

Spatial and Capital Contestation in Pindul Cave Tourism: Management Rights, Price Competition, and Local Politics

Nurul Hashilah¹, Yusuf Hermawan², Dyah Kemala Firdausi^{3*}

¹ Universitas Gadjah Mada

² Universitas Bina Sarana Informatika

³ Universitas Horizon Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: nurulhashilah@mail.ugm.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

Background: Natural resource tourism often faces management conflicts due to competing interests, as seen in Pindul Cave tourism involving land rights, pricing, and government policies.

Objectives: This article aims to analyze the dynamics of conflict in the management of Pindul Cave tourism, particularly focusing on rights claims, competition practices, and governance policies.

Method The study uses a qualitative approach, with descriptive and analytical discussion framed by tourism governance and the political economy of tourism.

Result Conflicts in Pindul Cave tourism stem from overlapping authorities, unequal power relations, and market-driven practices rather than purely technical issues. Price competition and weak supervision worsen social tensions and risk environmental and reputational damage. Although Regional Regulation No. 5 of 2013 introduced BUMDes as a centralized management body, its implementation faces challenges due to local resistance and fiscal-oriented governance.

Conclusion: Resolving tourism conflicts requires improvements in participatory, transparent, and equitable governance. Such reforms are essential to ensure that tourism policies support social, economic, and environmental sustainability in tourist destinations..

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INTRODUCTION

The dynamic development of a tourist destination is accompanied by conflicts and problems. Decision-making by policy makers is inseparable from various conflicts that can hinder the development of tourism in a region (Denkler, 2011). Social conflicts that occur, when viewed from the perspective of power relations, can be divided into three types. Conflicts can take the form of public protests against public policies established by the government, social conflicts between the community and business or private groups, and social conflicts between businesspeople and the government (Icomos, 2009; Lewis, et al.,



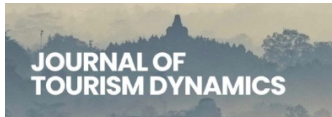
2003; in Eddyono, 2021:87,172). An example of an issue related to the struggle for power occurred in Pindul Cave, Gunung Kidul, Special Region of Yogyakarta. This power struggle became a non-physical social conflict that was highlighted by various media outlets and academics.

The Pindul Cave natural tourist attraction is located in Gelaran 1, Bejiharjo Village, Karangmojo District, Gunungkidul Regency, Yogyakarta Special Region. The site's primary tourism potential lies in its ancient karst architecture, which visitors explore via subterranean river tubing, a practice popularly known as "cave tubing" (Borobudur Authority Agency, 2019). However, the site has been plagued by protracted issues since 2013, including land disputes, contestation over management fees, inter-community conflicts, service quality deficits, and environmental degradation (Widiastuti & Makhasi, 2019).

The roots of this conflict began with the emergence of community claims over the right to manage tourist attractions between local communities, the government, and the Tourism Awareness Group/Pokdarwis (Afala, 2017). The Pindul Cave tourist attraction became widely known, increasing tourist visits and quickly generating economic benefits for the community, but also causing ongoing conflict (Farid, et al., 2022). The problem persisted despite mediation efforts. The community of Bejiharjo Village, which has also experienced socio-cultural shifts, previously relied on agriculture as their main source of income but is now required to adapt to the world of tourism, is considered unprepared to manage and handle such issues (Ismail and Sariffuddin, 2016).

Beyond socio-economic, non-physical conflicts, Pindul Cave faces critical issues regarding environmental degradation and a lack of integrated tourism development planning. Ideally, the site should be developed as a special interest tourism destination that strictly adheres to carrying capacity limits. In reality, however, poor management has led to unchecked mass tourism. This problem has resulted in environmental degradation, which should be addressed through the implementation of appropriate regulations. This requires decisive, concrete, and measurable action, implemented consistently, to address environmental degradation (Damanik, 2017:60). The convergence of the community's limited capacity for sustainable management and weak oversight by the local government has exacerbated these problems. Specifically, the interplay of environmental neglect, inter-group conflict, and the struggle for power among stakeholders has triggered intense political and economic contestation within the site's management.

In response, the Gunungkidul Regency Government, as the holder of regional tourism management rights, has attempted to address these issues through regulatory intervention. The government enacted Gunungkidul Regency Regulation Number 5 of 2013 concerning Tourism Management to provide a legal framework for planning, marketing, and defining the rights and obligations of involved actors. Furthermore, the Regent issued Decree No. 316/KPTS/2013, appointing the Gunungkidul Regency Culture and Tourism Office as the official manager of Pindul Cave. These measures were intended to establish legal certainty and implement effective governance as a conflict management strategy (Farid et al., 2022).



Based on the overall problems that have arisen in the management of the Pindul Cave tourist attraction, this study focuses on non-physical conflicts in the political and economic spheres. Issues related to contestation in the pursuit of interests by each actor in the management of the Pindul Cave tourist attraction are examined from the perspective of policies made by the village government and the Gunungkidul regency government. This study aims to examine the issues of power struggles and political interests that have an impact on the community's economy and the extent to which the Gunungkidul Regency Government has made efforts to formulate policies to overcome these various issues. This study is expected to serve as input and consideration in reviewing tourism policies so that it can help overcome the political and economic conflicts of interest that occur.

METHODS

This study was conducted using qualitative descriptive methods. Data in the form of a general description of the Pindul Cave tourist attraction, news and articles related to the conflict, and policy documents in the form of Gunungkidul Regency Regulations on Tourism were collected through literature study. The data was then analyzed through three stages, namely data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

The author conducted the data reduction stage by sorting the data obtained from various literature on the conflicts that occurred at Pindul Cave and then analyzing the data using theories related to tourism political economy and policies published by the Gunungkidul Regency Government. The analyzed data was then presented descriptively in the form of a narrative so that conclusions could be drawn based on each conflict that occurred.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Contestation over Management Rights and Land Claims

The problem that occurred at Pindul Cave began in 2013. A conflict arose between three tour operators, namely Dewa Bejo, Wira Wisata, and Panca Wisata, and a local landowner over the management of the Pindul Cave tourist attraction. The dispute involved Atiek Damayanti, the landowner, as evidenced by her official land certificate, and the Taruna Wisata group, which was involved in the debate. The main conflict involved the Taruna Wisata group's request to transport building materials and demolish the sarang seriti (a type of tree) at the top of the Pindul Cave land. This resulted in the closure of the entrance to Pindul Cave by the local community (Kompas.com, 2013).

From a regulatory perspective, the utilisation of natural resources, particularly underground rivers, requires formal authorisation from the Geological Agency, as stipulated in Article 33 of the 1945 Constitution, Law No. 7 of 2004, and Government Regulation No. 38 of 2011. These legal frameworks place the authority for resource utilisation under the jurisdiction of the Gunungkidul Regency Government. Subsequently, the Regent delegated this authority to the local Tourism Office in accordance with prevailing statutory provisions (Sudjarwono, cited in Farid et al., 2022).



Despite continuous mediation efforts conducted by the Tourism Office, the dispute persisted for nearly a decade, from 2013 to 2021. A further mediation attempt in 2021 involved the Regent of Gunungkidul, Sunaryanta, and a member of the Gunungkidul Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD), Kuntariningsih (Kabarhandayani.com, 2021). The conflict was eventually resolved through a negotiated land sale agreement between the landowner and the tourism management actors (Suharjono, 2021).

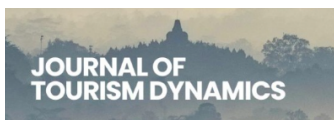
These developments demonstrate that prolonged conflicts and negative publicity can substantially damage the image of a tourism destination, potentially disrupting visitor flows and local economic activities. As argued by Damanik (2017), tourists' perceptions of safety and comfort are critical determinants of destination image and competitiveness. In response to these challenges, the Gunungkidul Regency Government adopted a political and regulatory approach by issuing Gunungkidul Regency Regulation No. 5 of 2013, which specifically addresses disputes over management rights and land claims at the Pindul Cave tourist site. This regulation reflects an institutional effort to mediate tensions between private property rights and state authority over natural resource governance, thereby promoting more sustainable and coordinated tourism management.

Price Competition as a Form of Rivalry among Tour Operators

Price competition has become a significant source of tension between community-based tourism groups (Pokdarwis) and private tour operators, particularly with regard to the pricing of tour packages. This phenomenon reflects irregular pricing practices that deviate from collectively agreed standards and have contributed to disputes among tourism stakeholders. Kurniawan (2019) explains that there are irresponsible tour operators who dare to sell cave tubing tour packages at prices lower than the agreed price between operators. The agreed rate is IDR 40,000, excluding the retribution fee charged to each tourist. However, unscrupulous tour operators cheat by selling the package for IDR 15,000, causing commotion among tour operators.

The Head of Bejiharjo Village responded to allegations of these pricing practices by rejecting claims of misconduct. According to Yanto in Kurniawan (2019), if there is a low selling price for Pindul Cave tour packages, it is intended to attract more tourists so that the community's economy becomes more prosperous. However, contrary to this statement, Yanto, as the village head, also did not approve of the sale of tour packages at low prices because too many tourists could damage the environment and disrupt market prices among tour operators. To maintain order and fairness, the Maju Mandiri Village-Owned Enterprise (BUMDes), which has been delegated authority by the regional government to manage the Pindul Cave tourism area, retains the right to terminate the operational contracts of operators found to violate agreed pricing policies.

From the demand side, tourists have also expressed dissatisfaction with inconsistent pricing practices. Itsnaini (2022) notes that visitors frequently encounter intermediaries or unauthorized ticket sellers offering Pindul Cave tour packages at prices higher than the official rates established by Pokdarwis and authorized operators. Moreover, limited access to reliable information regarding official service providers has created confusion among tourists, particularly due to the proliferation of unofficial online sources.



In response, Aldian (as cited in Itsnaini, 2022), Head of the Gunungkidul Regency Tourism and Culture Office, advised tourists to verify the legitimacy of operators, including by consulting official communication channels and social media accounts.

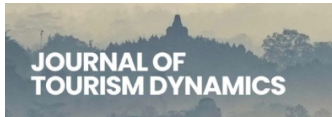
In facing these challenges, the Gunungkidul Regency Government introduced several regulatory measures aimed at mitigating price conflicts and improving governance in the tourism sector. These measures include Gunungkidul Regency Regulation No. 5 of 2013 concerning Tourism Implementation, Gunungkidul Regency Regulation No. 56 of 2014 amending Regency Regulation No. 3 of 2014 concerning technical guidelines for tourism management, and the establishment of the Maju Mandiri Village-Owned Enterprise (BUMDes) Maju Mandiri in 2017, which officially collaborates with the Regency Tourism and Culture Office. Collectively, these initiatives reflect the local government's efforts to strengthen institutional oversight and implement a more centralized and coordinated tourism management system.

Tourism Policy as a Government Response in Gunungkidul Regency

The challenges associated with regional autonomy are reflected in the fragmented management of tourism destinations, where attractions are often administered independently by multiple actors without adequate coordination. This situation can generate overlapping authority, institutional inefficiencies, and competing interests among stakeholders. Damanik (2017) notes that discrepancies frequently arise between the central and regional governments regarding the distribution of authority and responsibility. Regional governments commonly face constraints related to infrastructure capacity and financial resources. In contrast, the central government tends to assume a coordinating role to ensure the overall functioning of tourism activities at both national and international levels.

Given this redistribution of responsibilities and the varying levels of institutional preparedness, local governments are expected to adopt a more proactive role in managing tourism destinations and addressing emerging issues. These responsibilities are intended to support national tourism development objectives, as stipulated in the Minister of Culture and Tourism Regulation No. PM 37 of 2007. In response to the range of governance challenges identified at Pindul Cave, the Gunungkidul Regency Government issued Gunungkidul Regency Regulation No. 5 of 2013 on Tourism Management as a legal framework to regulate and strengthen regional tourism development.

Article 8 of the Regional Regulation stipulates that marketing activities must be carried out collaboratively, in an integrated and sustainable manner, involving all stakeholders in organizing responsible tourism activities to build the image of the region as a competitive tourist destination. In response to this, all actors involved in the management of the Pindul Cave tourist attraction, including the community, investors, government, and tourism operators, need to work together effectively. Of course, marketing activities need to consider environmental carrying capacity in order to minimize the impact of environmental degradation and social conflict as an effort to create a good and competitive destination image. Marketing management needs to be carried out honestly and fairly, including in disseminating information related to tour package prices. This is



intended to prevent unhealthy competition between tour operators, which often lowers the selling price of Pindul Cave tour packages.

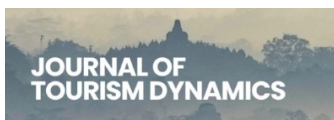
In addition, both village and regional governments play a critical role in supervising the collection and distribution of tourism levies in accordance with visitor numbers. Daily revenues from levies should be systematically recorded and monitored to ensure accountability and to facilitate accurate evaluation of Regional Original Revenue (Pendapatan Asli Daerah, PAD). Transparent practices in the collection, documentation, and reporting of levies are necessary to build trust among communities, tourism operators, and government institutions. This need for improved oversight is underscored by the Gunungkidul Regency Government's PAD target of IDR 27 billion in 2022, of which only IDR 14.42 billion had been realized by mid-August (Kemenparekraf.go.id, 2022). Consequently, enhanced monitoring and stricter enforcement of regulations, particularly those related to the financial management of Pokdarwis and tour operators, are necessary to improve revenue performance and strengthen governance transparency in the tourism sector.

Article 14 concerning the development of tourist attractions explains that village governments and communities must obtain authorisation from the regional government, in this case the Gunungkidul Regency Government. In accordance with Article 19, tourism management businesses run by village governments in the form of village-owned enterprises (BUMDes) and by individuals or business entities must register with the Gunungkidul Regency Government so that all tourism activities can be properly monitored. These enforcement efforts are carried out to prevent fraudulent practices in the payment of levies and the sale of tourism packages.

Issues related to rights and obligations are further addressed in Article 44, which grants priority rights to residents of the Pindul Cave area and surrounding communities. These rights include preferential access to employment opportunities, participation in consignment or sales partnerships through commission- or revenue-sharing arrangements, and involvement in management activities. Article 46 also outlines the rights of tourism entrepreneurs, including equal opportunities for business development, the right to establish and join tourism associations, and access to legal protection and government support in accordance with applicable laws and regulations.

Alongside these rights, stakeholders are required to fulfil a set of obligations as specified in Articles 48 and 50. These provisions broadly aim to promote social order, environmental conservation, and the implementation of responsible and sustainable tourism practices to maintain the destination's image and long-term viability. The Gunungkidul Regency Government likewise bears institutional responsibilities. As stated in Article 47, the government is tasked with fostering a conducive tourism climate through supervision, regulation, and control, as well as providing clear information and legal certainty to all stakeholders.

Taken together, the provisions contained in Gunungkidul Regency Regulation No. 5 of 2013 demonstrate the local government's effort to exercise its functions as both policymaker and regulator in addressing governance challenges within the tourism sector. The regulation provides a legal framework that can serve as a reference for resolving



emerging disputes. Nevertheless, further examination is warranted regarding the objectivity and inclusiveness of the policy formulation process, particularly the extent to which diverse stakeholders, such as local communities, tourism operators, government agencies, and academic experts, were involved in the deliberations leading to the regulation's adoption.

Subsequent efforts to refine conflict resolution mechanisms were introduced through Gunungkidul Regent Regulation No. 56 of 2014, which amended Regent Regulation No. 3 of 2014 on the technical implementation of tourism management. This amendment sought to reduce management disputes by recommending a simplified governance structure in which a single destination would be managed by one Pokdarwis, or each village would be represented by one Pokdarwis. Although the community formally agreed to this arrangement, its implementation proved challenging. In practice, multiple Pokdarwis members, many of whom also operate as tour service providers, continued to participate in the management of Pindul Cave, the area's primary revenue-generating attraction (Farid et al., 2022). This overlap in roles contributed to ongoing competition over economic benefits, thereby undermining principles of equity and coordinated governance.

The conflict surrounding the management of the Pindul Cave tourist attraction has also attracted the attention of the Bejiharjo Village Government, which sought to establish the Maju Mandiri Village-Owned Enterprise (BUMDes) in 2017 and officially collaborated with the Gunungkidul Regency Tourism and Culture Office. The Bejiharjo Village Government aims to manage tourist attractions in its area through a one-stop system in order to minimize various conflicts. This effort was formalized through the signing of a cooperation agreement between the two parties. The policy related to centralized management by BUMDes Maju Mandiri resulted in a retribution fee of IDR 5,000 per person being charged to tourists. However, this policy has elicited responses from the community, including tourism groups and tourism operators, who feel burdened by the retribution fee, believing it could reduce the income of tourism operators and that the government has an interest in achieving its Local Revenue (PAD) targets (Farid, et al., 2022; Afala, 2017; Kurniawan, 2019).

CONCLUSION

The conflict over the management of the Pindul Cave tourist attraction shows that local tourism does not develop in a neutral space but rather in an arena of competing interests over land, resources, and economic profits. Since 2013, overlapping private property rights, state authority over the use of natural resources, and the economic interests of the community and tourism operators have triggered prolonged conflict. Unhealthy price competition among operators, the practice of selling tour packages below agreement prices, and the presence of brokers indicate weak governance and oversight. This also confirms that market logic left unregulated has the potential to undermine economic justice, the environment, and the image of tourist destinations.

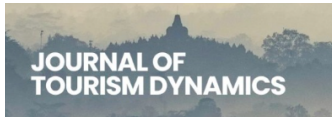
In response, the Gunungkidul Regency Government has developed a policy framework through Local Regulation No. 5 of 2013 and its derivative regulations, including the establishment of BUMDes as a centralized management effort. The establishment of



BUMDes Maju Mandiri as a one-stop centralized management effort represents the institutional strategy of the village and regional governments to reduce conflict and improve the accountability of destination management. However, this policy has also sparked new controversy regarding retribution burdens and perceptions of regional fiscal dominance, particularly in the context of achieving Regional Original Income (PAD) targets. This confirms that tourism policy is never neutral, but is always caught between economic interests, political legitimacy, and social and environmental sustainability. Therefore, resolving the conflict at Pindul Cave requires strengthening participatory, transparent tourism governance that applies the principle of fairness. This is intended so that policies not only reduce conflict but also ensure the social, economic, and environmental sustainability of the destination.

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