

Sustainable Tourism Planning and Management on Religious Destination in Indonesia: The Tomb of Sunan Kalijaga

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the planning and management of sustainable tourism at the Tomb of Sunan Kalijaga in Demak, Central Java, one of Indonesia's leading religious tourism destinations. Sustainable tourism is essential for balancing economic development, socio-cultural preservation, and environmental protection while ensuring the long-term sustainability of tourism destinations. However, limited studies have examined the implementation of sustainable tourism in religious tourism settings. This study aims to analyse sustainable tourism planning and management at the Tomb of Sunan Kalijaga and its contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A qualitative case study approach was employed through field observations, semi-structured interviews, documentation, and literature review. The findings show that the destination, which attracts approximately 1.6 million visitors annually, has successfully integrated sustainable tourism principles into its management. Economic sustainability is reflected in the development of community-based businesses, including souvenir shops, food stalls, parking services, accommodation, and other local enterprises that generate employment and income. Socio-cultural sustainability is demonstrated through the preservation of religious traditions, particularly the annual cleansing ceremony of Sunan Kalijaga's sacred heirlooms during Eid al-Adha, which strengthens cultural identity and community participation. Environmental sustainability is promoted through the use of environmentally friendly materials such as bamboo, waste management facilities, and efforts to maintain the cleanliness of the pilgrimage area. The study identifies three main strategies implemented by the Sunan Kalidjogo Foundation: collaboration with government agencies through education and training, capacity building for foundation staff, and partnerships with stakeholders to promote environmentally responsible tourism practices. These strategies support the achievement of SDGs, particularly Goal 1 (No Poverty), Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and Goal 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), highlighting the importance of collaborative governance in sustaining religious tourism destinations.

Keywords: Sustainable Tourism Development; Religious Tourism; Sunan Kalijaga; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); Sunan Kalidjogo Foundation.

INTRODUCTION

Religious tourism is the oldest type of tourism in the world. This type of tourism existed long before the emergence of modern tourism in the mid-1800s. Religious tourism activities took place even before scholars defined what tourism was. Religious tourism activities have been carried out for thousands of years since humankind first encountered religion. An example of religious tourism activities can be observed among Muslims who travel to the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina to perform Umrah and Hajj. Similarly, adherents of Judaism travel to the Wailing Wall in East Jerusalem, and Catholics travel to Rome, Italy, both of which represent religious tourism activities. Meanwhile, religious tourism is defined not only by its religious aspects but also by

secular dimensions. This means that religious tourism can be followed in by people across religions, and not limited to a single religion only. Religious tourism can be defined as visitation to certain tourism places where visitors have the opportunity to experience religious events or sites, or the products they induce, such as art, culture, traditions, and architecture (Iliev, 2020). Understanding religious tourism also cannot be separated from pilgrimage tourism and spiritual tourism. In this context, pilgrimage tourism and spiritual tourism are subsets of religious tourism. The difference lies in pilgrimage tourism, which specifically involves visits to holy places, whereas spiritual tourism emphasizes fulfilling the tourists' spiritual needs. In general, religious tourism activities are carried out in nearly all countries worldwide, including Indonesia.

Indonesia officially recognizes six religions: Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. The majority of Indonesia's population adheres to Islam. One of the key factors behind the rapid spread of Islam in Java (Indonesia) was the role played by the *Wali Songo* (Nine Saints). Sunan Kalijaga was one of the Nine Saints who is highly respected by the Indonesian people. He served as an advisor to the kings of the first Islamic kingdoms in Java, including the Sultanates of Demak, Pajang, and Mataram. Sunan Kalijaga passed away at the age of 135 and was buried in the city of Demak, Central Java. Pilgrims (visitors) continue to flock to his grave to this day. The number of visitors significantly increases during the holy month of Ramadan. The planning and management of the Sunan Kalijaga grave site is currently under the supervision of the Sunan Kalidjogo Foundation. Initially, the planning and management were handled by the *Kasepuhan* Kadilangu royal lineage, but due to inheritance disputes among Sunan Kalijaga's descendants, control was transferred to the Foundation.

The planning and management of the Sunan Kalijaga grave site as a tourism destination focuses on sustainable tourism development. In 1987, the Brundtland Report titled "Our Common Future" defined sustainable development as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. According to the UNWTO, sustainable development is based on three pillars: economic sustainability, social sustainability, and environmental sustainability. In terms of economic sustainability, the focus is on ensuring that economic growth in the Sunan Kalijaga grave destination can be maintained over time. As of 2025, there are approximately 384 vendors operating within the grave site complex. In terms of socio-cultural sustainability, the emphasis is on preserving local cultural traditions that have been practiced since the 17th century, such as the *penjamasan pusaka* (sacred heirloom cleansing) of Sunan Kalijaga. Meanwhile, environmental sustainability highlights the importance of using bamboo in the *penjamasan pusaka* ritual and providing waste bins throughout the Sunan Kalijaga grave complex area.

The implementation of sustainable planning and management at the Sunan Kalijaga grave site destination focuses on thorough planning and comprehensive destination management, which are then aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Several SDGs that align with this effort include Goal 1: No Poverty, and Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth. The objective of this study is to explain the sustainable tourism planning and management practices implemented at the Sunan Kalijaga grave destination. Three aspects of sustainability will be examined: economic, social, and environmental sustainability. These three aspects will also be connected to the relevant SDGs, namely No Poverty and Decent Work and Economic Growth. This paper follows a structure consisting of an introduction, method, result and discussion, and conclusion.

Sustainable Tourism Theory

Sustainable tourism is defined as a form of tourism that considers economic, socio-cultural, and environmental aspects in a balanced manner (UNWTO, 2005). The economic sustainability aspect emphasizes the active involvement of local communities in tourism management, such as homestays, traditional culinary services, local tour guides, and souvenir production (Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2017). This aspect also promotes long-term economic growth through inclusive tourism activities that empower local communities (Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009). Community-based tourism has been proven to increase a sense of ownership and fairly distribute economic benefits (Fitriani & Prihatiningsih, 2020). Meanwhile, the socio-cultural sustainability aspect focuses on preserving traditions such as *penjamasan pusaka* (heirloom cleansing rituals), *haul* (annual commemorations), and *sedekah bumi* (earth offerings), which are vital to prevent their replacement by commercial tourism (Yuliawati & Nugroho, 2020). Educating visitors about the history of the *Wali Songo*, including the values of

Sunan Kalijaga's da'wah that emphasize tolerance and cultural acculturation, is an essential asset in reinforcing the religious character of tourism (Hadi, 2015). In this context, it is also important to safeguard cultural values, traditions, and local wisdom that form the identity of the community (Richards, 2007).

The environmental sustainability aspect emphasizes that mass visits during pilgrimage seasons need to be regulated based on environmental carrying capacity to prevent congestion, pollution, and degradation of the site (Cooper et al., 2008). It is crucial to implement zoning, waste management, and tourist education to maintain the sanctity and cleanliness of the site (UNEP, 2005). This aspect also recommends the management and preservation of the physical and natural environment around the destination to ensure its sustainability (Swarbrooke, 1999). A key point of the three main pillars of sustainable tourism development is to ensure that current tourism activities do not compromise the needs of future generations (WCED, 1987). In the context of religious destinations like the Tomb of Sunan Kalijaga, tourism sustainability must take into account the sacredness of the location, the preservation of local culture, and the well-being of surrounding communities. These three elements are essential to maintain long-term sustainability at the destination.

Social Capital Theory

Social capital refers to networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit (Putnam, 2000). In tourism development, the existence of social capital is vital to encourage community participation and collective support for tourism activities. Putnam also categorises social capital into three forms. Bonding social capital refers to strong relationships within homogeneous groups, such as families, neighbourhoods, or religious communities, fostering solidarity and mutual support. Bridging social capital describes connections between different social groups, enabling the exchange of information, innovation, and broader cooperation. Linking social capital refers to vertical relationships between communities and institutions with greater authority, such as government agencies, non-governmental organisations, and private-sector organisations, facilitating access to resources, policy support, and institutional capacity.

Social Capital Theory has been widely applied in tourism studies because sustainable tourism development requires active collaboration among multiple stakeholders. Sustainable tourism cannot be achieved solely through government intervention but depends on trust, participation, and cooperation among destination managers, local communities, businesses, religious leaders, visitors, and public institutions. Strong social capital promotes community empowerment, improves destination governance, enhances conflict resolution, and encourages collective responsibility for conserving cultural heritage and environmental resources.

In the context of the Tomb of Sunan Kalijaga, social capital is reflected in the close cooperation between the Sunan Kalidjogo Foundation, local communities, government agencies, religious leaders, and tourism-related businesses. The foundation maintains community trust through the preservation of religious traditions, including the annual cleansing ceremony of Sunan Kalijaga's sacred heirlooms. At the same time, collaboration with the Tourism Office and other stakeholders supports education, capacity building, and sustainable tourism management. These partnerships strengthen local economic development while preserving religious values, cultural heritage, and environmental quality.

Therefore, Social Capital Theory provides an appropriate theoretical framework for analysing sustainable tourism planning and management at religious tourism destinations. It explains how trust, social networks, shared norms, and stakeholder collaboration contribute to economic sustainability, socio-cultural preservation, environmental management, and institutional effectiveness. Consequently, the theory offers a comprehensive perspective for understanding how collaborative governance supports the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within the context of religious tourism in Indonesia.

Tourism Carrying Capacity Theory

The carrying capacity theory describes the maximum number of tourists a destination can accommodate without causing environmental and social degradation (Saveriades, 2000). Carrying capacity in pilgrimage destinations such as the Tomb of Sunan Kalijaga needs to be carefully considered, especially during peak pilgrimage seasons.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design. This approach was selected to obtain an in-depth understanding of the planning and management practices of sustainable religious tourism at the Tomb of Sunan Kalijaga. The study was conducted at the Tomb of Sunan Kalijaga in Kadilangu Village, Demak Regency, Central Java, Indonesia. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit participants who possessed direct knowledge and experience related to the planning, management, and implementation of religious tourism activities at the study site. To obtain diverse perspectives and enhance data richness, participants were selected from key stakeholder groups, including the management of the Tomb of Sunan Kalijaga, representatives from the tourism office, village government officials, religious leaders, local traders, tourists, and pilgrims. Snowball sampling was subsequently used to identify additional informants recommended by the initial participants when further relevant information was required. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, whereby no substantially new information emerged from subsequent interviews.

The participants represented a wide range of demographic and professional backgrounds to capture multiple perspectives on sustainable religious tourism management. They included male and female participants of different age groups, educational levels, occupations, and lengths of involvement with the tourism destination. Stakeholders such as government officials, site managers, and religious leaders contributed institutional and policy perspectives, while traders, tourists, and pilgrims provided practical experiences regarding tourism services, visitor management, and community participation.

Primary data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with the selected participants. An interview protocol was developed based on the research objectives and relevant literature on sustainable tourism and religious tourism management. The interview guide included open-ended questions covering four major themes: (1) tourism planning and governance; (2) stakeholder participation and collaboration; (3) environmental, socio-cultural, and economic sustainability practices; and (4) challenges and future strategies for sustainable religious tourism development. Each interview lasted approximately 45–90 minutes and was conducted in Indonesian. With participants' informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Secondary data were obtained from government policy documents, tourism development plans, tourist visitation statistics, academic journal articles, and government reports. To enhance the credibility of the findings, data were triangulated across multiple sources, including interviews, field observations, documentation, and literature review.

Field observations focused on tourism facilities, visitor activities, environmental conditions, religious practices, and interactions among stakeholders. Documentary analysis was undertaken to examine relevant policies, development plans, and official reports that supported the interpretation of the interview findings. The data were analysed using the interactive analysis model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The analytical process began with repeated reading of interview transcripts and field notes to achieve familiarity with the data. Initial codes were generated inductively from the interview transcripts and subsequently grouped into broader categories based on conceptual similarities. These categories were further refined into major themes representing key aspects of sustainable religious tourism planning and management. Data displays, including thematic matrices and comparison tables, were used to identify relationships, similarities, and differences across stakeholder groups. Throughout the analysis, emerging interpretations were continuously compared with field observations and documentary evidence to ensure consistency and credibility. The trustworthiness of the findings was strengthened through data triangulation, member checking with selected participants, and maintaining an audit trail documenting coding decisions and analytical procedures.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research on the development of religious tourism destinations, such as the Tomb of Sunan Kalijaga, has advanced significantly in recent years. However, most existing studies reveal a clear gap between research focusing on local economic development and research oriented toward sustainable tourism. This gap manifests in several

dimensions, including research focus, analytical approach, community participation, and the religious and cultural dimensions.

First, studies on local economic development tend to prioritize improving community economic welfare as the main objective, particularly through MSME empowerment, job creation, and increased income for local residents (Santosa et al., 2021). In contrast, sustainable tourism research generally focuses on balancing economic, socio-cultural, and environmental aspects while taking into account the carrying capacity of the tourism destination (Butler, 2022; Hall, 2019). This indicates that local economy-based research often overlooks environmental concerns, while sustainable tourism research positions environmental aspects as a top priority alongside economic and social factors (Nugroho & Numata, 2020).

Second, the gap also appears in the scale and analytical approach. Local economy-based research is typically micro in nature, with limited focus on the economic activities of businesses around the Tomb of Sunan Kalijaga (Pramono & Riyanto, 2021). On the other hand, sustainable tourism studies are more multidisciplinary and holistic, encompassing in-depth analysis of carrying capacity, community-based tourism (CBT), and the interactions between tourists and local communities (Saarinen & Rogerson, 2021; Sidiq & Resnawaty, 2021). This suggests that the integration of microeconomic approaches into a broader sustainability framework remains suboptimal.

Third, community participation shows a significant disparity. Research on local economic development emphasizes community involvement in economic activities but often neglects their role in holistic governance and decision-making processes for the destination (Hakim & Soemarno, 2017). In contrast, sustainable tourism demands full community participation in the planning, management, and evaluation of the destination (Muhammad et al., 2021). Therefore, community participation in local economic research tends to be limited to productive economic activities without broader institutional engagement.

Fourth, the religious and cultural dimensions represent another critical area of divergence. Local economic-based research tends to emphasize the economic value of tourism activities, which may result in the commodification of sacred values at religious tourism sites (Sunaryo, 2013). In contrast, sustainable tourism research underscores the importance of maintaining a balance between economic interests and the preservation of spiritual and cultural values as the core of religious tourism attractiveness (Timothy & Olsen, 2018). This highlights the need for more serious attention to the spiritual-religious aspect within local economic studies.

Fifth, from a literature standpoint, there remains a gap between global theoretical frameworks on sustainable tourism and contextual empirical research conducted at local destinations such as the Tomb of Sunan Kalijaga (Setiawan & Sugiarto, 2022). Local research that clearly integrates local economic approaches into sustainability theory frameworks is still relatively limited.

Thus, addressing this research gap requires more integrative, multidisciplinary, and contextual studies that can bridge the needs for local economic enhancement and the preservation of sustainability values effectively at religious tourism destinations like the Tomb of Sunan Kalijaga. Sustainable tourism-based development at religious tourism destinations such as the Tomb of Sunan Kalijaga in Demak holds a highly strategic role in various aspects, including environmental protection, community welfare improvement, and the preservation of cultural and spiritual values. One of the primary urgencies in implementing sustainable tourism is to ensure the preservation of both natural and built environments surrounding the tourism area. The Tomb of Sunan Kalijaga, as a religious destination, often faces environmental pressure due to the high number of visitors, especially during special events such as *haul* (commemoration) and other religious celebrations. Therefore, sustainable development is needed to allow tourism activities to continue without damaging the surrounding environment, including reducing plastic waste, managing garbage effectively, and maintaining the destination's carrying capacity (Butler, 2022).

Sustainable tourism also aims to improve the quality of life for local communities through economic empowerment. Sustainable management at the Tomb of Sunan Kalijaga creates opportunities for increasing local income, especially through direct participation in various tourism-related businesses such as souvenir trading,

traditional culinary tourism, and other tourism services (Santosa, Utami, & Raharjo, 2021). Through the sustainable tourism approach, economic benefits can be experienced by the community in a long-term and equitable manner. Religious tourism destinations have a high level of cultural and spiritual sensitivity. Therefore, sustainable tourism development serves as a strategic approach to preserve the sacredness of the site, prevent excessive commodification, and safeguard the religious and cultural values inherited from Sunan Kalijaga (Timothy & Olsen, 2018). This is essential to maintain the authenticity of the destination as a center of spiritual and religious activity, rather than merely a commercial object.

The sustainable tourism approach provides space for active local community participation in decision-making, planning, and management of the destination area (Muhammad, Yulianda, & Djunaedi, 2021). This ensures that the community is not only an economic beneficiary but also a key actor who contributes to maintaining the overall sustainability of the destination. Active community participation also enhances a sense of ownership and collective responsibility for the preservation of the destination. The importance of sustainable tourism lies in its effort to maintain a balance among the three main pillars: economy, socio-culture, and environment, simultaneously. In the context of the Tomb of Sunan Kalijaga, such balance is essential to ensure that local economic development does not compromise environmental quality and the socio-cultural integrity that has long been established (Setiawan & Sugiarto, 2022; Sidiq & Resnawaty, 2021). This balance is the key to the long-term success of religious tourism destination development.

Religious tourism is one of the most important tourism segments in Indonesia, especially due to its unique cultural and spiritual richness. Religious tourism destinations such as the Tomb of Sunan Kalijaga in Demak face specific challenges in their management, including the need to balance economic, socio-cultural, environmental, and spiritual aspects. Therefore, sustainable tourism development at the Tomb of Sunan Kalijaga can serve as a best practice model for managing religious tourism destinations across Indonesia. The Tomb of Sunan Kalijaga is a religious destination rich in spiritual values and Islamic history in the archipelago. Sustainable tourism-based development places the preservation of these spiritual values at the core of destination management—not solely for economic purposes but also to protect the site's sanctity (Timothy & Olsen, 2018). This effort can serve as a model for other religious destinations such as the Tomb of Sunan Ampel in Surabaya, the Tomb of Sunan Gunung Jati in Cirebon, and other Wali tombs throughout Indonesia.

The application of sustainable tourism principles at the Tomb of Sunan Kalijaga also includes environmental management, such as waste control, visitor management, and the preservation of gardens and site landscapes to maintain a clean and serene environment for pilgrims (Butler, 2022). This is crucial, as many religious destinations in Indonesia face environmental issues due to increasing visitor numbers. Sustainable management at the Tomb of Sunan Kalijaga can serve as an example for addressing such environmental challenges. One of the key components of sustainable tourism development is the empowerment of local communities through a community-based tourism (CBT) approach. At the Tomb of Sunan Kalijaga, various local economic activities such as traditional culinary tourism, souvenir handicrafts, and tourism services are operated by local communities, who are also directly involved in managing the site (Setiawan & Sugiarto, 2022). This development model is important to replicate in other religious tourism destinations in Indonesia so that economic benefits can be widely felt by local residents.

Sustainable management at the Tomb of Sunan Kalijaga involves collaboration among stakeholders, including local governments, religious leaders, site managers, academics, and local communities in the decision-making process. This process fosters a sense of shared ownership and active participation from all parties (Muhammad et al., 2021). Such collaboration and institutional strengthening practices serve as important references for managing other religious tourism destinations facing challenges in stakeholder synergy. The implementation of sustainable tourism at the Tomb of Sunan Kalijaga is a significant example for the development of other religious tourism destinations in Indonesia due to its success in applying the triple bottom line concept—economic, socio-cultural, and environmental aspects—in a balanced manner. This success reinforces the Tomb of Sunan Kalijaga as a reference for study and best practice that can be replicated at other religious tourism destinations, such as other Wali tombs, historical temples, ancient mosques, and religious heritage sites.

CONCLUSION

Sustainable tourism planning and management at Sunan Kalijaga's tomb have been carried out effectively. Its implementation can be observed through economic, socio-cultural, and environmental sectors. Economic sustainability is evident from economic activities within the tomb complex. Meanwhile, socio-cultural sustainability emphasizes spiritual values and Islamic culture preserved within the complex. Environmental sustainability focuses on waste management, controlling visitor numbers, and utilizing environmentally friendly products to support environmental conservation. These efforts have successfully contributed to the sustainable development of tourism at Sunan Kalijaga's tomb complex. This study reflects its objective by highlighting sustainable tourism development based on the three main pillars. The relevance of this research to industry policies is well established. However, the study has several limitations, suggesting that future research themes should focus more specifically on "The Influence of Social Media in Increasing Tourist Visits to Sunan Kalijaga's Tomb."

LIMITATIONS

This study focuses exclusively on the planning and management of sustainable tourism at the Tomb of Sunan Kalijaga in Demak, Central Java, Indonesia, as a single case study of a religious tourism destination. The analysis is limited to three dimensions of sustainable tourism: economic sustainability, socio-cultural sustainability, and environmental sustainability. Institutional aspects are examined only to the extent that they relate to the planning and management practices implemented by the Sunan Kalidjogo Foundation and its collaboration with government agencies and other stakeholders.

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CONSENT

The researcher explained the study's purpose and obtained informed consent from each participant before data collection.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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