

TRACKING THE COMMITMENT OF LOCAL POLITICAL ELITES IN REVITALIZING PEAT AND MANGROVE ECOSYSTEMS IN RIAU'S COASTAL AREAS

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Abstract

This study critically analyzes the commitment of local political elites on the Riau coast in the revitalization of peat and mangrove ecosystems. With the approach of political ecology and qualitative case study methods, it was found that the commitment displayed was symbolic and instrumental. This is evident from the inconsistency between formal policies and minimal budget allocations, as well as licensing practices that support the extractive industry. Key findings suggest that elite actions are determined more by calculations of economic-political interests tied to the electoral cycle than by authentic ecological sustainability visions.

Keywords: *Commitment, Political Elite, Local Politics, Peat-Mangrove Ecosystems, Coastal*

INTRODUCTION

The peat and mangrove ecosystem in the coastal region of Riau is an ecological fortress and a vital source of livelihood that is now in a critical condition (Tan et al., 2023). Tragedy massive forest and land fires in 2015 triggering a national policy response that places revitalization as a priority agenda (Okamoto et al., 2023). The local political elite, as the holder of formal authority in the region, is a key player that determines the success of the implementation of this restoration program. However, persistently continued degradation raises fundamental questions about the authenticity of their commitments (Tomsa & Bax, 2023), indicates a sharp discrepancy between the pro-environmental policy narrative and the realities of practice on the ground (Scoville-Simonds, 2009). Most studies on restoration tend to focus on the technical-biophysical aspects, often ignoring the underlying political dimension (Lee, 2021). This research fills this gap by placing the commitment of local political elites as the main object of analysis. Using the framework of political ecology, this essay seeks to unravel how power relations, economic conflicts of interest, and social pressures shape environmental policy decisions in Riau. This approach allows for a critical analysis of the structural factors that cause revitalization programs to often fail beyond the level of rhetoric (Ichlas, 2020), so that it is not effective in overcoming the root of the problem of coastal ecosystem degradation that occurs. This study aims to track and critically analyze the manifestations of the commitment of local political elites in coastal Riau to the revitalization of peat and mangrove ecosystems in Riau. The analysis focused on the inconsistencies between formal policies, budget allocations, licensing practices, and political rhetoric constructed by elites. This study argues that the commitment displayed tends to be symbolic and instrumental. This commitment is fundamentally more shaped by the calculation of economic-political interests intertwined with extractive industries and the electoral cycle, rather than based on an authentic and institutionalized vision of ecological sustainability.

Theoretical Framework

The main theoretical framework used in this study is political ecology (Robbins, 2019). This theory critically examines the relationship between political, economic, and social factors and environmental change (Neumann, 2014). Political ecology allows for an in-depth analysis of how power and access to resources, such as peatlands and mangroves, are distributed among various actors (Birkenholtz, 2012). In the context of Riau, this approach helps unravel the power dynamics involving local political elites, corporations, the central government, and communities in the management and revitalization of these crucial coastal ecosystems. From a political ecology perspective, local political elites play a central role as actors who have the capacity to shape policies and the allocation of environmental

resources (Bryant, 2001). Their commitment to ecosystem revitalization is inseparable from their inherent political and economic interests (Forsyth, 2008). This theory highlights how elite decisions are often the result of negotiations between environmental conservation agendas and pressure to drive economic growth, for example through plantation or industrial licensing. (Scoville-Simonds, 2009). Therefore, the commitments that appear on the surface need to be critically analyzed (Bixler et al., 2015). Furthermore, this study utilizes the lens Environmental Political Economy to understand the driving factors for peat and mangrove degradation. Pressure from global and national markets on commodities such as palm oil and pulp creates a strong economic incentive structure for stakeholders at the local level (Thompson, 2018). Political elites are often at a crossroads between meeting regional economic development targets and enforcing environmental regulations. This analysis is crucial to track whether revitalization commitments are only rhetorical or actually implemented amid massive economic interest pulls (Lee, 2021).

Political ecology also emphasizes the importance of analysis of scale and networks of actors. Peat and mangrove revitalization policies in Riau are not only determined by local actors, but also influenced by policies at the national level and international commitments. Local political elites serve as important nodes in a network that connects the central government, non-governmental organizations, the private sector, and indigenous communities. Their position and power relations in this network significantly determine the direction and effectiveness of the implementation of the revitalization program in the field. Thus, a political ecological framework is applied to systematically dissect the commitments of local political elites on the Riau coast. This approach allows research to move beyond normative policy analysis. Instead, the focus will be directed to political practices, power distribution, and conflicts of interest that actually occur in efforts to revitalize peat and mangrove ecosystems. Through this theory, research can identify the structural and political barriers that underlie the gap between policy promises and the reality of the implementation of environmental restoration programs.

Research Method

Research Approach and Design

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. The qualitative approach was chosen because of its ability to delve deeply into the complexity of the commitment of local political elites, a phenomenon that cannot be quantitatively measured. The design of the case study allows researchers to conduct a holistic and empirical investigation of the political dynamics that occur in the specific context of the coastal region of Riau. Through this design, research can intensively explore how power relations, economic interests, and social pressures shape elite actions and policies related to peat and mangrove revitalization, in line with the political ecological framework embraced. The design of the case study in this study is descriptive-exploratory. The descriptive nature is manifested through systematic presentation of policies, programs, and budget allocations formulated by local political elites for ecosystem revitalization. Meanwhile, the exploratory nature aims to uncover the motivations, negotiations, and conflicts of interest hidden behind publicly displayed commitments. This design operationally applies a political ecology lens to trace how actors with different powers interact with each other and influence environmental policy outcomes, thus allowing for context-rich analysis of the phenomenon being studied. The selection of the qualitative approach and the design of this case study is based on the argument that political commitment is a complex social construct. Commitment is not only reflected in formal policy documents, but also in political practices, uneven allocation of resources, and narratives constructed to legitimize certain actions. This approach allows researchers to capture these nuances and analyze the gap between policy rhetoric and factual implementation on the ground. Thus, this design is considered the most relevant to answer research questions regarding the political and structural factors that actually determine the effectiveness of peat and mangrove revitalization.

Location and Scope of Research

This study takes place in the coastal area of Riau Province, which was chosen purposively because of its significance as the epicenter of degradation of peat and mangrove ecosystems in Indonesia. These areas, particularly in Bengkalis Regency and the Meranti Islands, represent a sharp arena of conflict of interest between the conservation agenda and the expansion of the large-scale plantation and forestry industries. The selection of this location is relevant to the framework of political ecology, as it allows for an in-depth analysis of how local political elites navigate economic pressures and environmental demands. The complex biophysical and socio-political conditions of the Riau coast make it an ideal case study to trace political commitments empirically. The scope of this research is focused on the commitment of local political elites who are defined as decision-makers at the provincial and district levels, including governors, regents, DPRD leaders, as well as heads of related agencies such as the Environment and Forestry Service. The analysis will focus on policies, programs, and budget allocations related to peat and

mangrove revitalization in the period 2016 to 2023. This period was chosen because it marked the post-2015 momentum of the great forest and land fires and the establishment of the Peat and Mangrove Restoration Agency (BRGM), thus allowing for the tracking of the response and consistency of elite policies during the critical period. This research consciously limits itself to not conducting biophysical evaluations of the technical success of the revitalization program, such as measuring the growth rate of mangroves or peat hydrology. The study's main focus was on the political dimension of commitment, not on its ecological outcomes. Moreover, even if the role of non-governmental actors such as corporations and NGOs is recognized, the analysis will not delve into their internal dynamics extensively. This restriction is carried out to maintain the depth of analysis of the central actor, namely the local political elite, as the holder of formal authority in the formulation and implementation of environmental policies in the region in accordance with the framework of political ecology.

Data Sources and Data Collection Techniques

This research relies on two main types of data sources, namely primary and secondary data, to obtain a holistic understanding. Primary data, as the backbone of the research, was unearthed through in-depth interviews with key informants. This source is essential to uncover perceptions, motivations, and dynamics of political interests that are not contained in official documents. Meanwhile, secondary data serves as a verification and contextualization tool. This data includes policy documents such as Regional Regulations (Perda) and Regional Medium-Term Development Plans (RPJMD), budget documents (APBD), annual reports of related agencies, meeting minutes, and mass media coverage. The central data collection technique in this study is semi-structured in-depth interviews. This method was chosen because of its ability to flexibly and deeply explore complex and sensitive issues related to political commitment. The researcher uses pre-prepared interview guidelines to maintain focus, but remain open to developing follow-up questions based on the informant's responses. This allows for the extraction of rich and nuanced information about the behind-the-scenes negotiations and political considerations of the elites. The entire interview process is recorded with the informant's permission and then transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy of the data in the analysis stage. As a complement to the interview, document analysis techniques and non-participant observation techniques were used. Document analysis was conducted systematically against secondary data to trace the formal traces of political commitment from 2016 to 2023, especially in terms of policy consistency and budget allocation. This technique is crucial for comparing policy rhetoric with its factual implementation. Non-participant observations were conducted on a limited basis at some public events such as hearings or policy seminars to capture the political atmosphere and direct interaction between actors, which provided contextual data that was not revealed through interviews or documents.

Determination of Key Informants

The determination of key informants in this study used purposive sampling techniques combined with snowball sampling. The purposive technique is applied to select individuals who directly have authority and in-depth knowledge related to the formulation of peat and mangrove revitalization policies. The main selection criterion was the strategic position of the informant in the local government structure, both at the executive and legislative levels, during the research period. Furthermore, snowball sampling techniques are used to identify other influential actors in the policy network, based on recommendations from the initial informants, in order to map a more comprehensive power relationship according to the framework of political ecology. Informants were classified into three main groups to ensure data triangulation and depth of analysis. The first group is the executive elite, consisting of high-ranking officials in the Riau Provincial Government and case study districts, including regional heads and heads of the Environment and Forestry Service. The second group is the legislative elite, including the leaders of the DPRD and the chairman of the commission in charge of the budget and the environment. The third group is non-governmental actors, consisting of representatives of prominent environmental NGOs, academics, and indigenous leaders who actively interact and advocate for environmental policies to these political elites. The process of selecting informants is carried out until it reaches a data saturation point, which is a condition where interviews with new informants no longer produce significant information or themes that are different from previous findings. In total, the study involved about 18 key informants spread across the three groups. The selection of informants from various institutional backgrounds is consciously designed for the purpose of triangulation. By comparing perspectives from government, legislature, and civil society, this study can cross-verify claims of political commitment and identify gaps between policy narratives and implementation realities.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data analysis in this study uses a thematic analysis approach[3] which is carried out systematically and gradually. The initial stage includes verbatim transcription of all in-depth interview recordings and data reduction by compiling summaries of relevant documents. Furthermore, the researcher conducted open coding of transcripts and documents to identify key concepts related to political commitment, power relations, economic interests, and policy implementation. These codes are then grouped into broader categories to form the initial themes. This process allows researchers to inductively discover significant patterns that emerge from direct field data. To deepen the analysis and ensure the validity of the findings, this study applied a constant comparative method and data triangulation. The constant comparison method is used to systematically compare data between informants from different groups (executive, legislative, NGOs) as well as between interview data and document data. This process aims to sharpen the categories and themes that have been identified. Triangulation of data sources was carried out by cross-verifying information from interviews, policy documents, and observation notes. This strategy is crucial to test the consistency and credibility of the data, as well as to dismantle the gap between policy rhetoric and the realities of implementation on the ground. The final stage of analysis involves critical discourse analysis and interpretation of data within the framework of political ecology. Discourse analysis is applied to dissect the language, narratives, and rhetoric used by political elites in policy documents and public statements. The goal is to reveal how the issue of peat and mangrove revitalization is framed, as well as what interests are legitimized through the discourse. All the results of thematic, comparative, and discourse analysis are then interpreted holistically using the lens of political ecology to explain the dynamics of power, conflicts of interest, and structural factors that actually shape the commitment of local political elites in Riau.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Manifestations and Inconsistencies of Local Political Elites' Commitment in Ecosystem Revitalization Policies

Analysis of policy documents such as the RPJMD and Regional Regulations shows that there is a manifestation of the formal commitment of the local political elite after the 2015 ecological disaster. This commitment is reflected in the adoption of national restoration programs and the establishment of regional regulations on peat and mangrove protection. From the perspective of political ecology, this formalization can be interpreted as a strategic response to central government pressure and international spotlight. The elite uses these policy instruments to build legitimacy and a pro-environmental image in the eyes of the public as well as influential external actors. However, these formal commitments show sharp inconsistencies when faced with budget allocations. Analysis of APBD data for the 2016-2023 period consistently shows that the portion of the budget for ecosystem revitalization programs at the Environment and Forestry Service is very minimal. This budget is not comparable to the allocation for infrastructure and economic development sectors which often has the potential to put new pressure on the ecosystem. This gap indicates that the real political economic priorities of the elites are still on the side of conventional development.

Further inconsistencies were revealed in spatial planning and licensing policies. In-depth interviews with civil society actors and academics, confirmed through permit data, uncovered the practice of issuing new permits for plantations in critical ecosystem buffer areas. On the one hand, the political elite formulated restoration policies, but on the other hand they facilitated the expansion of the extractive industry. This phenomenon exposes how the power to allocate land resources becomes an arena for negotiating interests that defeat the ecological revitalization agenda. Analysis of critical discourse on the public statements of elites shows that the rhetoric of environmental commitment is often political and cyclical. The issue of peat and mangrove revitalization tends to strengthen significantly ahead of the regional head election contest (Pilkada) as a tool to gain public sympathy. However, the intensity of this discourse decreased dramatically post-election and was not converted into consistent policy action. This shows that environmental commitments function more as a seasonal political commodity than a sustainable development agenda. The implementation of revitalization policies in the field tends to be fragmentary and reactive. Interviews with technical officials revealed that most of the ongoing restoration programs are ad-hoc projects that rely heavily on central government funding or donor agencies. The lack of initiatives sourced from the APBD purely shows the weak institutionalization and ownership of this agenda by the local elite. The existing commitment is more of a fulfillment of administrative obligations to external actors than an internalized ecological vision.

The Dynamics of Power and Economic Interests Behind the Management of Peat and Mangroves in the Riau Coast

The results of the study revealed that economic interests, especially those derived from the oil palm plantation industry and industrial plantation forests[8], are the main determinants in the decision-making of local political elites. In-depth interviews with legislators and NGO activists show that there is a strong patronage relationship between political elites and large corporations. This relationship is manifested in the ease of licensing and spatial planning revisions that benefit industrial expansion, often at the expense of peat and mangrove protected zones that have been established in national policies. The dynamics of power on the Riau coast are very uneven, where the political elite functions as a broker who allocates access to land resources. The power to issue site permits and recommendations for the release of forest areas became an effective political instrument for accumulating economic and political capital. Analysis of licensing documents confirms that large concessions have historically been granted to companies with ties to local political dynasties, while indigenous peoples and smallholder farmers' access to land has been increasingly marginalized in the process. This economic interest is directly intertwined with the electoral political cycle. Findings from interviews with key informants indicate that the high political costs of regional head elections encourage candidates to seek financial support from businessmen. In return, the elected elite provides guarantees of investment security and ease of regulation for corporate donors. This pattern creates a structural obstacle to firm enforcement of environmental laws, as elites are in a position of acute conflict of interest.

Further analysis shows that there is a tug-of-war between the central and regional governments. Although the central government through BRGM pushes the restoration agenda, local political elites often interpret it selectively. Centrally funded restoration programs are welcome, but policies that restrict industrial expansion on peatlands are often met with resistance. Local elites use regional autonomy as a pretext to prioritize Regional Original Revenue (PAD) from the land-based sector, effectively undermining the implementation of national restoration policies. The development discourse carried out by the political elite consistently frames environmental protection as an obstacle to economic growth and job creation. Through critical discourse analysis of public discourse and RPJMD documents, a narrative that prioritizes large-scale investment as the only path to prosperity was identified. This narrative effectively delegitimizes the voices of civil society groups and academics who advocate for a sustainable development model, as well as perpetuates the status quo of the exploitation of peat and mangrove ecosystems for the economic benefit of a few.

The Gap Between Policy Rhetoric and the Reality of Revitalization Program Implementation

Analysis of implementation in the field shows that revitalization programs run by local governments tend to be ceremonial and symbolic. Mangrove planting or peat wetting activities are often designed as public events that are widely covered by the media to build a pro-environmental image for the political elite. However, interviews with technical staff and local activists revealed a lack of budget allocation for long-term maintenance and monitoring. As a result, many programs fail to achieve their ecological goals, confirming that implementation is more oriented towards momentary political imagery than sustainable restoration. The most obvious gap was identified in the regional budget allocation (APBD). Although planning documents such as the RPJMD list revitalization programs as priorities, the portion of the budget allocated in real terms is very insignificant when compared to other sectors. Budget data shows that capital expenditure on infrastructure that is often associated with new land clearing is much larger. These findings, which are reinforced by testimony from members of the DPRD, confirm that the rhetoric of environmental commitment is not supported by the political will to allocate adequate financial resources.

The implementation of the revitalization program on the Riau coast relies heavily on external funding, especially from the central government through BRGM and international donor institutions. This dependency creates an implementation model that is project-centric and unsustainable. When project funding ended, restoration activities stopped. The lack of initiatives funded purely by the APBD shows the weak ownership and institutionalization of the revitalization agenda by local political elites. Their commitment becomes passive and reactive, only moving when there are financial incentives from outside the region. Law enforcement against encroachment and destruction of peat and mangrove ecosystems is a weak point in policy implementation. Interviews with law enforcement officials and community leaders revealed that many cases of destruction by corporations or influential actors are not fully processed. Political elites often take refuge behind the pretext of overlapping authority or prioritizing the investment climate. This reality of impunity is in sharp contradiction with the rhetoric of environmental law enforcement that is often voiced, indicating the existence of a conflict of interest that hinders the effective implementation of policies on the ground. Although policy narratives often prioritize community participation, the implementation of revitalization programs in the field tends to be top-down and exclusive. Findings from interviews

with representatives of indigenous peoples and farmer groups show that their involvement is often only a formality to qualify for the project. Local knowledge and community aspirations are often overlooked in planning and implementation. This practice not only reduces the effectiveness of restoration programs, but also perpetuates the marginalization of local communities in the management of natural resources in their own regions.

The Role of Multi-Scale Actor Networks in Shaping Local Political Elite Commitments

The commitment of local political elites is not formed in a vacuum, but rather is the product of interaction in a network of multi-scale actors. The findings of the study show that pressure from the central government, especially through the Ministry of Environment and Forestry (MoEF) and the Peat and Mangrove Restoration Agency (BRGM), is the main driver of the adoption of revitalization policies at the regional level. These interventions, coupled with the spotlight from international donor agencies and NGOs, forced local elites to display pro-environmental commitments as part of their political legitimacy in the presence of external actors. Specifically, BRGM plays a central role as a national actor that injects resources and technical agendas into the regions. Programs such as peat rewetting and mangrove rehabilitation funded by the State Budget are the backbone of implementation in the field. However, interviews with local officials revealed that this high reliance on central funding creates the perception that revitalization is a "central project". As a result, elite commitments have become reactive and instrumental, and there is a lack of sustainable initiatives sourced from purely regional budgets (Okamoto et al., 2023). Civil society networks, both local and national NGOs, serve as a significant balancing force. Through policy advocacy, media campaigns, and on-the-ground monitoring, they consistently highlight the gaps between the promises and practices of the political elite. The public pressure built by these networks has proven effective in forcing elites to respond, at least rhetorically. Nonetheless, their influence is often limited when dealing with a network of corporate actors who have much greater access and financial resources.

On the other hand, the network of corporate actors, especially the plantation and forestry industries, is the most dominant force in shaping elite decisions (Pink & Dhofier, 2024). The patronage relationship between political elites and businessmen creates an incentive structure that prioritizes short-term economic interests over ecological sustainability (Dey & Arunachalam, 2024). In-depth interviews confirm that corporate lobbying effectively influences spatial planning and licensing policies, which are often in direct conflict with the revitalization agenda pursued by the central government and pushed by civil society. Thus, local political elites act as nodes or brokers navigating various interests in this multi-scale network. Their commitment to ecosystem revitalization is the result of dynamic negotiations between conservation pressures from above (central government) and from below (NGOs), with the pull of strong economic interests from the side (corporations) (Ichlas, 2020). The policy direction taken is ultimately determined by the political calculations of the elite as to which networks provide the greatest political and economic benefits to their continued power.

Structural and Political Obstacles to the Effectiveness of Peat and Mangrove Ecosystem Revitalization in Riau

The main structural barriers stem from the dependence of the regional economy on the land-based industrial sector. Significant Regional Original Revenues (PADs) from oil palm plantations and industrial plantations create a strong incentive structure for political elites to prioritize extractive economic expansion. This dependency puts the ecosystem revitalization agenda in a politically weak position. Peat and mangrove protection policies are often defeated by short-term economic calculations, which fundamentally hamper the effectiveness of federally mandated restoration programs. The electoral political system is a significant political obstacle. The very high cost of contesting regional head elections encourages candidates to forge alliances with large corporations as a source of campaign funding. This patronage relationship creates a political debt that must be paid after the elite is elected, often in the form of ease of licensing and weak enforcement of environmental laws. As a result, the revitalization commitment promised during the campaign became difficult to realize because it was clashed with the interests of corporate donors who controlled land resources.

The fragmentation of authority between the central, provincial, and district governments has become an exploited institutional gap (Firman, 2009). Local elites often use the pretext of regional autonomy to reject or reinterpret national restoration policies that are deemed incompatible with local economic interests. The weak capacity and independence of law enforcement officials in the regions, which are often under the influence of elite politics, leads to impunity for environmental perpetrators. These institutional barriers effectively paralyze the implementation of revitalization policies at the site level. Another political obstacle is the practice of elite capture in the implementation of revitalization programs. Externally funded restoration projects are often managed and monopolized by a network of local elites, so the benefits do not reach the community. The participation of indigenous

and local communities with ecological knowledge is often only ceremonial. This proprietary process not only reduces the technical success of the program, but also perpetuates the marginalization of communities from their own natural resource management, which ultimately undermines the sustainability of restoration.



Structurally, the dominant developmentalism discourse is an ideological barrier. Political elites have consistently framed environmental protection as the antithesis of economic growth and job creation. This narrative is used to legitimize pro-extractive investment policies and delegitimize criticism from civil society groups. The hegemony of this discourse shapes public perception and limits space for sustainable development alternatives, making it difficult for ecosystem revitalization efforts to become a real policy priority at the regional level.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the commitment of local political elites in coastal Riau to the revitalization of peat and mangrove ecosystems is dualistic and contradictory. Formally, this commitment is manifested in the adoption of policies and regulations as a strategic response to central government pressure and international spotlight. However, this commitment proved to be fragile and more rhetorical when confronted with real political practices. The fundamental gap between policy narrative and factual implementation is clearly identified through minimal budget allocation, inconsistencies in spatial licensing policies, and instrumentalization of environmental issues as a purely electoral political commodity. Behind this dualism of commitment, this study found that the calculation of economic-political interests is the main determinant that shapes elite actions. The strong patronage relationship between the political elite and land-based industrial corporations, reinforced by the high-cost electoral political system[4], creates acute structural barriers. In this dynamic, the power to allocate land resources serves as an instrument for the accumulation of political and economic capital. As a result, the ecosystem revitalization agenda is systematically subordinated under the priority of accommodating corporate interests and maintaining the continuity of the political power of the elites. The obstacles to effective revitalization commitments are not only political, but also structurally embedded. The dependence of the regional economy on the extractive sector, the fragmentation of institutional authority between the central and regional governments, and the hegemony of development discourse that frames conservation as an economic threat, collectively create an un conducive policy environment. The practice of elite capture of restoration programs and marginalization of community participation further weakens implementation at the site level. This condition confirms that without structural transformation in the local political economy, any effort to revitalize the ecosystem will continue to face implementation failures.

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