



The Designation of Komodo National Park World Heritage Site: to Whom does it benefit?

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Since its inscription as a World Heritage Site in 1991, Komodo National Park has experienced an influx of tourists, almost tripling pre-inscription visitor numbers. This is unsurprising since in addition to the Komodo dragons themselves, tourists also discover the added attraction of the park's wonderful marine life. However, positive developments which have been claimed as an impact of the growing industry do not extend to the closest community who lives within the national park. Kampung Komodo is a village located in the heart of Komodo Island, but it has hardly received any improved facilities or economic benefit. The reason for this is that many developments are centralised in Labuan Bajo, a small city on the mainland where the main airport is located. Further, the designation of Komodo World Heritage Site brought an additional layer of conservation, which means that the villagers' activities are now limited by the implementation of protection strategies. These strategies do not only threaten the local community's social welfare; the designation and its current management strategy can potentially endanger the relationship between the Komodo people and their heritage site. Therefore, it stands to reason that the local community now feels excluded from the management of the World Heritage Site.

The Komodo National Park

Komodo National Park is inhabited by thousands of komodo dragons and was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1991. The National Park itself consists of three major islands: Komodo, Rinca, and Padar, together with many smaller islands, located in the eastern part of Indonesia between Sumbawa and Flores. The biggest

island of the National Park, Komodo Island, has a human population of almost 2000 who live in 5% of the island's total area. Komodo dragons are already well known among travelers around the world as the world's largest lizard, but since its inscription to the World Heritage List, the National Park has received far more international attention.

As arguably expected from inscription on the World Heritage List, tourism in this area has grown significantly since the international designation. From the 20,000 visitors that Komodo National Park received in 1990's, numbers have grown to 60,000 in 2013 and 90,000 in 2015. With the effort that Indonesia Tourism Ministry has made in promoting the island in recent years, it is predicted that in 2019, Komodo National Park will welcome no less than 500,000 visitors (Kementrian Pariwisata Indonesia, 2016). In addition to promoting the National Park as a World Heritage Site, more investment in festivals, infrastructure, health facilities, and air transportation are being made in order to attract visitors and to ease the access to the island. Many local newspapers mentioned that the national park's World Heritage status has brought positive impacts to the development of tourism industry in the area (Molan, 2014; Stirman, 2011; Trirahmi, 2013). With the increase of visitors and growth in tourism in this area, the government believes that the local economic development will be enhanced and therefore will contribute to the improvement of the local community's livelihood.

Given the definition of local community as human settlements close to a given site (Joppe, 1993), however, it seems that tourism does not really bring an improvement to the closest community in Komodo National Park. All hotels, restaurants, and other tourism facilities are located not in on Komodo Island but in Labuan Bajo, a city more than 40 kilometres away on the Flores mainland where the airport is located. Therefore, Kampung Komodo, a village that is located on Komodo Island remains untouched from investment or improvements. Visitors must travel by boat for several hours to access Komodo island from Labuan Bajo, but they rarely go to Komodo village after that, in spite of it being located within the main island of Komodo National Park.

Looking at the case study, is it appropriate to argue that the designation of World Heritage Sites delivers more benefit than negative impacts to the local community? When the heritage sites have become of interest of the international community,

does it mean that its local community will lose their ownership or control of their heritage?



1. Kampung Komodo, view from the dock. (Photo source: G. Afioma)

Tourism in Komodo Village

Although it does not apply to all sites and is becoming a subject of debate among scholars, Johansen (2012) explained that World Heritage inscription potentially increases tourism development within an area and delivers economic improvement to the local community. In the case of the local community in Komodo Village, the government's decision to protect Komodo Island as a national park already resulted in local people being restricted in performing their job as fishermen, let alone the designation of Komodo as a World Heritage Site. The status has resulted in a different conservation and zoning system than before. The zoning system that initially meant to conserve the biosphere of the island and protect the surrounding area has resulted in the constriction of the allowed fishing area for the villagers, which was their main way of making a living. Moreover, tourism development has not brought any significant impact for the local community, although Hall and Lew (2009) have said that improvements for the community should be put into place along with the development of tourism. The major facilities, schools, and infrastructures are only developed in Labuan Bajo and did not happen in Komodo Village. The village's livelihood does not improve significantly: schools are not allowed to be built, locals

need to go to the mainland in order to access a hospital, and the permissible fishing area is getting smaller in regard to conservation activities.

Mentioned as one of the world's best snorkelling destination, the marine world of the Komodo National Park area is an additional attraction to the park itself, which attracts more visitors each year. There are currently around 50 dive operators in Labuan Bajo and each of them offers opportunities to explore more than 1000 variety of fish and 260 different coral reefs. Among those operators, only around one third of them are owned by Indonesians and even fewer are owned by local people from Flores or the West Manggarai regency. Although a lot of training has been provided for the local community in order to increase their participation in tourism industry, they are reported to have difficulty competing with foreign nationals who work as business actors or diving instructors in the area.

To achieve the new tourism ministry's goals, the Indonesian government is now attempting to establish a tourism authority body with the aim of encouraging infrastructure improvement to support tourism activities in several areas in Indonesia, including Komodo and Labuan Bajo. Its main task is to accelerate tourism development by providing clean water, good waste management systems, and sufficient facilities in order to create a better environment for tourism to grow. However, it seems that the authority body does not include consideration of local communities in its strategy as their main steps to foster tourism growth rely mostly on the development of attractions, visitor accessibility, and amenity improvement (Kementrian Pariwisata Indonesia, 2016). There is a lack of local community involvement strategies mentioned in the key success factor and less in more specific strategies in improving local communities' wellbeing regarding the growing industry they are facing.

Mowforth and Munt (2003) argue that local communities in third world countries can hardly benefit from tourism growth which is likely to occur through the national or international status of the site. Given the situation of the local community in Komodo village, it can indeed be argued that locals do not have control of the site nor the ways the industry is developed. Even though the local authorities and management plan insist that the involvement of residents is important, in the actual implementation, local community's views are hardly heard, including those who reside in Komodo village.

Komodo People and the World Heritage Status

Beginning from a small research project conducted about Komodo many years ago (Auffenberg, 1981; Diamond, 1987; Burden, 1927), the Komodo people have witnessed the process of the Komodo dragon becoming famous and now its designation as a World Heritage Site. They observed it become a biosphere reserve in 1977, turn into a national park in 1980 and finally receive its World Heritage Status in 1991. The majority of Komodo people were traditional fishermen, but since the designation brought tourism in the area, many of them trying to shift their profession into the tourism sector. In early 2013, as a result of the growing industry, Komodo Village was designated by the Indonesian government as a tourism village. This means that the development and management of the village will be handled mostly by its own community with the aim of supporting the tourism industry (Putra and Pitana, 2010). Interestingly, many Komodo people do not feel that the concept of tourism village is effective. They also consider that the status of Komodo as a biosphere reserve and a World Heritage Site have excluded them from their heritage due to their access to the resources of the island and its surroundings becoming increasingly restricted. They lost their ownership, management, access, and the benefits of their resources from conservation activity and tourism development.

In Komodo Village locals have believed for many years that Komodo dragons are their siblings. Komodo in the local language is '*sebae*' which means half, and local people attempt to protect the existence of this animal although the komodo is a deadly species. This kind of connection, inherited from their ancestors, that the komodo is a family member and they have responsibility to protect the animal is arguably an intangible value that is not understood well. It is argued by Jimura (2016) that many management systems tend to separate the sites and their local community, causing an exclusion of local people from their own heritage. This can be seen in Komodo National Park as the government's effort to protect the site and animal is through prohibiting local residents to develop their way of living side by side with Komodo. The lack of understanding that a connection of the locals and the sites as more than just people and their place of living might be the main cause which triggers the separation of the management of a World Heritage Site and its local people. On Komodo island, the existing management system, carried out by local people, is apparently considered as insufficient by the local authority, and unexpectedly, removing this local tradition has led to some Komodos attacking the village.

The Komodo National Park itself has been trying to optimize its conservation strategies, both of the Komodo Island and its buffer zone, through the application of nine zones (See figure 2). All activities in Komodo National Park are only allowed in the permitted zone, including fishing and habitation. Obviously, a zoning system that is developed by the national park is an improvement in the management strategy of the site, considering that the issues affecting Komodo dragons and their habitat includes over-fishing of reef resources, destructive fishing, and poaching (Erdmann, 2004). Data from Erdmann (2004) also identified that the coral reef resources in the Komodo National Park area is among one the most seriously threatened in Indonesia. Reef gleaning, cyanide fishing, and blast fishing were performed heavily by the fishing community causing degradations of the marine ecosystem and fish stocks. Therefore, it is a relief that the government has taken further responsibility to ensure the sustainability of the Komodo National Park and its buffer zone.

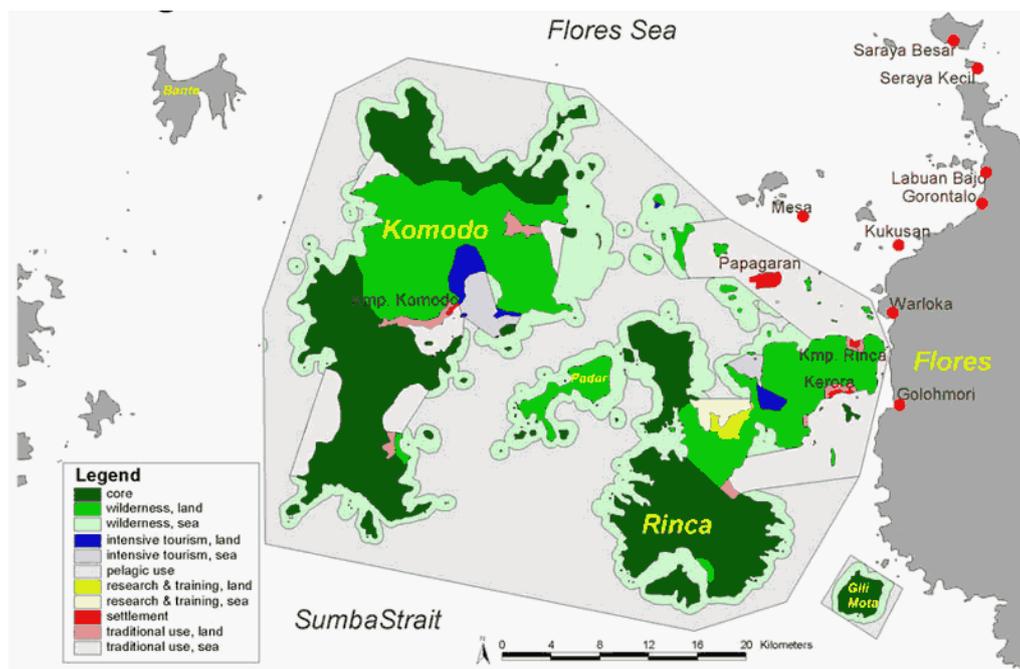


Figure 2. Zoning of Komodo National Park.

Source: <http://www.komodonationalpark.org/zoning.htm> (Accessed: 27 October 2016)

Nevertheless, the management system could be viewed as insufficient since it aims to sustain the environment without providing a solution to the sustainability of local community. In many tourism destinations local populations often have to compete with the tourism industry for the use of resources (Cole, 2012, Swarbrooke, 1999). To solve that conflict, a site needs a sufficient management of tourism and careful

assessment of its impact for the area. Here on Komodo Island the local people's intention is not to compete with the tourism industry for resources, but rather to compete with legal regulations that are created to protect the tangible form of their heritage which now belongs to the world due to the designation.

With the status of Komodo National Park as a World Heritage Site, it could be argued that the local community's expectation is that the status would also maintain the life of those who live within heritage sites since the convention aims to *'adopt a general policy which aims to give the cultural and natural heritage a function in the life of the community...'* (UNESCO, 1972). Moreover, as there is now a concern that World Heritage Sites should also contribute to the sustainable development of communities, it is not irrational for local communities to ask if being inscribed as a globally significant site, Komodo National Park could *'contributes (sic) directly to alleviating poverty and inequalities by providing basic goods and services, such as security and health, through shelter, access to clean air, water, food and other key resources'* (UNESCO, 2011). On the contrary the inscription became a status which has driven international attention but meant local people lost their ability to access their own heritage.



3. Souvenirs seller in Komodo Village (Photo source: G. Afioma)

Discussion

Leask (2006) argues that though balancing a World Heritage Sites conservation activity and tourism activity is difficult, conservation activity should be the priority. As we look at Komodo Village, however, compromising local community's social welfare is not a sustainable solution if we are to manage the heritage values holistically. It is difficult to understand the connection between natural World Heritage Sites and their intangible value, but Komodo village shows that the link between a natural site and its intangible values can be just as powerful. For the local community it is a foundation of the traditional management system which allows them to protect the sites before a management plan was established or even before any global recognition.

As the number of tourists increases as a result of the designation of Komodo as a World Heritage Site, there is little positive economic impact for the villagers in Kampung Komodo. Facilities on the island have not improved s they are encouraged mostly in Labuan Bajo. Trying to participate in the industry, many villagers in Kampung Komodo now work in hand-crafting and selling souvenirs, even though visitors rarely visit the village and their shops. Therefore, it cannot be said that now the local community received significant benefits from tourism development in Komodo National Park

Looking at Komodo Village as a case study we see a powerful argument that Disko and Tugendat. (2014) and Olenasha's (2014) assertion that local communities are often considered a threat to World Heritage Sites, can be confirmed. Komodo village has been on the island long before the national park was established and their own ways of conservation have been successful in preventing the extinction of Komodo dragons so far. Their traditional way of protecting the animals worked, but their importance to the site is still neglected. For many years local people in Komodo village have been blamed as those who contribute to the decline in environmental sustainability, but it can be argued that some of their more irresponsible actions happened as a result of their difficulties in accessing economic and social sustainability.

Therefore, if a World Heritage Site is to contribute to the sustainable development, it is non-negotiable that the social and economic sustainability of local communities should come together with the environmental sustainability of the sites. In fact, ensuring the social welfare of local communities, which includes recognizing their connection with the World Heritage Site and making sure that the community does

not need to compete with conservation strategy, would avoid environmental destruction. Arguably, even when a site is designated with an international status, local communities should still be able to access them as a local site as it was before the designation

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