

Establishing Sustainable Tourism Development Framework: Promoting an Ecologically Balanced Approach in the Municipality of Alabat, Quezon

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ABSTRACT

This study develops a framework for sustainable tourism development in Alabat Municipality, Quezon Province, focusing on balancing tourism growth with environmental protection. The research adopts a descriptive design, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. Surveys and interviews were conducted with 100 participants, including local government officials, business owners, tourists, and environmental advocates. The quantitative data assessed compliance rates and metrics related to tourism development, while qualitative data highlighted stakeholders' preferences and experiences. Findings indicate that respondents anticipate growth in tourism activities due to upcoming infrastructure improvements. Key factors for sustainable tourism include effective guiding tools, data transparency, economic viability, and infrastructure support. Public awareness, resilience mechanisms, and regulatory updates are essential for optimizing tourism potential. The study concludes that establishing a sustainable tourism framework will guide the development of a Local Tourism Development Plan. It supports frameworks such as the Triple Bottom Line Theory by Elkington and the Carrying Capacity Theory by Mathieson & Wall. Recommendations include strengthening physical and social infrastructure, regulating tourist numbers, enhancing public awareness, and fostering stakeholder collaboration to align tourism goals with sustainable development objectives in the municipality.

Keywords: Sustainable Tourism Development, Carrying Capacity, Stakeholder Engagement, Tourism Infrastructure, Local Development Plan

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has long been a powerful economic engine, yet its rapid expansion, particularly in rural and ecologically sensitive regions, has presented significant environmental challenges. While tourism has boosted local economies, it has also exerted pressures on the environment that could lead to irreversible damage if not properly managed (Baloch et al., 2023). In the Philippines, an archipelago rich in biodiversity, tourism has heavily relied on natural resources, making sustainable practices essential for its longevity. However, poorly planned tourism has often led to environmental degradation, including deforestation, pollution, and resource depletion, especially in smaller municipalities (Perez et al., 2023).

Alabat, located in the province of Quezon, had faced these very issues. The municipality, with its rich biodiversity and scenic landscapes, had drawn tourists, but it also faced considerable risks due to the lack of a clear and effective sustainable tourism framework. While the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) had emphasized the need for tourism that fostered both economic development and environmental protection (UNWTO, 2020), Alabat's tourism sector had yet to fully integrate sustainability into its planning and operations. Without such integration, the municipality had risked the degradation of the ecosystems and communities that tourism aimed to support (Cruz & Santos, 2023).

Research has shown that without the proper framework, tourism in ecologically sensitive regions often leads to deforestation, increased waste, and resource depletion (Supera et al., 2024). Alabat, a fifth-class municipality on Alabat Island, had covered an area of 57.61 square kilometers and had a population of 15,936 (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2020). Despite its modest size, Alabat's ecological integrity had been crucial to the livelihoods of its people, many of whom depended on agriculture and fishing. Tourism there needed to be developed in a way that did not erode these essential resources. The absence of sustainable practices had exacerbated the risk of harm to both the environment and local communities (Lopez & Hernandez, 2023).

Tourism, when improperly managed, has led to a variety of environmental problems. Baloch et al. (2023) had identified common pitfalls of unsustainable tourism, such as waste mismanagement, habitat destruction, and pollution, all of which had affected natural resources crucial for long-term tourism success. As tourism had grown in Alabat, these problems had become more pronounced, with waste management and eco-friendly accommodation practices being among the most pressing issues (Perez et al., 2023). Supera et al. (2024) had argued that local communities often lacked the necessary awareness and participation to prevent these adverse outcomes. In Alabat, local stakeholders had had minimal involvement in decision-making processes regarding tourism, which had stifled efforts toward a sustainable path.

A sustainable tourism framework, one that had integrated environmental conservation, community participation, and equitable economic benefits, had been essential for Alabat. Such a framework had not only aligned with national and international sustainability goals but also could have positioned Alabat as a model for other small municipalities aiming to harmonize development with ecological preservation. This had aligned with the findings of Martinez and Dela Cruz (2023), who had emphasized the importance of local policies that promoted sustainability in tourism development. Implementing these policies had required concerted efforts from both the local government and the community to address the ecological, social, and economic aspects of tourism.

The present research aimed to assess the previous tourism situation in Alabat, identify critical areas where sustainability had been lacking, and propose a comprehensive framework that could ensure balanced and environmentally conscious tourism development. Building upon recent studies, such as those by Gonzales et al. (2024) and Torres et al. (2023), which have highlighted the need for waste reduction, cultural preservation, and the engagement of local communities in tourism planning, this framework has served as a foundation for sustainable tourism in the municipality. By incorporating eco-tourism principles that respected and protected local biodiversity, Alabat had been able to create a tourism model that benefited both its natural environment and its people, thereby ensuring a sustainable future for its tourism industry (Mendoza et al., 2023).

Through this research, Alabat had not only safeguarded its unique ecosystems but had also offered valuable lessons to other municipalities in the Philippines and beyond, proving that with proper planning and community involvement, tourism could be both an economic boon and a force for ecological conservation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainable tourism has been a central concern in the Philippines, as the country grapples with balancing economic growth from tourism with the need for environmental conservation. Cruz's *Sustainable Tourism Development in the Philippines: A Policy Framework* (2017) remains a foundational resource, providing a comprehensive framework that integrates environmental, social, and economic dimensions of tourism. Cruz emphasizes the importance of involving stakeholders, including local communities, government entities, and businesses, to address the negative impacts of

tourism while optimizing its economic benefits. His work highlights the need for proactive management, particularly in foreseeing and mitigating environmental degradation and societal disruptions caused by unregulated tourism growth.

Building on this, the Philippine Department of Tourism (DOT) and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) introduced the National Ecotourism Strategy and Action Plan (NESAP) 2023-2033, which aims to position the Philippines as a leading ecotourism destination. The strategy emphasizes sustainable management practices, such as eco-friendly infrastructure, capacity-building programs for local communities, and transparent monitoring systems. NESAP underscores the need for a balanced approach that preserves ecological integrity while promoting socio-economic benefits, with a particular focus on empowering local communities to participate in and benefit from ecotourism initiatives (DOT & DENR, 2023).

Recent studies also delve into the challenges and opportunities of sustainable tourism in the Philippines. Gamboa and de Guzman (2023) explore the issues of over-tourism and environmental degradation, calling for policy reforms that integrate both ecological and socio-economic considerations. Their work suggests that tourism management should be reformed to address the full range of impacts, recommending stronger coordination between stakeholders to develop a more holistic approach to sustainable tourism. Similarly, Santos and Dizon (2023) argue that tourism has the potential to contribute significantly to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the Philippines, provided that local communities are actively engaged in tourism development and sustainability initiatives. They advocate for educational programs to increase environmental awareness among both stakeholders and tourists, which could help mitigate adverse environmental impacts.

The role of ecotourism in community development is further explored by Villanueva et al. (2022) in their case study of Palawan. They highlight the positive socio-economic impacts of ecotourism, including job creation, local entrepreneurship, and cultural preservation. However, they also point out the need for stricter regulations to ensure that tourism does not lead to the depletion of natural resources. In the same vein, Hernandez et al. (2023) discuss the unique challenges faced by tourism in the Philippine highlands, emphasizing the fragility of these ecosystems and the need for sustainable tourism models that balance growth with conservation.

Post-pandemic tourism recovery strategies have also garnered attention. Ferrer and Ramirez (2022) examine the shift towards low-impact tourism in the Philippines, proposing that the pandemic has accelerated the adoption of more sustainable practices. They highlight the potential of digital technologies to enhance tourism management, reduce waste, and increase efficiency, advocating for a more resilient tourism industry that prioritizes environmental conservation. Alonzo and Mendoza (2023) also discuss the recovery of the tourism sector post-COVID-19, emphasizing the importance of sustainable tourism practices that promote local tourism, reduce carbon footprints, and protect the natural environment.

Reyes et al. (2022) investigate responsible tourism practices across various regions in the Philippines, finding that while some areas have made significant progress, others still struggle with issues like environmental degradation and unsustainable development. They stress the importance of enforcing stricter regulations and improving public education to ensure the sustainable growth of the tourism sector. Ramirez and Aquino (2023) explore how tourism in the Philippines can adapt to the challenges posed by climate change, proposing the integration of climate adaptation strategies into tourism planning. Their work advocates for low-carbon tourism options and the preservation of climate-vulnerable ecosystems.

Finally, Garcia and Perez (2023) emphasize the role of technology in promoting sustainable tourism. They suggest that innovative solutions, such as smart tourism platforms and data-driven decision-

making, can help reduce tourism's environmental impact while improving visitor management. Their research highlights the potential for technology to support sustainable tourism practices by optimizing resources and enhancing the visitor experience.

These recent studies illustrate the ongoing evolution of sustainable tourism in the Philippines. They highlight the need for comprehensive, multi-stakeholder approaches that integrate environmental, social, and economic considerations. The literature collectively stresses the importance of community involvement, regulatory frameworks, and innovative technologies in achieving long-term sustainability in tourism. As the tourism industry continues to recover and grow, the lessons drawn from these studies will be crucial in shaping a more sustainable and resilient future for the Philippine tourism sector.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a mixed-method research design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore sustainable tourism practices in the Municipality of Alabat. The research employed descriptive and exploratory designs to evaluate current tourism activities, the area's ecological balance, and stakeholder perspectives. Quantitative data were collected through surveys using a Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), targeting local government officials, business owners, tourists, and community members to gauge their awareness, attitudes, and practices regarding sustainable tourism. Additionally, qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with government representatives, tourism operators, environmentalists, and local leaders to gain deeper insights into the challenges, policies, and opportunities for sustainable tourism development. The survey included questions related to respondents' demographics, perceptions of the state of tourism, and environmental impacts, while the interviews provided richer insights into the policies and practices surrounding tourism and its effects on the local environment. All data collection occurred after obtaining necessary permissions from local authorities and participants, ensuring that ethical standards were upheld.

The study was conducted in Barangay Villa Norte, Alabat, located in Quezon Province, specifically in the Tumiis-Sitio region, which was known for its potential as a sustainable tourism destination. The geographical location of Alabat, with its proximity to both the Pacific Ocean and Lamon Bay, provided a unique context for examining the environmental, socio-cultural, and economic impacts of tourism. A random sampling technique was employed to ensure a representative sample of 100 respondents, including local government officials, business owners, tourists, and key informants. The respondents were selected from various sectors, including local government units (LGUs), tourism-related businesses, and the general public, ensuring diverse perspectives. Participants were encouraged to provide input on the impacts of tourism on local resources, as well as potential solutions for more sustainable development. The study aimed to develop a Sustainable Tourism Development Framework that could guide future growth while safeguarding Alabat's natural environment.

Data analysis involved both descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics, such as frequency counts and percentage distributions, were used to summarize the demographic profile of respondents and the general state of tourism in the study area. Thematic analysis was applied to interview data to identify recurring themes and insights regarding tourism practices, environmental conservation, and stakeholder perspectives. A five-point Likert scale was employed to assess the overall state of tourism, as well as the level of awareness about environmental issues and sustainable practices. Results were analyzed using means, standard deviations, and percentage distribution, which enabled the researcher to identify key trends and draw conclusions about the sustainability of tourism in Alabat. The findings were instrumental in shaping the proposed Sustainable Tourism Development

Framework, which aimed to reconcile tourism growth with environmental preservation and community development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

I. PARTICIPANTS OF THE STUDY

There were 150 participants included in the study. Further details of their demographic characteristics are summarized below:

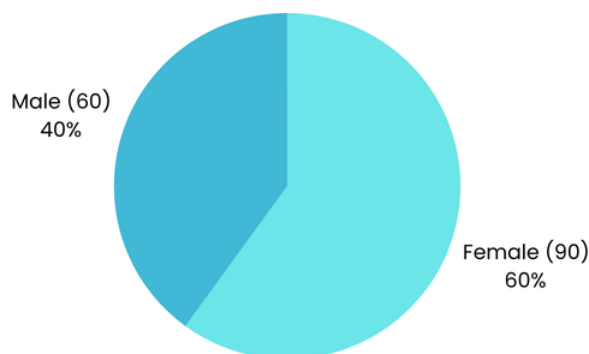


Figure 1. Gender Distribution

Figure 1 shows the gender distribution of the respondents. Among them, 90 are female, accounting for 60% of the total respondents, while 60 are male, making up the remaining 40%.

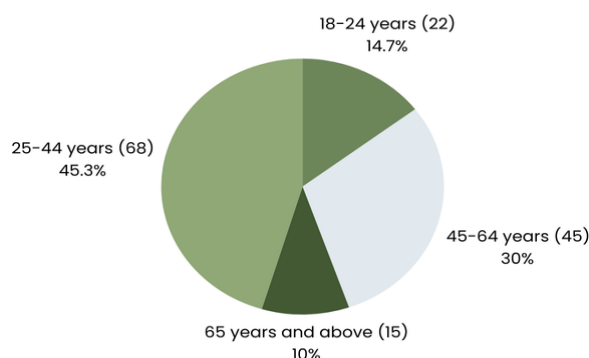


Figure 2. Age Distribution

Figure 2 shows that the majority (45.3%) are aged 25–44, followed by 30% in the 45–64 range, while younger (18–24) and older (65+) groups are less represented. This suggests that middle-aged adults were more engaged in the study, possibly due to relevance or accessibility factors.

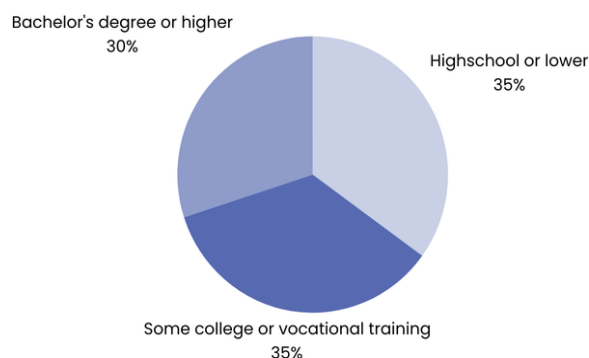


Figure 3. Educational Attainment

Figure 3 shows that the educational background of respondents is evenly distributed, with 35% having vocational training, 35% having a high school education or lower, and 30% holding a bachelor's degree. The high percentage of vocational training suggests a strong preference for practical, skills-based education. Meanwhile, the lower proportion of bachelor's degree holders may reflect barriers to higher education or differing career paths.

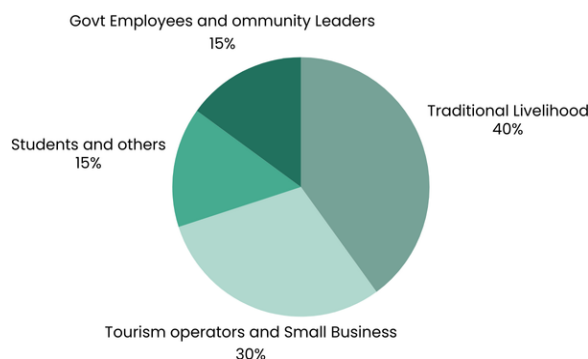


Figure 4. Engagement

Figure 4 shows that the majority of respondents are engaged in traditional livelihoods (35%) and tourism-related businesses or small enterprises (30%), indicating a strong reliance on local industries. Meanwhile, government employees and community leaders (15%) and students (15%) represent smaller portions of the workforce. This distribution highlights the economic dependence on traditional and small-scale businesses, which may be influenced by cultural, economic, and policy factors.

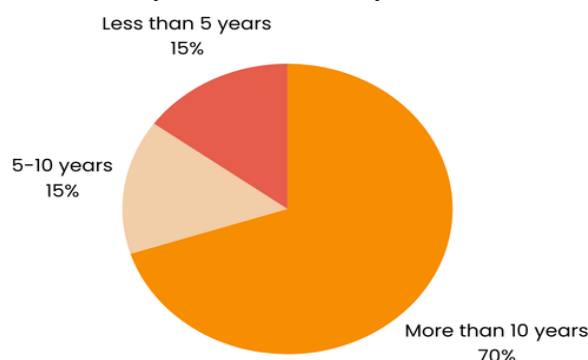


Figure 5. Length of Residence in Barangay Villa Norte

Figure 5 shows that most respondents (70%) have lived in Barangay Villa Norte for more than 10 years, while 15% have resided there for 5–10 years, and another 15% for less than 5 years. This suggests a stable, long-term population, with the majority having deep community ties and local knowledge. The smaller proportion of newer residents (30%) may indicate limited migration into the area, possibly due to economic, social, or infrastructural factors.

This detailed breakdown not only provides context for the diversity of perspectives in the study but also establishes the reliability of the data when analyzing variations in opinions across different demographic groups.

1. What are the current tourism practices in the Tumiis Tourism Zone, and how do they impact the environment and socio-cultural dynamics of Barangay Villa Norte?

More than 68% of the respondents rated the current environmental management as being “poor” or “very poor.” Field observations reported litter build-up, minor water pollution around high-traffic tourism areas, and increased wear on natural trails. Interviews highlighted that tourism has brought

in more money, but also raised concerns about the loss of traditional culture. About 40 percent of those surveyed agreed that commercialization was jeopardizing cultural authenticity.

2. What opportunities exist for developing sustainable tourism initiatives that align with ecological preservation and benefit the local community?

Stakeholders discussed initiatives such as eco-accommodations, guided nature and cultural tours, and local artisan markets. Approximately 75% were strongly in favor of the initiatives that combine local culture with environmental conservation. Qualitative responses indicate demand for better training in sustainable practices, highlighting clear opportunities for capacity-building workshops and educational campaigns

3. What strategies can be implemented to promote an ecologically balanced approach to tourism in the Tumiis Tourism Zone?

Respondents suggested several upgrades to tourism infrastructure with a focus on environmental sustainability. These included the implementation of waste management programs and revisions to government policies to prevent over-tourism, particularly in sensitive areas. There was significant support (38%) for the idea of upgrading tourism infrastructure and establishing waste management solutions that address both immediate and long-term environmental challenges.

A common theme across responses was the call for broader participation in decision-making processes, with about 80% of respondents advocating for government policies that support sustainable development practices. Additionally, they emphasized the need for environmental and social community monitoring as part of the strategy to ensure these practices are effectively implemented. This feedback highlights the importance of inclusive governance and proactive measures to achieve sustainable tourism development.

3.1 Statistical Analysis

The local tourist entity received a mean approval rating of 2.8 (on a scale from zero to five), indicating some level of dissatisfaction among respondents. Additionally, 68% of participants considered environmental issues to be their most pressing concern, while 65% expressed agreement with the concept of eco-friendly tourism that also benefits nature.

Chi-Square Test. A chi-square test was conducted to assess the relationship between educational level and recognition of environmental tourism practices. The results showed a statistically significant difference ($\chi^2(2, N=150) = 12.45, 0.05 < p$), suggesting that less-educated households were less likely to perceive sustainable development beyond simple, token gestures in their daily lives.

Passion's Correlation. A moderate positive correlation was found between the length of residency and support for eco-friendly tourism policies ($r = 0.45, 0.05 < p$). This implies that individuals who have lived in a particular area for a longer period are more likely to support sustainable tourism practices and policies.

Preliminary Regression Analysis. A preliminary regression analysis indicated that educational level and occupation are significant predictors of attitudes toward sustainable tourism. These factors appear to play a major role in shaping respondents' perceptions and support for eco-friendly tourism policies.

3.2 Interpretation of Findings

The qualitative findings further illustrate the statistical results, providing a deeper understanding of tourism's impact in Villa Norte. Overall, respondents rated their satisfaction with neighborhood tourism management at 2.8 out of 5, suggesting that improvements are needed. A significant 68% of

respondents considered environmental issues to be a major concern, while 65% supported legislative measures promoting eco-friendly tourism. The chi-square test revealed a statistically significant relationship between educational level and knowledge of sustainable tourism practices, indicating that higher education levels are linked to a greater understanding of these issues. Additionally, Pearson's correlation coefficient showed a moderate positive relationship between length of residence and support for ecological tourism, meaning those who have lived in the area longer are more likely to support sustainability efforts. A preliminary regression analysis also identified education level and occupation as significant predictors of public acceptance for environmental management policies, highlighting the influence of these factors on attitudes toward sustainability.

In examining Villa Norte's tourism development, it is clear that there are both positive and negative aspects, with little middle ground between them. While tourism generates substantial income, it also imposes significant environmental costs, such as inefficient septic systems and damaged trails. This dual nature of tourism, tied closely to natural resources, raises concerns about its long-term sustainability. Local business owners expressed cautious optimism, suggesting that improved ecological practices could lead to a more stable, long-term income stream. The data shows that while tourism is a major income generator, the environmental costs—such as poor waste disposal, worn footpaths, and water pollution—are still substantial, emphasizing the need for careful management to prevent the exploitation of natural resources.

In interviews, many respondents, particularly the elderly, expressed concern that the rapid growth of tourism has diluted traditional values. This was echoed by villagers who feel increasingly disconnected from decision-making processes, contributing to a tension between traditional cultural practices and modern tourism demands. This reflects a broader challenge faced by communities around the world: balancing economic development with the preservation of cultural heritage. Furthermore, the positive correlation between higher education levels and support for sustainable tourism initiatives highlights the importance of fostering an ecological mindset through long-term community education, ensuring that future generations are equipped to maintain both environmental and cultural sustainability.

Respondents with college-level education not only showed a substantially higher level of eco-friendly knowledge, but they also vigorously supported community environmental monitoring proposals. 5.2 Comparison with Literature Review When comparing the findings of this study with existing literature, the findings of this study are parallel to some points and contradictory at others. Our findings confirm the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework and DIAMOND Model as discussed in the literature. Just as these models advocate for harmony development, we confirm with our results that failing at one or other environmental /social culture dimension can produce an unsustainable outcome indeed. This backs up previous research by bodies such as the WTO, which emphasizes a holistic approach to tourism development (UNWTO).

CONCLUSION

This research focused on sustainable tourism development in the Municipality of Alabat, specifically in the Tumiis Tourism Zone, to assess areas for improvement and strategies for maintaining tourism sustainability. The findings highlighted several environmental impacts associated with tourism, including increased waste generation, plastic pollution, and overcrowding in certain areas. These issues have placed significant pressure on local infrastructure and ecosystems. As tourism continues to grow, the community is adapting by adjusting its cultural practices to meet the demands of the expanding tourism economy, which has led to the transformation of traditional lifestyles.

Despite these challenges, the study identifies various opportunities for fostering sustainable tourism. Key strategies include promoting ecotourism activities, such as nature walks, bird watching, and

sustainable fishing, which can balance ecological preservation with community economic development. Additionally, integrating local artisans and businesses into tourism activities can help safeguard cultural heritage while improving the livelihoods of residents. By adopting an integrated approach that respects both environmental and cultural aspects, Alabat can foster sustainable tourism that benefits the local economy and enhances community pride, while preserving the natural environment for future generations.

In conclusion, while tourism has proven to be an important driver of economic growth in Alabat, it is essential to address its negative impacts to ensure long-term sustainability. The study advocates for responsible tourism planning that balances economic benefits with environmental and social preservation. Strategies such as assessing the carrying capacity of tourism zones, improving waste management, and providing environmental education are vital. Collaborative efforts with local stakeholders, including indigenous groups and businesses, will ensure that the benefits of tourism are equitably shared. By emphasizing sustainable practices and community involvement, Alabat can become a model for other regions, demonstrating that tourism can thrive alongside environmental and cultural preservation.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Develop a Sustainable Tourism Framework.** A collaborative effort between local government units, community leaders, and tourism stakeholders should be initiated to prioritize the creation of a comprehensive framework. This framework should focus on conservation efforts, waste management, and regulating tourist numbers in ecologically sensitive areas to ensure long-term environmental sustainability.
2. **Promote Environmental Awareness.** Launch an extensive environmental awareness program targeted at both tourists and locals. The program should emphasize the importance of preserving the region's ecosystems and cultural heritage, fostering a sense of responsibility and collective action for conservation.
3. **Support Community-Driven Tourism Initiatives.** Encourage active participation from local residents, particularly from Barangay Villa Norte, in tourism activities. This can include roles such as leading guided tours, selling locally made handicrafts, or showcasing traditional cultural performances, thereby providing an avenue for local empowerment and cultural preservation.
4. **Enhance Infrastructure and Waste Management Systems.** Focus on developing sustainable infrastructure to support tourism, particularly in the areas of waste management. Implement eco-friendly facilities and signage to guide tourists in practicing responsible behaviors, ensuring that tourism growth does not contribute to environmental degradation.
5. **Urgently Formulate a Local Tourism Development Plan.** There is an immediate need to develop a well-defined tourism development plan for Alabat. This plan should be shaped through ongoing consultations with stakeholders and aligned with national, regional, and provincial policies, ensuring that tourism growth is balanced and beneficial to both the environment and the local community in the long term.

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