

Sustainable Tourism Management Strategy to Strengthen The Competitiveness of Palu City Destinations

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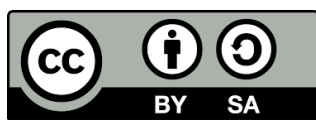
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Abstract

Tourism played an important role in promoting regional economic growth, employment, and community welfare. However, Palu City's tourism sector had not yet fully optimized its natural, marine, cultural, culinary, and creative economy potential, while its development continued to face challenges related to infrastructure, institutions, promotion, environmental management, and disaster risk. This study aimed to formulate a sustainable tourism management strategy to strengthen the competitiveness of Palu City as an urban and marine tourism destination. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed through a literature review using secondary data from official statistical publications, government reports, and relevant academic studies. Data were collected through document review and analyzed descriptively and interpretively by categorizing the information into destination planning, stakeholder collaboration, human resource development, digital marketing, infrastructure and environmental management, disaster mitigation, and creative economy development. The findings indicated that tourism competitiveness required integrated and data-driven planning, stronger cross-sectoral institutions, meaningful community participation, improved tourism service competencies, consistent digital promotion, adequate infrastructure, and disaster-resilient destination management. Palu Bay, local culture, culinary products, and creative industries could be integrated into distinctive tourism packages to increase visitors' length of stay and generate greater local economic benefits. In conclusion, Palu City required a collaborative and sustainable tourism management model that balanced economic competitiveness, community welfare, environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and visitor safety.



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INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the sectors capable of creating economic linkages among various community activities (Lesmana et al., 2022; Loureiro & Nascimento, 2021). When tourists visit an area, their activities are related not only to tourist attractions but also to transportation, accommodation, culinary services, trade, the creative economy, tour guide services, and micro and small enterprises (Aji et al., 2023; Latif et al., 2023; Atmojo et al., 2023). Therefore, tourism development should not be understood merely as the development of tourist attractions but rather as a management process that integrates various resources within a destination (Gravitiani et al., 2022; Sianturi et al., 2025).

Palu City has a strategic position in the development of the tourism sector. As the capital of Central Sulawesi Province, Palu serves as a center of government and economic activity and provides access connecting various regions across Central Sulawesi. Data from the Central Statistics Agency indicate that accommodation services in Palu City continue to play an important role in supporting tourist mobility. In July 2025, for example, the number of guests staying in star-rated hotels reached 16,582, consisting of 16,542 domestic guests and 40 foreign guests. During the same period, the room occupancy rate of star-rated hotels was recorded at 50.28% (Palu City Central Statistics Agency, 2025).

Data from the Central Statistics Agency of Palu City indicate that Palu City's tourism market remains highly dependent on domestic tourists. This condition also presents an opportunity because tourism development does not need to focus exclusively on attracting foreign tourists.

Domestic tourists, business travelers, participants in government activities, educational travelers, and family tourists can serve as major market segments that should be managed more strategically. Palu City also has significant experience with natural disasters. The 2018 earthquake and tsunami demonstrated that destination development must incorporate safety, preparedness, spatial planning, and risk mitigation. Scientific studies of the Palu tsunami have shown that the approximately magnitude 7.5 earthquake in 2018 involved complex mechanisms and generated a tsunami that significantly affected the Palu region (Central Statistics Agency of Central Sulawesi Province, 2025).

The competitiveness of Palu City cannot be strengthened solely through the construction or renovation of individual attractions. Destination competitiveness is multidimensional and is influenced by safety and security, basic and tourism infrastructure, accessibility, environmental quality, hospitality, natural resources, cultural assets, and the capacity of destination institutions to coordinate their activities. Mustafa et al. (2020), in their comparison of six leading island destinations in Southeast Asia, identified safety and security, infrastructure, natural and human-made attractions, hospitality, culture, and traditions as important dimensions of destination competitiveness. Wu et al. (2023) further demonstrated that competitiveness must be assessed alongside sustainability because a destination may achieve strong tourism performance while using its environmental, economic, and social resources inefficiently. These findings imply that Palu requires an integrated management strategy rather than fragmented programs implemented independently by different institutions (Idham & Mukhtar, 2025; Jamaluddin & Septiana, 2025; Karatu et al., 2026; Umar et al., 2025).

The need for an integrated strategy is particularly important because Palu is a disaster-prone coastal city. The earthquake, liquefaction, and tsunami of September 2018 caused extensive physical, social, and economic damage and demonstrated the vulnerability of coastal settlements and tourism facilities. Destination management in Palu must therefore integrate disaster risk reduction into spatial planning, infrastructure development, visitor information, evacuation systems, destination operating procedures, and marketing communications. Pahrudin et al. (2023) found that information sources influenced tourists' perceptions and behavioral intentions in Indonesian destinations affected by earthquakes, indicating that credible risk communication can contribute to post-disaster tourism recovery. Accordingly, safety should not be treated merely as an emergency management responsibility but as a

fundamental component of the quality, reputation, resilience, and competitiveness of Palu City as a tourism destination (Ismiyati & Lestari, 2020; Marzuki et al., 2024; Paton & Sagala, 2018; Setiawan et al., 2025).

Previous studies have provided valuable insights into several components of sustainable destination development. Tjaija et al. (2022), using an A'WOT approach that combined the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) and SWOT analysis, recommended tourism product diversification, improved event management, destination image enhancement, visitor management, promotion, and branding for the sustainable development of Palu Bay following the natural disaster. At the regional level, Sawir et al. (2024) emphasized that strategic public relations could strengthen sustainable tourism by improving policy acceptance, stakeholder communication, destination image, and public understanding of local culture. Meanwhile, studies of Southeast Asian destinations have consistently shown that infrastructure, destination attributes, service quality, and institutional support influence competitiveness. Although these studies provide important foundations, most have examined particular attractions, communication practices, or individual dimensions of competitiveness rather than Palu City's tourism management system as a whole.

Community participation constitutes another essential element of sustainable destination management because local communities are both custodians of tourism resources and groups directly affected by tourism development. Meaningful participation allows residents, tourism awareness groups, youth organizations, artisans, culinary businesses, and micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) to influence planning decisions and derive economic benefits from tourism activities. However, Reindrawati's (2023) systematic review of Scopus-indexed studies found that community participation in developing countries is frequently constrained by operational, structural, and cultural barriers, including limited access to information, complex bureaucracy, weak community capacity, and distrust among stakeholders. Therefore, developing sustainable tourism in Palu requires more than inviting communities to participate in government programs. It requires institutional mechanisms that enable communities to participate in identifying tourism potential, designing tourism products, managing destinations, monitoring environmental impacts, and evaluating the distribution of tourism benefits.

Digital transformation has also changed how destinations compete because tourists increasingly obtain information, compare alternatives, assess safety, make reservations, and share experiences through digital platforms. For Palu City, digital marketing can connect relatively dispersed attractions by presenting Palu Bay, cultural activities, culinary products, community enterprises, and creative economy centers as part of a coherent visitor experience. Nevertheless, promotional visibility alone is insufficient when online information is inconsistent, destination products are poorly integrated, or visitor services fail to meet expectations created by digital content. Research on destination marketing has shown that digital tools contribute to visitor decision-making when they are integrated with strategic planning, stakeholder collaboration, sustainability, and destination resilience. Thus, Palu requires a data-driven digital strategy supported by a clear destination brand, market segmentation, an integrated event calendar, reliable safety information, and continuous evaluation of visitor engagement and behavior.

Despite the contributions of previous research, an important gap remains in explaining how sustainable tourism management can comprehensively strengthen the competitiveness of Palu City. Existing studies have generally examined Palu Bay, specific tourism sites, post-disaster development, public communication, infrastructure, or community empowerment separately. Limited attention has been given to integrating destination planning, stakeholder collaboration, human resource development, digital marketing, infrastructure, environmental management, disaster mitigation, and creative economy development within a single city-level management framework. Moreover, tourism performance indicators are often examined independently of community welfare, environmental carrying capacity, disaster preparedness, and the distribution of benefits among local businesses. Addressing this gap is important because fragmented development may temporarily increase tourist visits without extending visitors' length of stay, strengthening destination resilience, improving service quality, or generating sustainable benefits for local communities.

Based on this research gap, the present study aims to formulate a sustainable tourism management strategy to strengthen the competitiveness of Palu City as an urban and marine tourism destination. The study specifically seeks to identify the city's tourism potential and principal management constraints, examine the roles of relevant stakeholders, synthesize strategic priorities, and develop an integrated framework covering destination planning, institutional collaboration, human resource capacity, digital marketing, infrastructure, environmental sustainability, disaster mitigation, and the creative economy. Its novelty lies in integrating competitiveness, sustainability, community participation, and disaster resilience within a context-specific management framework for Palu City. Theoretically, the study contributes to the literature on sustainable destination management by demonstrating how these dimensions interact within a disaster-prone emerging destination. Practically, its findings can benefit local government agencies, tourism businesses, communities, academics, and investors by providing an evidence-based foundation for coordinated programs, resource allocation, tourism product development, performance monitoring, and the development of a safe, inclusive, resilient, and competitive destination.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach using a literature review to examine sustainable tourism management strategies for strengthening the competitiveness of Palu City as a tourism destination. The study relied on secondary data obtained from official statistical publications, government reports, and relevant academic literature on tourism management, destination competitiveness, sustainable tourism, community participation, tourism infrastructure, digital marketing, and disaster mitigation.

The primary statistical data were obtained from publications issued by the Palu City Central Statistics Agency (BPS Kota Palu) and the Central Statistics Agency of Central Sulawesi Province (BPS Provinsi Sulawesi Tengah). These data were used to describe tourism-related conditions in Palu City, including accommodation utilization, hotel occupancy, tourist mobility, and other indicators relevant to destination development. Supporting literature was obtained from journal articles and previous studies related to tourism competitiveness, marine

tourism, community-based tourism, ecotourism, and the socioeconomic impacts of tourism development.

Data were collected through document review by identifying, selecting, and examining statistical reports and scientific literature relevant to the research objectives. The collected information was categorized into key dimensions of tourism management, including destination planning, institutional strengthening and stakeholder collaboration, human resource development, digital marketing, infrastructure and environmental management, disaster mitigation, and creative economy development.

The data were analyzed using descriptive and interpretive analysis. Statistical information was used to describe existing tourism conditions, while findings from previous studies were compared and synthesized to identify challenges, opportunities, and strategic priorities for sustainable destination development. The analysis considered the economic, social, cultural, environmental, technological, and disaster risk characteristics of Palu City. The synthesized findings were then used to formulate an integrated tourism management framework emphasizing collaboration among government, communities, businesses, academics, and other tourism stakeholders.

The final stage involved formulating a tourism management strategy based on the identified problems and development potential. The strategy covered five main stages: mapping tourism potential and problems, determining development priorities, developing integrated tourism products, strengthening promotion and digital marketing, and conducting continuous monitoring and evaluation. This framework was used to assess how sustainable tourism management could strengthen the competitiveness of Palu City as an urban and marine tourism destination.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Destination Planning Management

Tourism development management must start with data-based planning. Local governments need to have information about the number of tourists, tourist character, length of stay, tourist expenses, satisfaction levels, visit patterns, and carrying capacity of each destination.

The data can be used to determine development priorities. Not all tourist attractions must be built in the same pattern. Destinations that have sensitive ecosystems require a conservation approach, while urban areas can be developed as centers for tourism activities and the creative economy. Planning must also use a regional approach. A destination cannot develop optimally if it relies only on physical development. Roads to destinations, parking lots, toilets, eateries, information centers, internet networks, security, cleanliness, and transportation must be part of integrated planning. In addition, each destination development must have clear indicators of success. These indicators can include increased visits, length of stay of tourists, increased community income, growth of MSMEs, the number of local workers, the cleanliness of destinations, tourist satisfaction, and the level of environmental sustainability. (Central Statistics Agency of Central Sulawesi Province. 2025).

Institutional Strengthening and Collaboration

One of the important issues in tourism management is coordination between sectors. Tourism development is not possible only by the Tourism Office. Local governments need cooperation with the Transportation Office, Public Works, Environment, Culture, MSMEs, District and Village Governments, and the private sector. Collaboration must also involve the community. The community is not only the party that receives the impact of development, but must be part of the destination management. A community-based approach can create a sense of belonging so that the sustainability of destinations is easier to realize. Various studies on tourism development show that community involvement is closely related to the success of destination management. The experience of ecotourism development also shows the importance of community participation in the planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation stages.

In Palu City, strengthening tourism awareness groups, youth communities, MSME actors, art groups, culinary actors, and environmental communities can be a concrete strategy. They can be given space to participate in determining tourism products, managing activities, providing tourism services, and conducting promotions. (Wahab & Mustafa, 2023).

Improving the Quality of Human Resources

The competitiveness of destinations is greatly influenced by the quality of the people who provide services. Beautiful scenery will not produce a good tourist experience if tourists get poor service, unclear information, dirty environment, or low security. Therefore, the tourism development program of Palu City needs to include training for business actors and the community. Training materials can include tourist services, cleanliness and sanitation, business management, basic foreign languages, tour guides, photography, digital marketing, social media management, and tourist safety.

Human resource development must also be directed to the younger generation. Young people have relatively strong abilities in the use of digital technology so that they can be the driving force for destination promotion. They can develop short video content, tourist photography, digital maps, cultural stories, and travel information. The experience of assisting business communities in Palu City shows that improving business management skills and product diversification can have an impact on marketing and business revenue.

This shows that tourism can be an entrance to strengthen the community's economy if accompanied by increasing business capacity (Wahab & Mustafa, 2023).

Digital Marketing Strategy

Changing tourist behavior has made digital marketing an important component of destination management. Travelers today tend to look for information about destinations through search engines, social media, videos, traveler reviews, and travel platforms. Palu City needs to have a strong destination identity. Promotion is not enough to just display photos of tourist attractions, but must build stories about the experiences that tourists can get. For example, tourists can be offered travel packages that combine panoramic views of Palu Bay, local cuisine, cultural activities, craft centers, and natural destinations. The government and business actors can develop an annual calendar of activities that includes cultural festivals, sports activities, art performances, culinary festivals, creative economy exhibitions, and community activities. The calendar is then promoted consistently through various digital

platforms. Marketing strategies also need to use data. Information about the most viewed content, the origin of tourists, the length of interaction, and search patterns can be used to determine the target market. Thus, promotion is not carried out in general, but is directed to the group of tourists who have the greatest likelihood of visiting. (Wahab & Mustafa, 2023).

Infrastructure, Environment, and Disaster Mitigation

Infrastructure is an important element in improving the quality of the tourist experience. The development of tourism infrastructure in Palu City must pay attention to road access, transportation, toilets, parking lots, information centers, communication networks, lighting, cleanliness, and facilities for vulnerable groups and people with disabilities. However, infrastructure development must be carried out taking into account the character of the environment and disaster risk. Coastal destinations, for example, must have information about evacuation routes, gathering points, warning boards, and safety procedures. Disaster education can also be used as part of the operational standards of destination management. Sustainable tourism development must basically maintain a balance between economic, social, cultural, and environmental interests. Therefore, the success of tourism should not only be measured based on the number of tourists. If the number of visits increases but garbage increases, the environment is damaged, the community does not receive economic benefits, and the capacity of the destination is exceeded, then the development cannot be called successful. (Farhaeni, at all, 2024).

Creative Economy Development Strategy

Tourism and the creative economy have a mutually reinforcing relationship. Tourists need food, souvenirs, handicraft products, art performances, and local experiences. On the other hand, creative economy actors need a market to sell their products. Palu City can develop a creative economy center that is connected to tourist routes. Local MSME products can be developed into distinctive souvenirs with attractive packaging designs that are easy for tourists to carry. Local culinary can also be positioned as part of the destination's identity. The development of the creative economy must pay attention to product quality, price consistency, cleanliness, packaging, certification if needed, as well as digital marketing. Thus, the money spent by tourists can have a greater economic effect on the local community. (Farhaeni, at all, 2024).

Palu City Tourism Management Model

The tourism management model of Palu City can be built through five stages. First, mapping the potential and problems to determine the character of each destination. Second, determining priorities based on economic potential, environment, accessibility, and community readiness. Third, the development of tourism products through the integration of nature, culture, culinary, and the creative economy. Fourth, promotion and marketing by utilizing digital technology. Fifth, periodic monitoring and evaluation. The model must be collaborative. The government plays the role of regulator and facilitator, the community as the main actor at the local level, the private sector as investors and service developers, academics as a source of knowledge, while the community can be a driver of innovation and promotion. This kind of management is in line with the principle that tourism development must generate economic benefits while maintaining destination resources. Research on tourism competitiveness also

emphasizes the importance of regional management, environmental conditions, and destination supporting factors in building competitiveness. Riska, Ramadani, F., & Purwasih, R. (2020).

CONCLUSION

Tourism development in Palu City requires an integrated, sustainable, and community-based management approach. The city's natural, marine, cultural, culinary, and creative economy resources constitute important assets for strengthening Palu City's competitiveness as a tourism destination in eastern Indonesia.

Tourism development strategies should not rely solely on the physical development of tourist attractions. The government needs to strengthen data-driven planning, institutional capacity, human resource quality, accessibility, digital marketing, the creative economy, environmental cleanliness, and safety and disaster mitigation systems. Accommodation statistics indicate that tourism activities in Palu City still have considerable potential for further development, particularly through improvements in visitor experience and length of stay. In December 2025, for example, the room occupancy rate of star-rated hotels reached 50.93%, while that of non-star hotels reached 26.47%.

In the future, Palu City needs to establish a strong destination identity that distinguishes it from other cities in Indonesia. A tourism concept integrating the appeal of Palu Bay, natural attractions, local culture, culinary products, the creative economy, and the distinctive characteristics of local communities could provide a foundation for this development. Ultimately, the success of tourism development should be measured not only by the number of tourists but also by the extent to which tourism improves community welfare, protects the environment, strengthens local culture, and supports the development of safe, resilient, and sustainable destinations.

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