



The Governance Gap And Its Implications For Destination Image And Tourist Satisfaction: A Marine Ecotourism Study In The Likupang And Bunaken

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Abstract: Marine ecotourism destinations possess significant economic potential but face concurrent sustainability challenges, including environmental degradation and tourist dissatisfaction. This study investigates the interplay among destination image, tourist satisfaction, and governance failures within Indonesia's Super Priority Tourism Destinations, specifically Likupang and Bunaken. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, this study explores the lived experiences of key stakeholders, including tourists, community members, industry operators, and academic experts, through in-depth interviews and observation. The findings reveal a significant governance gap: a disconnect between top-down development policies and on-the-ground operational realities. This gap manifests as tangible failures, including poor waste management, inconsistent service quality, and inadequate community empowerment. These factors collectively create an expectation-reality paradox that fundamentally undermines the destination image and degrades tourist satisfaction, thereby threatening the long-term viability of both sites. This study proposes a constructive governance model for sustainable marine ecotourism as its primary contribution. This model advocates a shift from a sectoral, top-down approach to a collaborative framework, specifically through a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) scheme. The proposed model aims to align economic incentives with conservation objectives by integrating pro-environmental behaviors and authentic community participation, providing a viable pathway to restore the destination image and ensure sustained tourist satisfaction.

Keywords: Marine Ecotourism, Destination Image, Tourist Satisfaction, Governance, Public-Private Partnership (PPP)

INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry is a significant driver of the global economy, offering substantial potential for job creation and economic growth (Zadeh Bazargani & Kiliç, 2021). However, the rapid proliferation of tourism activities, mobility, and accommodation development yields multifaceted environmental, economic, and cultural impacts (Gühnemann et al., 2021). Recognizing these consequences, sustainable tourism development has become a central issue in conceptual and empirical discourse (Azinuddin et al., 2023). Within this context, ecotourism has



emerged as a crucial subsector aiming to align environmental conservation with the well-being of local communities.

Marine ecotourism, in particular, presents unique challenges, as its activities encompass coastal zones, the sea surface, and underwater areas, which are inherently intrusive and interact directly with vulnerable marine ecosystems (Said et al., 2022). As demand for nature-based destinations escalates, so do the challenges of maintaining ecological resource integrity (Lee et al., 2021). Adverse impacts such as emissions from water transport, oil spills, and inadequate waste management, originating from tourists and local communities, can directly degrade marine biota ecosystems.

This issue of ecosystem degradation, often visual, functions as a crucial antecedent that negatively shapes tourist perceptions and, subsequently, the destination image. Destination image, the totality of impressions and beliefs an individual holds about a place, is a critical determinant influencing travel decisions and post-visit behaviors, including evaluations and revisit intentions (Pham & Khanh, 2021). In the context of ecotourism, a positive image is essential for driving demand (Luong, 2023). However, this image is fragile and can be undermined by deviant behaviors or tourist incivility, such as vandalism, littering, and disrespectful conduct towards nature (Cheng et al., 2021).

Ironically, a gap often exists between tourists' stated pro-environmental attitudes and their actual behaviors at the destination, a phenomenon known as the attitude-behavior gap (Pham & Khanh, 2021), (López-Sánchez & Pulido-Fernández, 2016). Although tourists may possess environmental awareness (Kotler et al., 2021) or sustainability intelligence (Mohammad Nasir et al., 2024), the presence of uncivil behavior can disrupt the harmony and natural beauty (Haraldsson & Ólafsdóttir, 2018). This incivility can act as a boundary condition that detracts from the destination experience (Qiu et al., 2022), ultimately impacting tourist satisfaction. As an affective and cognitive post-visit evaluation, tourist satisfaction highly depends on whether the anticipated destination image aligns with the experienced reality.

This study examines this phenomenon within the context of two priority tourism destinations in North Sulawesi, Indonesia, which exhibit contrasting trajectories: Bunaken National Park and the Likupang Special Economic Zone (SEZ). Bunaken Island, a legendary 8.08 km² marine



tourism destination, has historically been a regional tourism mainstay. However, data from the Tourism Office indicates an alarming trend: a drastic decline in tourist arrivals of up to 65% over the last seven years. Visitor numbers peaked at 40,979 in 2009 and have plummeted to below 5,000 in the past two years. This sharp decrease suggests the likelihood of serious problems related to destination image or tourist satisfaction. Conversely, the Government is positioning the Likupang SEZ (Government Regulation No.84, 2019), established via Government Regulation No. 84/2019, as one of five Super Priority Tourism Destinations. Likupang is currently undergoing massive development focused on premium resorts and cultural tourism, employing the Wallace Conservation as the rising star strategy.

This stark contrast between a mature and declining destination (Bunaken) and an emerging, investment-driven destination (Likupang) offers a unique natural laboratory. Although both locations are proximate and foundationally based on marine ecotourism, they face distinct image management and satisfaction challenges. Previous research has focused separately on ecotourism intentions (Pham & Khanh, 2021), (Luong, 2023) or incivility impacts (Qiu et al., 2022). However, a research gap persists regarding how the marine ecotourism image and tourist satisfaction interact within two destination contexts at opposing life cycle stages.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the roles of marine ecotourism image and tourist satisfaction in the Likupang and Bunaken priority destinations. It proposes a constructive model that is significant for enhancing the marine ecotourism image in the Priority Tourism Destinations of Likupang and Bunaken, Manado. This model emphasizes collaboration among the community, tourists, and the tourism industry to preserve ecological integrity, which has been shown to positively impact tourist satisfaction and encourage return visitation.

METHOD

This study utilized a qualitative methodology with a phenomenological approach. This approach was selected because the research objective was to explore and deeply understand the meanings, perceptions, and subjective (lived) experiences of tourists, industry operators, and the community regarding the marine ecotourism destination image and tourist satisfaction (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Government policies on the National Tourism Destination Master Plan for



Likupang and Bunaken Island support this, acknowledging that the research setting's status depends on these Destination Areas' governance.

Data were collected through direct (in-person) and online interviews, direct observation, a review of relevant literature, and focus group discussions. The national tourism destinations of Likupang and Bunaken Island demand significant investment in time, resources, and meticulous management to achieve progressive and sustainable marine ecotourism development. Based on this premise, the Likupang and Bunaken National Tourism Destinations were deemed suitable for obtaining the holistic insights required to formulate an integrated framework encompassing all the constructs and dimensions discussed above.

Research informants were selected using purposive sampling. Consistent with the phenomenological and exploratory nature of the study, this research focused on the depth and richness of data (data richness) from key informants, rather than on statistical generalization. The informants involved in this study were: 1. A Marine Tourism Expert (1 Informant), 2. A Tourist (1 Informant), 3. Travel Operators (2 Informants), and 4. A Community Member (1 Informant). This selection aimed to validate data regarding development and tourist satisfaction relative to the tourism destination image in the Likupang and Bunaken Areas. This method ensured that only informants who met the study's inclusion criteria were interviewed.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A phenomenological analysis of key informant experiences in Bunaken and Likupang reveals a significant disconnect between the projected ecotourism image and on-the-ground operational realities. The findings highlight three central themes: (1) a gap between ecotourism expectations and experiences; (2) divergent challenges at different destination life cycle stages; and (3) the disconnect between top-down policy and bottom-up implementation.

The Expectation Gap and Its Impact on Satisfaction

The marine ecotourism destination is a complex and multidimensional concept, influenced by various variables such as environmental service quality, infrastructure conditions, and the overall experience gained during the visit. Research findings indicate that the most significant challenge faced by both destinations is the failure to manage crucial touchpoints that shape image



and satisfaction. The literature (Carvache-Franco et al., 2021) emphasizes that satisfaction is closely related to perceived value, convenience, and human care. However, findings from the field reveal deficits in these aspects.

1. Environmental Quality significantly influences Destination Image.

The marine ecotourism image inherently promises a clean and pristine environment. However, this finding directly contradicts this reality. Informant 1 (Marine Tourism Expert) explicitly noted: *Trash in the Likupang Area is still visibly accumulated at specific points; no permanent staff are assigned to clean it. (Interview: July 22, 2025)*

This finding was corroborated by Informant 3a (Travel Operator), who experienced direct operational problems in Bunaken: *We still receive many complaints from tourists about trash stopping the engine of the boat we use in the middle of the sea. (Interview: October 16, 2025)*

Both findings are clear evidence of an image-reality paradox. Likupang, which is being developed as a super-priority destination, has already failed in basic waste management, damaging its image even before maturation. Bunaken, a global diving icon, now has an image threatened by marine pollution that is both functional (stopping engines) and aesthetic.

This negatively confirms the Expectancy Disconfirmation Theory (Saut & Ly, 2024). Tourists arrive with high expectations (a positive image) and are confronted with a poor reality (waste), creating significant negative disconfirmation. This aligns with studies at the Tioman Island Marine Park, which also found a significant gap between expectations and actual experiences regarding environmental service quality (Adam et al., 2024). Failing to manage waste (Kamagi et al., 2022) is an operational issue and a fundamental problem delegitimizing a destination's ecotourism claims.

2. Physical Environment

Satisfaction also highly depends on service interactions (Cariño et al., 2019), (Min, 2016). Here, Bunaken shows signs of destination fatigue. Informant 2 (Tourist) complained: *We felt the boatman's service was not yet friendly when serving us during the diving activity in Bunaken. (Interview: July 21, 2025)*

This finding is crucial. This indicates that the tourism ecosystem in Bunaken, which should be mature, fails to provide human care (Carvache-Franco et al., 2021). This unfriendly service



directly diminishes the perceived value (Lagarense & Walansendow, 2020) and negatively impacts tourist satisfaction, regardless of the coral reef quality they might still enjoy. This confirms that infrastructure (Carvache-Franco et al., 2021) and natural beauty (Sthapit et al., 2020) are insufficient if the human service component fails.

Divergent Challenges in Bunaken and Likupang

Data analysis indicates that although both locations face image and satisfaction issues, their root causes differ according to their destination life cycle stage.

1. Bunaken's Destination Challenges

Bunaken, a premier destination for diving and snorkeling, faces over-tourism and environmental degradation challenges. Challenges in Capacity Management and Competition: As a mature destination, Bunaken's problems are operational and competitive. The findings (unfriendly service, marine debris) and supporting literature (Farhum et al., 2021) suggest Bunaken suffers from poor carrying capacity management. Diver density and over-tourism (Lagarense & Walansendow, 2020) damage the ecosystem (Farhum et al., 2021) and degrade the quality of the experience.

This indicates that the marine tourism ecosystem in Bunaken is not functioning correctly because tourist volume is imbalanced with the destination's resources. Therefore, appropriate visitor number regulation is necessary to maintain ecological balance and the quality of the tourist experience [(Farhum et al., 2021)].

Bunaken faces the challenge of sustaining satisfaction. Its failure to manage density and service quality leaves it vulnerable to competition. In comparison, destinations like Sipadan Island in Malaysia strictly limit daily diving permits to protect the ecosystem and guarantee experiential exclusivity. Bunaken, in contrast, appears to be pursuing volume, sacrificing long-term satisfaction and eroding its premium image.

2. Likupang's Destination Challenges

The Challenge of Building a Community Foundation: As a super-priority destination, Likupang faces a more fundamental challenge: building an ecotourism foundation from scratch. However, field findings reveal a top-down approach that neglects the primary pillar of ecotourism: the community (Rhama, 2020). Informant 4 (Community Member) expressed this frustration:



As a community, we are happy that Likupang was designated a national tourism destination. However, we were responsible for developing tourism villages with various appropriate technology tools, yet we do not know how to operate them. (Interview: July 22, 2025)

This finding indicates that if the community is not competently involved from the outset (Junaid, 2018), Likupang's community-based ecotourism image (Azinuddin et al., 2023) will never materialize. Instead, what will be created is enclave tourism (exclusive tourism) isolated from local culture, which contradicts ecotourism principles. Resolving the gap between expectations and reality, implementing sustainable tourism practices, and the active involvement of the local community are strategic aspects that can enhance tourist satisfaction while simultaneously promoting responsible ecotourism development.

Research emphasizes the importance of sustainable tourism practices and strategic management to protect the unique underwater ecosystem while ensuring long-term tourist satisfaction (T.H. et al., 2024). The sustainability of such marine parks is measured through an index comprising ecological, economic, social, and institutional dimensions, with results indicating a moderate status, which suggests the need for improvements in several aspects. Marine ecotourism, categorized under sustainable tourism, is recognized significantly for strengthening local livelihoods, preserving cultural values, and maintaining environmental sustainability (Rhama, 2020). Therefore, marine tourism activities, often conducted within marine protected areas (MPAs) to create a highly potential symbiotic relationship, can raise environmental awareness and generate income for the protected area and its surrounding communities.

In ecotourism destinations, products and services are critical elements shaping the tourist experience and evaluating a site's successes or shortcomings (Azinuddin et al., 2023), (Fu et al., 2023). The design and presentation of these elements influence how tourists perceive destination features, potentially communicating deeper meanings or values. When tourists enjoy marine tourism activities (whether on the coast, sea surface, or underwater) that management has designed to involve them in environmental conservation, such as planting mangroves and avoiding plastic food containers or waste bins, eco-tourists then realize the importance of their involvement in preserving marine sustainability. Such experiences transform objective affordances into subjective



evaluations, with the emotional significance of the experience acting as the lens through which the destination is perceived (Sthapit et al., 2023).

A constructive model for a sustainable marine ecotourism destination image should begin with environmentally-aware communities and tourists who have adopted the concepts of the SDGs and the blue economy, generating tourist satisfaction and return visitation to marine ecotourism destinations, as illustrated in the figure below:

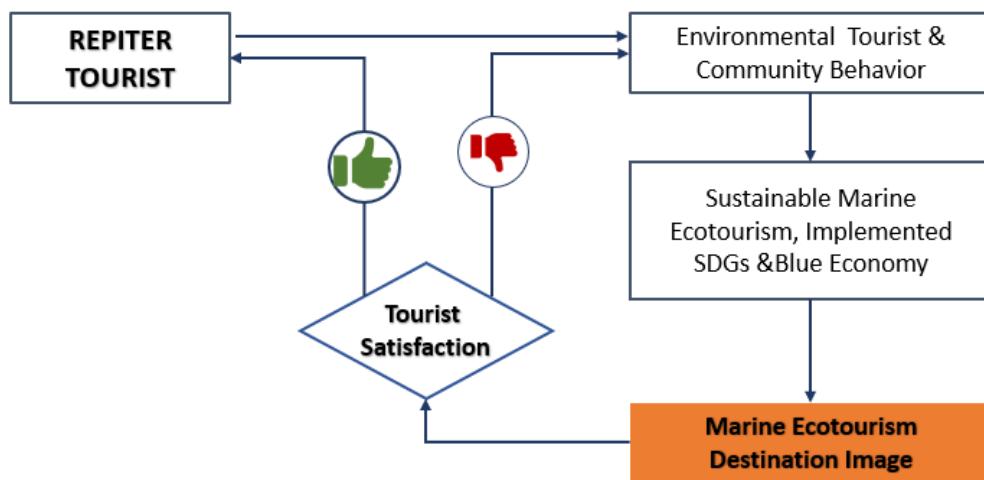


Figure 1. Constructive Model of Marine Ecotourism Destination Image and Tourist Satisfaction

(Source: Author's analysis, 2025)

The Gap Between Top-Down Policy and Bottom-Up Implementation

‘A massive gap exists between policies formulated at the national level and their on-the-ground implementation and supervision. The government has established a framework through Presidential Regulation No. 16 of 2024 (Master Plan for Manado-Likupang National Tourism Destination) and Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy Regulation No. 9 of 2021. However, implementation is weak. The government provided hardware (technological equipment) without the software (training and mentorship). This is not empowerment (Kamagi et al., 2022) but a burden. This failure creates the risk that the local community will merely become spectators in their own land, an observation reinforced by findings that the Likupang Special Economic Zone (SEZ) land is largely privately owned (Government Regulation No.84, 2019).



Informant 3b (Travel Operator) highlighted the enforcement issue: *The regional government's policy prohibiting waste disposal by ships passing through Bunaken National Park and Likupang waters has been established, but it requires periodic supervision. (Online interview: October 15, 2025)*

This finding confirms critiques in the literature (Suharyanto et al., 2024) that Indonesian tourism policy tends to be top-down and sectoral. The existence of a policy without routine supervision (Informant 3b's finding) and community mentorship (Informant 4's finding) renders it ineffective.

This governance failure directly impacts image and satisfaction. Without law enforcement, the waste problem will continue undermining the destination image (Informants 1 & 3a's findings). Without participatory governance that meaningfully involves the community (Britton et al., 2021), (Suhardono et al., 2024), service will remain poor (Informant 2's finding) and community empowerment will fail (Informant 4's finding).

Therefore, this study concludes that technical solutions such as Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) tools [49] cannot repair the image and increase satisfaction in Bunaken and Likupang. There needs to be a fundamental shift from top-down governance to a collaborative model, such as the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) scheme mandated by Presidential Regulation No. 38 of 2015, which authentically integrates the community, private sector, and government in daily supervision and operations.

Marine ecotourism areas require skills to provide services that encourage visitors to be more environmentally friendly. This condition will, in turn, foster enhanced pro-environmental behavior among tourists. The availability of regulations and their application by the community and visitors will positively impact environmental sustainability (Junaid, 2018). This increased awareness drives value-based decision-making, where tourists actively seek destinations aligned with their ethical values and sustainability goals. When a destination is perceived positively for its eco-friendliness, cultural respect, or sustainable practices, tourists with high sustainable intelligence and environmental concern are more likely to translate favorable perceptions into actions, such as visiting the site, recommending it, or participating in sustainable activities.



This research aims to build an integrated framework that explores the linkages among marine ecotourism destination image design, the environmental perceptions and behaviors of tourists and the community, and the marine tourism experience. This experience imparts an impression that encourages return visits and ultimately leads to tourist satisfaction. Based on these constructs, this study provides holistic insights into shaping a marine ecotourism destination image, contributing to sustainable marine ecotourism development and tourist satisfaction.

The insights gained from this framework will offer valuable contributions to science and the institutions managing priority tourism destinations in Indonesia, particularly the Likupang and Bunaken Island areas. Quality destination management will yield high-quality service, thereby impacting tourist satisfaction. This addresses a gap in the literature and provides an innovative perspective on sustainable tourism, as national tourism destination governance cannot be executed unilaterally. Presidential Regulation No. 38 of 2015 mandates the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) scheme for managing tourism destinations.

This scheme and concept can be applied in Likupang, Manado, which has rapid growth potential in the marine ecotourism sector. It will benefit the environment and the local community while progressing toward better service.

No	Aspect of Cooperation	Private/Investor	Government	OUTPUT Result	OUTCOME Result
1	Design	Detailed development area (amenities, attractions, utilities).	Masterplan and standard technical specifications concept (RIPP).	Optimal design.	Generates tourist satisfaction.
2	Build	Construction of all tourism infrastructure and facilities.	Development according to regulations (Spatial/Regional Plan) and quality oversight.	Standard for high-quality policy products.	Adequate tourism facilities.
3	Operate	Manage and operate the area/tourism facilities commercially under 25-30 year concession.	Regulatory function, promotion, and economic and social benefits.	Community empowerment in the tourism sector.	Community welfare and increased Regional-Owned Revenue (PAD).
4	Finance	Provide a large portion or all of the initial investment capital.	Viability Gap Funding (VGF) support and risk guarantees.	Optimal funding procedures.	Increased PAD / Gross Regional Domestic Product (PDRB) revenue.
5	Maintenance	Maintenance and repair of all assets during the concession period.	The asset is handed over in good condition	Standard for tourism facility quality.	Tourist satisfaction in the



after the concession period. use of tourism facilities.

Table 1. Recommendations for a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) Scheme in the Development of the Likupang-Bunaken Tourism Area

Source: Researcher's Analysis, 2025

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the significant disconnect between policy and reality in the marine ecotourism destinations of Bunaken and Likupang, revealing how critical governance gaps directly undermine destination image and tourist satisfaction. The findings demonstrate that despite their different life cycle stages, both destinations suffer from a top-down, sectoral governance model that fails in implementation. In the mature destination of Bunaken, this failure manifests as operational fatigue, poor service quality, and ineffective waste management, leading to negative disconfirmation among tourists. In the emerging destination of Likupang, the gap presents a foundational failure in community empowerment, where technological hardware is provided without the necessary software of training and mentorship, risking community alienation.

The primary contribution of this research is formulating a constructive governance model that moves beyond ineffective top-down mandates. This model advocates for a fundamental shift towards collaborative governance, specifically recommending implementing a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) scheme, as mandated by Indonesian Presidential Regulation No. 38 of 2015. As detailed in Table 1, this PPP framework provides a practical mechanism for integrating the government (regulator), the private sector (investor/operator), and the local community (partner). This collaborative approach aligns economic incentives with conservation objectives, ensuring that environmental sustainability and pro-environmental behaviors become shared responsibilities, cultivating a positive destination image, and fostering sustained tourist satisfaction.

Theoretical and Practical Implications Theoretically, this study bridges the literature on destination image and public administration by empirically positioning governance failure as a critical antecedent to image degradation and tourist dissatisfaction. It highlights that technical solutions are insufficient when the underlying governance structure is flawed. Practically, this research serves as a direct warning to policymakers and destination managers: investing in infrastructure (hardware) without investing in community competency and strict policy



enforcement (software) will lead to systemic failure. The proposed PPP model offers a tangible blueprint for sustainably managing Indonesia's priority destinations.

Limitations and Future Research The qualitative, phenomenological approach of this study, while providing rich, in-depth data, relies on a small, purposive sample of key informants. Therefore, the findings offer depth of understanding rather than statistical generalisability. Future research should aim to quantitatively test the relationships proposed in the constructive model (Figure 1). A comparative analysis measuring the impact of different governance models (e.g., top-down vs. collaborative PPP) on specific variables like 'perceived waste management' or 'community engagement levels' across all of Indonesia's Super Priority Tourism Destinations locations would be a valuable next step in validating this framework.

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