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Empowering Coastal Communities through Volunteer Tourism: A Pathway to Inclusive Marine Ecotourism in Bali

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Abstract

Marine tourism holds immense potential for driving economic development, environmental stewardship, and cultural exchange. However, the rapid growth of coastal destinations often generates imbalances in benefit distribution, environmental degradation, and limited community involvement. This study examines the role of volunteer tourism (voluntourism) in empowering coastal communities in Tulamben, Bali, a world-renowned diving destination. Using a qualitative case study with a phenomenological approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document review involving 15 stakeholders representing community groups, NGOs, government officials, tourism operators, and volunteers. The findings reveal that voluntourism strengthens community participation through grassroots initiatives, capacity building, and conservation programs. Socio-economic outcomes include income diversification and entrepreneurship development, while environmental benefits are evident in coral reef restoration and enhanced community stewardship. Challenges persist, including unequal benefit distribution, limited governance, and reliance on external actors. This paper argues that voluntourism, when integrated into community-based tourism (CBT), serves as a strategic pathway for inclusive and sustainable marine ecotourism.

Keywords: volunteer tourism, community-based tourism, marine ecotourism, community empowerment, Bali

A. Introduction

Marine-based tourism is among the fastest-growing sectors in global tourism, offering diverse opportunities for economic progress, intercultural learning, and environmental conservation. In Indonesia, Bali has emerged as a prominent marine tourism destination due to its rich biodiversity, cultural heritage, and strategic positioning within global tourism networks. Tulamben Village, located in Karangasem Regency, stands out as a globally recognized diving site, best known for the iconic USS Liberty wreck and vibrant coral ecosystems that attract thousands of visitors annually.

Despite this potential, the accelerated growth of marine tourism in Tulamben has brought complex challenges, including unequal benefit distribution, low community participation, and environmental degradation from over-tourism. Addressing these challenges requires innovative, inclusive approaches that link economic opportunities with community empowerment and ecological stewardship.

Volunteer tourism (voluntourism) has emerged as a promising mechanism for achieving these goals. Through the integration of volunteer activities—such as coral restoration, environmental education, and community training—within tourism experiences, voluntourism provides a platform for community-based empowerment and sustainable marine ecotourism.

While global literature acknowledges voluntourism's potential to advance community-based initiatives and environmental conservation, its integration into marine ecotourism, particularly within Indonesia, remains underexplored. Existing research tends to focus on terrestrial CBT or voluntourism in general contexts, leaving a gap in understanding how voluntourism can catalyze inclusive and sustainable development in coastal areas.

This study explores the role of voluntourism in empowering coastal communities in Tulamben and analyzes how these initiatives foster inclusive marine ecotourism. It further investigates the practices and impacts of voluntourism on local livelihoods and proposes a conceptual framework for integrating voluntourism into community-based marine ecotourism development.

This research contributes both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it expands the discourse on community-based tourism by positioning voluntourism as a strategic tool for inclusive marine ecotourism. Practically, it offers actionable insights for policymakers, tourism operators, and NGOs in designing sustainable, community-driven voluntourism models that balance economic, social, and environmental outcomes.

B. Literature Review

Community-Based Tourism (CBT)

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) is a development approach that places local communities at the center of tourism planning, management, and benefit distribution. According to Giampiccoli and Saayman (2018), CBT ensures that

tourism provides equitable benefits to local residents while maintaining cultural integrity and conserving natural resources. In coastal destinations, CBT commonly manifests through locally owned homestays, guided tours, and small-scale enterprises that foster both economic growth and community pride.

Key principles of CBT—participation, empowerment, and capacity building—align closely with the objectives of sustainable tourism (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). In marine environments, community stewardship plays a vital role in protecting fragile ecosystems such as coral reefs and mangrove forests. Effective CBT requires robust governance, inclusive decision-making, and collaborative partnerships between local residents, tourism operators, and government institutions.

In Indonesia, recent studies demonstrate that successful implementation of CBT in marine areas depends on strong local governance and alternative livelihood strategies that reduce dependency on extractive industries. Broader research on sustainable tourism in Southeast Asia indicates that policy frameworks combining top-down and bottom-up approaches strengthen local institutions and enhance environmental as well as social sustainability. This finding is particularly relevant for coastal destinations vulnerable to tourism pressures and ecological degradation.

Volunteer Tourism (Voluntourism)

Volunteer tourism, or voluntourism, is a form of special interest tourism in which travelers engage in voluntary activities—such as conservation, education, and community development—while visiting a destination (Wearing & McGehee, 2013). It allows visitors to build meaningful relationships with host communities and contribute positively to socio-environmental systems.

Motivations for voluntourism often stem from altruism, personal development, and a search for authentic experiences (Callanan & Thomas, 2005). In marine destinations, voluntourists typically participate in coral reef restoration, beach clean-ups, or biodiversity monitoring programs (Lucrezi & Cilliers, 2023). While voluntourism promotes conservation and community development, it has also been criticized for issues such as unequal power dynamics and limited long-term sustainability (Guttentag, 2009).

In Bali, research on Generation Z volunteers highlights a mix of altruistic motives, self-development goals, and cultural immersion as driving factors for participation in voluntourism projects. Understanding these motivations is essential for designing programs that align with volunteer expectations while ensuring mutual benefits for local communities. In the broader Southeast Asian context, studies in Malaysia and the Philippines have revealed that voluntourist satisfaction depends on the compatibility between volunteer functions (values, understanding, and social engagement) and environmental commitment. Such satisfaction enhances the likelihood of future participation and word-of-mouth advocacy, which are key indicators of program sustainability.

Intersection of CBT and Voluntourism

Integrating voluntourism within the CBT framework creates a synergistic model that enhances both community empowerment and destination sustainability. Milne et al. (2018) argue that this integration promotes local agency by involving residents in the design, management, and evaluation of volunteer programs. Training in marine ecology, entrepreneurship, and language skills strengthens human capital and supports long-term economic resilience.

This intersection also addresses gaps in traditional tourism models by ensuring equitable benefit distribution, encouraging knowledge exchange between hosts and guests, and aligning environmental goals with tourism activities. Case studies in North Bali demonstrate that sustained interaction between volunteers, NGOs, and local communities has led to improved environmental awareness, strengthened stewardship, and measurable ecological outcomes, such as coral reef recovery.

However, the literature cautions that power imbalances may occur if voluntourism initiatives are dominated by external actors or lack integration into community governance systems. To avoid dependency and ensure long-term benefits, program design must emphasize transparency, local leadership, and continuous capacity development. These insights reinforce the argument for a community-led CBT–voluntourism model in Indonesia's coastal destinations.

Sustainable Marine Ecotourism Framework

Marine ecotourism, a subcategory of nature-based tourism, emphasizes responsible interactions with marine ecosystems. Honey (2008) defines sustainable marine ecotourism as tourism that minimizes environmental impacts, supports conservation, and delivers socio-economic benefits to local communities. The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) provides a comprehensive framework for assessing sustainability in marine destinations, including indicators such as effective destination planning, community engagement, conservation of natural and cultural heritage, and minimization of negative environmental impacts. Integrating voluntourism within this framework allows destinations like Tulamben to develop holistic approaches that unite community empowerment, conservation, and meaningful visitor experiences.

Tulamben, a renowned shipwreck diving site centered around the USS Liberty, illustrates the dual challenges of site degradation and stakeholder conflict. Studies on marine tourism governance in Bali highlight the need for coordinated management, transparent benefit-sharing, and strong local participation to ensure the sustainability of iconic diving sites. Lessons learned from Tulamben's community-led reef maintenance and visitor management initiatives can inform best practices for inclusive and sustainable marine tourism elsewhere in Indonesia.

C. Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design grounded in a social constructionist and phenomenological approach. The design was chosen to explore the lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of various stakeholders involved in voluntourism and community-based tourism (CBT) initiatives in Tulamben, Bali. The phenomenological perspective enabled a deeper understanding of how individuals experience voluntourism within their social and cultural contexts. This approach is particularly suited to examining complex tourism systems where social, economic, and environmental dimensions intersect dynamicall

Research Setting

The research was conducted in Tulamben Village, located in Karangasem Regency, northern Bali. Tulamben is internationally recognized for its marine tourism potential, particularly the iconic *USS Liberty* shipwreck dive site, vibrant coral ecosystems, and active conservation programs. The coexistence of established diving tourism and emerging voluntourism projects in this area provides a rich context for understanding how community empowerment, conservation, and tourism development interact.

Participants and Sampling

A purposive sampling technique was applied to ensure representation from diverse stakeholder groups. Participants included local community members such as fishermen, homestay owners, and small business operators; local organizations like Sekar Baruna and the MERO Foundation; tourism operators, including dive centers and guides; government representatives from village and regency tourism offices; and volunteers, both domestic and international, who were involved in conservation activities. In total, 15 key informants participated in this study, consistent with qualitative research standards for data saturation. This sample provided a balanced perspective of local experiences, governance issues, and collaborative dynamics in voluntourism-based marine tourism.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through multiple qualitative techniques to ensure triangulation and depth; (1) In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders to explore their experiences, motivations, and perceptions of voluntourism and community empowerment; (2) Participant observation was undertaken during activities such as coral planting, reef monitoring, and community education events to capture social interactions and on-ground dynamics; (3) Document review involved analysis of secondary data,

including community reports, NGO publications, and government tourism statistics, which provided contextual and historical insights.

This combination of methods allowed for the cross-verification of information and strengthened the reliability of the findings.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the three-step framework proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2019): data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. After transcribing and organizing the interview data, key themes were coded and categorized to identify recurring patterns. Thematic matrices were then developed to visualize relationships among concepts related to empowerment, governance, and sustainability. Finally, conclusions were drawn and verified by comparing emergent themes with theoretical constructs from CBT and sustainable tourism frameworks.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To ensure research credibility, several strategies were implemented. Triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents enhanced the depth and validity of interpretations. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with participants to confirm the accuracy of interpretations. Peer debriefing with academic colleagues further validated the coding and analytical process.

Ethical principles were rigorously maintained throughout the research. All participants were informed of the study's objectives and voluntarily provided consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were preserved, and pseudonyms were used where necessary. The research also adhered to cultural sensitivity protocols by consulting with local leaders and respecting customary practices. These measures ensured that the study maintained integrity, transparency, and mutual respect between the researcher and the community.

D. Result and Discussion

Community Participation and Empowerment

Voluntourism initiatives in Tulamben have significantly fostered community participation and local empowerment. Programs such as coral restoration, environmental education, and community-led conservation have encouraged grassroots leadership and collective action. Local organizations including Sekar Baruna and the MERO Foundation have emerged as active agents managing voluntourism-related projects. These groups not only coordinate volunteer activities but also design locally relevant initiatives, such as youth training workshops, waste management programs, and community-based awareness campaigns.

A village elder reflected:

"The volunteers came to help, but we also realized that we needed to take ownership. Now, we are not just receiving help — we are part of the planning and the action."

This perspective reflects a transition from dependency to co-creation. Voluntourism has provided a platform for residents to actively shape their community's tourism narrative while strengthening their sense of agency.

Capacity building and knowledge transfer have been notable outcomes of voluntourism programs. Local residents, particularly youth and women, have gained new competencies in marine ecology, English communication, digital promotion, and small-business management. These skills enhance employability and align with CBT principles by positioning residents as active contributors to tourism value chains.

Socio-Economic and Environmental Impacts

Voluntourism in Tulamben has contributed to both social and economic diversification. Beyond traditional diving and homestay enterprises, residents have developed new tourism-related products, such as eco-tours, culinary workshops, and handicraft production. Women's groups have begun marketing local snacks and souvenirs directly to volunteers and visitors, thereby creating micro-enterprise opportunities that generate supplemental income.

From an environmental perspective, voluntourism has had visible positive effects. Coral restoration activities, reef monitoring, and regular coastal clean-ups have improved reef health and contributed to greater ecological awareness among residents. These initiatives have also nurtured environmental pride within the community, transforming conservation into a shared social value rather than an externally imposed activity.

The strengthening of environmental stewardship is one of the most tangible outcomes of voluntourism. Local fishers and youth increasingly view themselves as custodians of the reef, with many voluntarily participating in maintenance and monitoring efforts. As a result, the community's long-term commitment to sustainability has deepened.

Social Cohesion and Local Identity

Voluntourism has reinforced social cohesion by uniting diverse community groups around shared goals of sustainability and cultural preservation. The visibility of local efforts—often highlighted by visiting volunteers through social media or NGO platforms—has fostered a renewed sense of pride in Tulamben's identity as a sustainable marine tourism village.

Participation in collaborative projects has strengthened intergenerational relationships as elders, youth, and women's groups work collectively in conservation and hospitality programs. This collaborative spirit enhances community trust and promotes local solidarity.

Challenges and Barriers

Despite its successes, voluntourism in Tulamben faces several persistent challenges. One major issue is the unequal distribution of benefits. Families

directly connected to NGOs or tourism businesses often enjoy greater financial and networking advantages, while marginalized groups—particularly subsistence fishers and households outside the main tourism zone—remain less involved. This imbalance risks reinforcing pre-existing socio-economic inequalities.

Another challenge concerns governance and coordination. The absence of a formal management framework for voluntourism has resulted in fragmented efforts, overlapping activities, and occasional competition among organizations. Stakeholders emphasized the need for a unified local management body to coordinate programs, allocate resources efficiently, and maintain transparency.

Issues of power dynamics and external dependency also persist. Some initiatives are heavily influenced by foreign organizations or external donors, leading to decision-making imbalances that can undermine local autonomy. When external support declines, programs risk losing momentum unless local actors are adequately prepared to sustain operations independently.

Finally, capacity gaps in business management, digital literacy, and advanced marine conservation techniques continue to limit community independence. While training programs have built foundational skills, sustained mentorship and institutional support are needed to ensure long-term self-reliance.

Summary of Key Findings

Overall, the findings demonstrate that voluntourism serves as both an empowering and transformative force in Tulamben's marine tourism landscape. It promotes inclusive participation, fosters environmental awareness, and diversifies local livelihoods. However, sustainability depends on the establishment of transparent governance mechanisms, equitable participation frameworks, and capacity-building programs that prioritize marginalized groups.

Table 1. Summary of Key Findings

Theme	Positive Outcomes	Key Challenges
Community Participation	Grassroots leadership; increased awareness and skills	Unequal involvement of marginalized groups
Socio-economic Impacts	Diversification of income; enhanced entrepreneurship	Risk of economic dependency
Environmental Impacts	Coral restoration; stronger environmental stewardship	Need for continuous technical support
Governance and Power	Increased collaboration between actors	Lack of formal governance framework; external dominance

Source: Author (2025)

The findings of this study affirm that volunteer tourism (voluntourism), when integrated with the principles of community-based tourism (CBT), has considerable potential to advance inclusive and sustainable marine ecotourism development in Tulamben. The discussion elaborates on four interconnected dimensions: community empowerment, socio-economic transformation, environmental stewardship, and governance dynamics. Together, these dimensions provide a comprehensive understanding of how voluntourism can function as a strategic pathway toward sustainability in coastal destinations.

Voluntourism as a Catalyst for Community Empowerment

The emergence of grassroots leadership and locally managed initiatives in Tulamben illustrates how voluntourism can transform community members from passive beneficiaries into active co-creators of tourism experiences. This shift resonates with Giampiccoli and Saayman's (2018) argument that authentic CBT requires communities to hold decision-making authority and ownership over tourism processes. By participating in the planning and execution of volunteer projects, local residents strengthen their sense of agency and gain practical governance experience.

However, empowerment in Tulamben remains uneven. Without deliberate inclusion mechanisms, marginalized groups—such as subsistence fishers and women outside existing tourism networks—risk being excluded from the benefits of voluntourism. This finding echoes Guttentag's (2009) critique that voluntourism can inadvertently perpetuate inequalities if access to participation is limited to privileged groups. Therefore, achieving genuine empowerment requires targeted outreach and participatory mechanisms that ensure broad-based inclusion across gender, age, and occupation lines.

Socio-Economic Transformation and Capacity Building

Voluntourism in Tulamben contributes to socio-economic diversification and local entrepreneurship, aligning with Porter and Kramer's (2011) concept of "shared value" in sustainable development. The creation of community-based enterprises—such as eco-tours, culinary workshops, and handicraft production—demonstrates how social initiatives can generate both economic and cultural benefits. By embedding local traditions into tourism offerings, voluntourism helps preserve cultural identity while expanding livelihood opportunities.

Similar trends have been observed in Southeast Asia, where voluntourism supports micro-enterprise development and enhances human capital in small island destinations (Lucrezi & Cilliers, 2023). The transfer of skills in marine ecology, English communication, and digital promotion builds community competence and strengthens resilience within the tourism economy. Nevertheless, the persistence of capacity gaps highlights the importance of institutionalized mentorship and continuous learning systems. Local governments, NGOs, and universities should collaborate to develop training

programs in business management, digital literacy, and conservation techniques to sustain community autonomy in the long term.

Environmental Stewardship and Marine Ecotourism

Environmental outcomes in Tulamben underscore voluntourism's potential as a tool for ecological restoration and awareness-building. Coral reef rehabilitation, waste management initiatives, and environmental education programs have contributed to a tangible improvement in reef health and pro-environmental attitudes. These results align with the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) framework, which emphasizes conservation, community engagement, and responsible tourism management as core pillars of sustainability (Anis et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the integration of volunteer programs with local conservation efforts fosters collective responsibility and shared identity among residents. This finding supports research by Setiawan et al. (2023), who noted that participatory conservation models in Indonesian coastal regions enhance both environmental outcomes and community cohesion. However, long-term sustainability depends on continuous technical support and the institutionalization of community-led monitoring systems to prevent dependency on external expertise.

Governance and Power Relations in Voluntourism

The absence of a formal governance structure in Tulamben presents a major obstacle to the effective management of voluntourism programs. Fragmentation among local organizations and overlapping initiatives mirror challenges identified in other marine destinations across Indonesia, where unclear stakeholder coordination undermines efficiency (Utama & Junaedi, 2019). To overcome these issues, the establishment of a multi-stakeholder governance platform—comprising community representatives, government agencies, NGOs, and tourism operators—is essential. Such platforms can facilitate transparent decision-making, equitable benefit-sharing, and alignment with long-term sustainability goals.

Power asymmetry remains a concern in voluntourism, particularly when foreign NGOs or external donors dominate program agendas. This can create dependency and weaken local agency. Milne et al. (2018) emphasize the need for inclusive governance mechanisms that prioritize community leadership and transparent accountability structures. By institutionalizing participatory planning and funding models, Tulamben can reduce its reliance on external actors and reinforce its capacity to manage voluntourism autonomously.

E. Conclusion

This study concludes that volunteer tourism (voluntourism) has emerged as a transformative mechanism for advancing inclusive and sustainable marine ecotourism in Tulamben, Bali. By integrating voluntourism within the

framework of community-based tourism (CBT), coastal communities gain greater agency, environmental awareness, and livelihood diversification. The findings demonstrate that voluntourism enhances community empowerment through participatory planning, knowledge exchange, and the development of new economic opportunities. The social outcomes—such as strengthened local identity and intergenerational collaboration—illustrate how voluntourism can foster social cohesion and collective stewardship. Environmental improvements, including coral restoration and waste management, further reinforce the potential of voluntourism as a driver of ecological sustainability.

However, challenges persist. Unequal benefit distribution, limited governance mechanisms, and external dependency threaten long-term sustainability. These issues highlight the need for more structured institutional arrangements that prioritize inclusivity, transparency, and local leadership. In essence, voluntourism should not be viewed merely as a charitable activity or alternative tourism trend but as a strategic pathway for building resilient and self-reliant coastal communities. When implemented through participatory and community-led approaches, voluntourism can transform marine ecotourism destinations into models of inclusive and sustainable development.

To enhance voluntourism in Tulamben, a community-based governance model should be formalized to coordinate programs, ensure equitable benefit distribution, and strengthen accountability among stakeholders. Capacity building and mentorship in marine conservation, business management, and digital literacy must be institutionalized through collaborations with local NGOs, universities, and tourism offices. Inclusive participation should be promoted by engaging marginalized groups, particularly women, youth, and traditional fishers, in order to ensure that all community members benefit. Long-term partnerships with NGOs, government institutions, and private tourism operators are essential to ensure resource continuity and reduce reliance on external donors. Finally, Tulamben should be positioned as a flagship sustainable voluntourism destination, with its community empowerment and conservation achievements highlighted, while continuous monitoring guided by Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) indicators ensures progress.

This study contributes to the evolving discourse on the intersection of voluntourism and CBT by positioning voluntourism not merely as a niche tourism product but as a community development strategy embedded within sustainable tourism frameworks. Theoretically, the findings extend the application of CBT and sustainable tourism theories to marine contexts where socio-ecological interdependence is high. The integration of voluntourism into this framework demonstrates how external engagement—when locally governed—can produce long-term socio-environmental benefits.

From a practical standpoint, the research provides actionable recommendations for policymakers, tourism practitioners, and NGOs. Institutionalizing inclusive participation ensures that marginalized groups benefit equitably from voluntourism initiatives. Structured training programs can

enhance human capital and reduce dependency on external expertise. Furthermore, developing a community-based governance body can facilitate collaboration among stakeholders, improve resource allocation, and strengthen accountability. Finally, destination branding strategies can position Tulamben as a model of sustainable marine voluntourism in Indonesia. Highlighting the village's success in coral restoration, community empowerment, and inclusive governance could attract socially and environmentally conscious travelers, thereby reinforcing its reputation as a leading example of sustainable marine ecotourism.

F. Conflict of Interest

The authors report no financial interests, professional commitments, or personal relationships that constitute a conflict of interest in the evaluation of hazard signage at Nusa Penida tourist sites.

G. Declaration of AI Use

The authors used ChatGPT by OpenAI to explore research ideas, consider possible conceptual frameworks, and organize the manuscript's structure. They evaluated the conceptual suggestions against original scholarly literature and reviewed the proposed organization for consistency with the research objectives, methods, and findings. The authors selected and refined the material incorporated into the manuscript and take full responsibility for its accuracy, originality, references, and academic integrity.

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