

ECO-CONNECT ASEAN 2025 COMMUNITY SERVICE: A STUDY ON ECOTOURISM, GOVERNANCE, AND CROSS-NATIONAL COMMUNITY DIPLOMACY

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Received : 01 September 2025

Published : 15 October 2025

Revised : 20 September 2025

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.54443/irpitage.v5i2.3993>

Accepted : 05 October 2025

Publish Link : <https://radjapublika.com/index.php/IRPITAGE/>

Abstract

The cross-border community service program under the theme Eco-Connect ASEAN 2025 was implemented on Tanjung Surat Island, Malaysia, with the support of the Johor Customs Office. This program was initiated in response to strategic issues related to the sustainable management of local resources, as well as an effort to strengthen people-to-people diplomacy among ASEAN countries. The primary objective of the program is to utilize Jong (traditional boats that serve as cultural identity and tourist attraction) and Kelulut honey (stingless bees with high economic and ecological value) as means for ecotourism development and local community empowerment. The methods employed included field observation, socialization and education, focused group discussions, and product branding workshops, with a participatory approach to ensure active community involvement. From a public administration perspective, the program emphasizes the strengthening of community-based ecotourism governance, the formation of cross-border networks, and support for achieving the ASEAN 2025 sustainable development agenda. The outcomes of the program include increased community awareness of the importance of ecotourism management, the establishment of discussion groups on Kelulut honey management, the creation of cross-border cooperation networks as part of the Eco-Connect ASEAN initiative, and enhanced community skills in optimizing local potential to support a sustainable economy.

Keywords: *Community Service, Eco Connecting ASEAN 2025, Governance, Community Diplomacy, Ecotourism*

INTRODUCTION

ASEAN, as a regional bloc, places connectivity as a key pillar encompassing political-security, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions. The ASEAN Community Vision 2025 emphasizes the integration of the region's communities oriented toward sustainable, inclusive development and based on public participation (ASEAN, 2015). In line with this vision, Malaysia, through the ASEAN Tourism Forum 2025, adopts the theme "Sustainability and Inclusivity," which underscores the region's commitment to promoting resilient and sustainable tourism (ASEAN, 2025). One of the regions with notable ecotourism potential is Tanjung Surat Island in Johor, Malaysia. This area is known for the tradition of the Jong, a traditional boat rich in cultural values and tourist appeal, as well as Kelulut honey, a stingless bee product with high economic value and ecological benefits. These two potentials not only provide economic impact but also represent a form of cross-border cultural diplomacy, aligning with the spirit of Eco-Connect ASEAN 2025 (Muhamad, 2025); (Hannah Adibah Wan Serail, 2024).



**Figure 1. Community Service Activities on Tanjung Surat Island, Malaysia
(Source: Researcher Documentation).**

The urgency of conducting community service activities in this area is based on the suboptimal utilization of local potential, the low skills of the community in developing sustainable ecotourism, and the weak competitiveness of local products at the regional level. The rationale for the activities lies in efforts to strengthen community-based ecotourism governance as a strategy to improve welfare, expand market networks, and enhance cross-border community diplomacy. This community service program aims to strengthen community-based ecotourism governance, enhance residents' capacities through education and training, and build cross-border networks that support the achievement of the ASEAN 2025 sustainable development agenda. The problem-solving strategy is implemented using a participatory approach through field observations, socialization and education, focus group discussions, and product branding workshops.

The literature review emphasizes that the success of ecotourism in Southeast Asia heavily depends on the level of local community involvement. Active community participation not only creates new economic opportunities through the development of community-based tourism enterprises but also plays a crucial role in preserving local cultural sustainability. These findings indicate that community-managed ecotourism can achieve a balance between economic interests and the preservation of cultural identity (Rahman and Baddam, 2021). Recent studies underscore the importance of regenerative ecotourism for social, cultural, and economic sustainability in Southeast Asia (Dolezal et al., 2020). López-Sanz et al. (2021) It emphasizes that the sustainability of ecotourism is largely determined by the level of local community participation and the supporting institutional capacity. Without institutional strengthening and active citizen involvement, ecotourism initiatives often remain temporary and struggle to deliver long-term impacts on community welfare. This research highlights the necessity of collaboration among communities, governments, and other stakeholders to ensure that ecotourism can truly serve as an instrument for sustainable development.

In line with this, Erdawati and Ayub (2024) offers a holistic model in Bone that integrates community engagement, nature conservation, and capacity building, ensuring that ecotourism sustainability is achieved not only economically but also ecologically and in terms of quality of life. Meanwhile, Prakasa et al. (2024) underscores the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration, including communities, government, and businesses, in strengthening ecotourism governance so that it can serve as a sustainable driver of social, economic, and environmental empowerment. Further research by Sarmini et al. (2023) on mangrove planting educational activities in the Batam ecotourism area shows that an approach integrating environmental and cultural aspects can provide a strong foundation for the development of community-based ecotourism. The situational analysis on Tanjung Surat Island reveals strategic opportunities for developing ecotourism based on the Jong and Kelulut honey. However, challenges remain, including limited community capacity, suboptimal market access, and weak promotion. Therefore, the involvement of Government Science lecturers and students through cross-border community service programs is expected to strengthen ecotourism governance, raise community awareness, and make a tangible contribution to the realization of Eco-Connect ASEAN 2025.

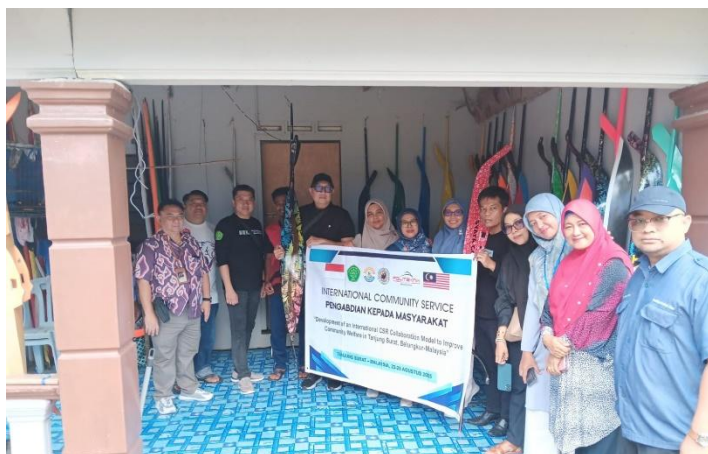
LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Governance Concept

According to the UNDP (2014), good governance is fundamentally based on five main principles: participation, transparency, accountability, responsiveness, and effectiveness. These principles complement each other and form an ideal framework for program management, including in the ecotourism sector. The application of the participation principle emphasizes the importance of active involvement of the local community, ensuring that ecotourism activities not only generate economic benefits but also align with local cultural values and environmental wisdom. Transparency and accountability guarantee that every process, from planning to implementation, is conducted openly, clearly, and responsibly, thereby reducing potential conflicts of interest and increasing trust among the public and tourists. Meanwhile, responsiveness requires managers to adapt to the evolving needs of tourists and the continuously changing environmental challenges. Ultimately, effectiveness and efficiency ensure that ecotourism management delivers balanced social, economic, and environmental benefits without causing ecosystem damage. Thus, good governance is not merely a normative principle but a practical foundation that determines the long-term sustainability of ecotourism.

2. People-to-People Diplomacy

According to Nye (2008) emphasizes that soft power is one of the main instruments in modern diplomacy, relying on attraction rather than coercion as a means to influence others. Through this approach, a country can gain legitimacy and influence at the global level without resorting to military or economic pressure. One increasingly prominent form of soft power implementation is people-to-people diplomacy, a mechanism of interaction aimed at building trust among nations and strengthening cross-border relations beyond formal governmental diplomatic channels. Active involvement of the local community is also in line with the findings Hidayat and Lestari (2023) which highlights the crucial role of community participation in strengthening participatory democracy practices at the local level.



**Figure 2. Active Involvement of the Local Community in Jong Ecotourism
(Source: Researcher Documentation)**

People-to-people diplomacy is realized through various non-political channels that are closer to the everyday lives of communities, including cultural exchanges, collaboration in education, development of the tourism sector, organization of sports events, and dissemination of information through media. These activities serve a dual purpose: on one hand, they enhance a country's positive image globally, and on the other, they strengthen emotional bonds and cross-cultural understanding. In this way, a country can project its values, identity, and potential while simultaneously building a more favorable and advantageous global perception. Ultimately, people-to-people diplomacy underscores that international relations are not solely determined by hard power, such as political or military strength, but also by the ability to create attraction, build trust, and foster long-term closeness. This makes soft power a relevant and sustainable strategy for strengthening a country's position amid an increasingly complex global competition.

In addition to serving as an instrument of global influence, soft power also provides a strategic space for a country to express its values, assert its national identity, and showcase its distinctive potential to the international community. For Indonesia, the application of soft power is evident through various cultural diplomacy initiatives, such as promoting traditional cuisine that reflects ethnic diversity, organizing art and music festivals that highlight the nation's creative richness, and preserving cultural heritage recognized by UNESCO as part of the global identity. Moreover, achievements in sports and Indonesia's active participation in international events further strengthen the country's image as a competitive and characterful nation. These efforts not only contribute to shaping a positive image of Indonesia but also expand networks of diplomacy based on trust, cooperation, and mutual understanding across countries. Such interactions foster the development of more inclusive international relations, where cultural appeal and social values serve as the primary foundation for strengthening bonds between nations. With this strategy, international relations are no longer built solely on political and military power, but on long-term legitimacy derived from a country's image, reputation, and cultural attractiveness consistently cultivated through people-to-people diplomacy.

3. Sustainable Development and ASEAN 2025

The ASEAN 2025 Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint emphasizes that regional development must be inclusive and environmentally conscious as part of efforts to create a competitive and sustainable society (ASEAN, 2016). One instrument considered relevant in supporting this agenda is the development of ecotourism. As a form of sustainable tourism, ecotourism not only creates economic opportunities for local communities but also raises collective awareness of the importance of natural resource conservation and cultural heritage preservation (Honey, 2008).



Figure 3. International Community Service of the University of Riau Islands, Indonesia at Polytechnic of Ibrahim Sultan, Johor, Malaysia (Source: Researcher Documentation)

Active community involvement in ecotourism management is a key factor for success, as a participatory approach ensures a more equitable distribution of benefits and strengthens the social and cultural identity of the local community (Stronza and Gordillo, 2008). In addition, ecotourism also contributes to shaping ASEAN's image as a region that is environmentally friendly, culturally diverse, and competitively attractive on the global stage (ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity, 2020). With good governance, ecotourism can bridge the three main dimensions of sustainable development: economic interests, environmental conservation efforts, and socio-cultural integration among ASEAN member states. Therefore, ecotourism not only serves as an engine of economic growth but also functions as a means of cultural and environmental diplomacy, strengthening regional solidarity in addressing global challenges.

METHOD

This community service method is designed participatively, involving the local community at every stage. According to Sugiyono (2019), a participatory approach is an appropriate strategy for obtaining in-depth data, as the community acts not only as an object but also as a subject in every stage of the activities. The program is implemented through socialization and outreach on ecotourism governance, training on Kelulut honey management as an

economic resource, focus group discussions to formulate environmental conservation strategies, and product branding workshops to enhance the added value of local potential. In addition, the community is also guided in building cross-border collaboration networks between Indonesia and Malaysia through the Eco-Connect ASEAN program.. The target participants were selected based on a needs analysis, including ecotourism managers on Tanjung Surat Island, Kelulut honey farmers, youth, village women, and local officials involved in environmental governance. This selection aims to broaden community participation while ensuring equitable distribution of benefits.

In implementing the activities, materials used included learning modules, brochures, digital socialization media, and Kelulut honey products as training objects. The tools employed comprised projectors, whiteboards, audiovisual equipment, and technical equipment for stingless bee cultivation such as hives, nests, and harvesting tools. The introduced equipment is designed to be simple, environmentally friendly, and easily applied by the community, thereby enhancing productivity without compromising ecosystem sustainability. Data were collected through field observations, interviews, focus group discussions, documentation, and questionnaires to measure the community's knowledge levels before and after the activities. All data were analyzed qualitatively using descriptive methods by comparing pre- and post-activity conditions, providing a comprehensive overview of the improvements in knowledge, skills, and community participation in managing ecotourism based on local potential.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Eco-Connect ASEAN 2025 Program

Community service activities within the framework of the Eco-Connect ASEAN 2025 Program have produced several strategic achievements across various dimensions. In terms of capacity building, the local community began to demonstrate a more comprehensive understanding of good ecotourism governance principles, including participation, transparency, accountability, responsiveness, and effectiveness (UNDP, 2014). These principles are not only understood conceptually but have also begun to be applied in the practical management of environmentally based tourism potential. This is reflected in the community's involvement in the planning, implementation, and evaluation processes of the program, which also indicates the growing collective awareness of the importance of ecotourism sustainability. This principle aligns with the idea of World Tourism Organization (2018) that tourism, including ecotourism, can make a significant contribution to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals when managed inclusively and in an environmentally friendly manner. In the context of community empowerment, Rahman (2020) emphasizes that ecotourism is not merely a means of recreation but also an environmentally based development model capable of enhancing local capacity and economic self-reliance. From an economic perspective, the development of Kelulut honey products stands out as one of the most significant achievements. Previously marketed in a simple manner, the products are now attractively packaged and positioned as an ecotourism icon. This branding strategy enhances the products' added value, expands market access, and provides more tangible economic benefits to the local community. This situation aligns with the view of ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity (2020) which emphasizes that ecotourism not only promotes environmental conservation but also strengthens the local economy through the sustainable optimization of resources.



Figure 4. Kelulut Honey Ecotourism (Source: Researcher Documentation)

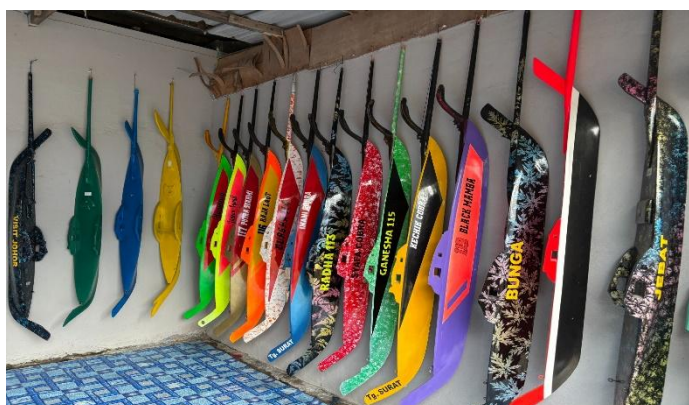


Figure 5. Jong Ecotourism (Source: Researcher Documentation)

In terms of cross-border collaboration, this activity successfully brought together academics from Indonesia, the local community of Tanjung Surat Island, and partner institutions from Malaysia. This collaboration has created new opportunities, such as joint research, knowledge exchange, capacity building, and cross-border ecotourism promotion. This cooperation model strengthens community diplomacy, where the local population is no longer merely an object but also a key actor in building ASEAN socio-cultural networks. These achievements align with the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025 agenda, which emphasizes inclusive development rooted in local culture and oriented toward environmental sustainability (ASEAN, 2016).

Furthermore, this initiative generated a set of policy recommendations aimed at reinforcing regulatory frameworks, offering targeted incentives, and advancing ecotourism that is both culturally authentic and environmentally sustainable. These recommendations serve as critical guidance for policymakers at regional and national levels, helping to ensure that regulations prioritize the interests of local communities, safeguard fragile ecosystems, and foster a supportive business climate for ecotourism practitioners. With well-designed policy backing, ecotourism destinations have the potential not only to strengthen their competitiveness within national borders but also to position themselves as leading attractions in the regional and global tourism landscape, promoting sustainable economic growth while preserving cultural and natural heritage.



Figure 6. Eco-Connect ASEAN 2025 Activities on Tanjung Surat Island, Johor, Malaysia
(Source: Researcher Documentation)

Conceptually, these findings demonstrate that participatory governance in ecotourism is key to the success of sustainable development. This aligns with the concept of soft power proposed by Nye (2008), where influence is not established through coercion but through attraction, trust, and collaboration. Through ecotourism, community diplomacy can serve as an effective instrument to strengthen cultural identity, build mutual trust, and support the integration of the ASEAN region as an environmentally friendly, inclusive, and globally competitive entity. The practical implications of this initiative extend across multiple stakeholders, creating meaningful benefits at various levels. For government authorities, the outcomes provide a robust foundation for designing policies that are more responsive and attuned to the specific needs of local communities, ensuring that development efforts are inclusive and sustainable. For community members, the program not only raises awareness of environmental conservation but also enhances entrepreneurial skills and fosters greater economic independence, empowering them to manage and benefit from local resources more effectively. For academics, this activity opens avenues for applied research, enriches opportunities for community engagement, and encourages the development and refinement of innovative ecotourism governance models. These models, proven effective in this context, have the potential to be adapted and replicated in other regions, contributing to broader knowledge exchange and sustainable tourism practices.

Table 1. Community Service Activity Achievements and Resulting Impacts

No.	Achievement Aspect	Results Achieved	Practical Implications
1.	Capacity Building	✓ The community understands and has begun applying the principles of ecotourism governance (participation, transparency, accountability, responsiveness, effectiveness).	✓ Strengthening community based governance to be more inclusive and sustainable.
2.	Local Economic Empowerment	✓ Kelulut honey products are now attractively packaged and promoted as an ecotourism icon.	✓ Increasing community income and expanding the market for products based on local wisdom.
3.	Cross Border Collaboration	✓ The establishment of networks between Indonesian academics, the Tanjung Surat community, and Malaysian institutions.	✓ Creating opportunities for joint research, capacity building, and cross border ecotourism promotion.
4.	Policy Recommendations	✓ Proposals for regulations and promotion of culturally and environmentally based ecotourism.	✓ Serving as input for the government in formulating regulations, providing incentives, and facilitating promotion.

Thus, Eco-Connect ASEAN 2025 not only produces tangible achievements at the local level but also contributes to regional integration efforts. The activities demonstrate that community-based ecotourism can serve as a medium of community diplomacy, strengthening socio-cultural networks, protecting the environment, and simultaneously enhancing the economic well-being of communities across the ASEAN region.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of the community service program within the framework of ASEAN Eco-Connect 2025 underscores that participatory governance and community empowerment are key elements in developing sustainable ecotourism. As outlined in the introduction, this initiative is expected not only to enhance the community's capacity to understand good management principles but also to strengthen the local economy while positioning community diplomacy as a means of fostering inclusive ASEAN integration. The findings of the activities reveal several strategic achievements. Community capacity has increased through the understanding and application of transparency, accountability, and participation principles in ecotourism management. Economically, the development of Kelulut honey and the Jong Center as flagship products has successfully added value while serving as symbols of ecologically and culturally based ecotourism. Moreover, the establishment of cross border collaboration among the community, academics, and regional institutions demonstrates the role of ecotourism as a tool of community diplomacy supporting the ASEAN 2025 development agenda.

To ensure the sustainability of the program, regulatory support is needed that prioritizes local communities, environmental conservation, and the promotion of ecotourism at the international level. Moving forward, the program's development will focus on: (1) establishing the Jong Center and Kelulut honey as models of culturally and ecologically based ecotourism in the ASEAN region, (2) expanding global promotion networks, and (3) building continuous collaboration among academics, government, and communities. With these achievements, the activities not only provide tangible benefits for the local community but also strengthen ASEAN's role as a region oriented toward inclusive development, environmental sustainability, and global competitiveness.

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