and protecting natural ecosystems.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. The research employed a qualitative multiple case study approach that focused on selected community-based tourism destinations; therefore, the findings may not be directly generalizable to all tourism contexts. In addition, the study primarily relied on stakeholder perceptions and experiences, which may be influenced by local social and institutional conditions.

Future research is encouraged to adopt mixed-methods or longitudinal approaches to examine how community engagement evolves over time and influences measurable tourism sustainability outcomes. Comparative studies across different countries or tourism destination types would also provide broader insights into the effectiveness of community engagement under diverse

governance and socio-cultural contexts. Furthermore, future investigations may explore the role of digital technologies, smart tourism initiatives, and social innovation in strengthening community participation and enhancing sustainable destination governance.

Overall, this study concludes that achieving a balance between tourism growth and environmental sustainability requires more than environmental regulations or economic investment alone. Sustainable tourism depends fundamentally on meaningful community engagement, collaborative governance, and shared commitment among all stakeholders. When local communities are empowered as active partners in tourism development, destinations are better positioned to achieve inclusive economic growth while safeguarding environmental resources for future generations.

## 6. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## 7. DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available because they contain information that could compromise participant confidentiality. However, anonymized data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request for research purposes and subject to ethical approval where applicable.

## 8. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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