

Creative Economy as a Driver of Sustainable Tourism in the Slopes of Mount Merbabu

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Abstract

This study examines the role of the creative economy as a driving force for sustainable tourism in the Merbabu Mountain slope area. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the research was conducted over six months, involving 25 key informants including community leaders, creative economy entrepreneurs, tourism managers, village officials, and tourists. The results show that the Merbabu Mountain slope area possesses diverse creative economy potential, particularly in traditional culinary arts and local resource-based handicrafts. The integration of creative economy with tourism has successfully increased tourist length of stay from 1 to 2.5 days and increased creative economy actors' income by 40% within a year. Despite challenges in product standardization and digital market access, an integrated development model was created comprising human resource capacity building, local wisdom-based product development, tourism package integration, and digital marketing development. The research recommends establishing a creative economy management unit at the regional level to ensure program sustainability. This study contributes to both theoretical understanding and practical implementation of creative economy integration in sustainable mountain tourism development, providing a replicable model for similar regions across Indonesia.

Keywords: *creative economy, sustainable tourism, mountain tourism, community development, Merbabu Mountain*

1. INTRODUCTION

Amid the stunning natural beauty, the slopes of Mount Merbabu hold untapped tourism potential. The villages scattered along the slopes of this mountain face a classic dilemma: abundant natural and cultural resources but have been unable to optimize them as a source of sustainable income. Local communities, most of whom depend on traditional agriculture for their livelihoods, often have difficulty

developing economic alternatives that can improve their welfare. Although several tourism development efforts have been made, there is still a gap between the existing potential and the realization in the field. Limited tourism supporting infrastructure, minimal variety of tourist attractions, and the lack of community skills in managing tourist destinations are the main obstacles. It is exacerbated by the lack of integration of the creative economy sector into the development of regional tourism. As a result, tourist visits tend to be seasonal and do not provide a significant economic impact on the local community.

Even more concerning, dependence on conventional tourism patterns that are not well planned is starting to raise concerns about environmental degradation and the erosion of local cultural values. Several tourist spots are beginning to show signs of damage due to unsustainable management. Meanwhile, the younger generation in this area is increasingly interested in migrating to big cities, leaving behind the potential of villages that could be developed into promising sources of livelihood. Without appropriate and targeted intervention, the slopes of Mount Merbabu are at risk of losing momentum to develop sustainable tourism that can improve community welfare while preserving its natural and cultural wealth. A new approach is needed that can integrate the creative economy as the main driver of sustainable tourism in this area.

Several previous studies have examined the relationship between the creative economy and sustainable tourism that are relevant to the development of the slopes of Mount Merbabu. Hemas & Wijaya (2022) in their study Empowerment of the Creative Economy Based on Local Wisdom in Mountain Areas found that the integration of the creative economy in tourism development can increase local community income by up to 45% within two years. This study emphasizes the involvement of local communities in innovative product development based on local natural and cultural potential. Research by Nugroho et al. (2023) entitled Sustainable Tourism Development through Creative Economy: A Case Study of Mountain Communities in Central Java revealed that villages in mountainous areas that successfully integrated the creative economy into tourism development showed a

better level of environmental sustainability. It is reflected in the 30% decrease in environmental damage and increasing public awareness of environmental conservation.

Meanwhile, Widodo & Kusuma (2021) in the Strategy for Developing Creative Economy-based Tourism Destinations in Mountain Slope Areas found a positive correlation between the development of creative economy products and the length of stay of tourists. This study shows that tourist destinations that offer creative economy products have succeeded in increasing the average length of stay of tourists from 1.5 days to 2.8 days. The aspect of community empowerment in the development of the creative economy was studied by Rachmawati (2023) in Community-Based Creative Economy: Driving Force for Sustainable Mountain Tourism. Her study revealed that empowerment programs that focus on the development of the creative economy have succeeded in reducing the urbanization rate of village youth by 35% and creating new jobs in the creative tourism sector.

This article aims to identify the potential of the creative economy that can be integrated with sustainable tourism on the slopes of Mount Merbabu. This is because until now, many creative potentials of local communities have not been exposed and utilized optimally. Starting from traditional crafts, and culinary specialties, to local arts and culture that can be unique tourist attractions. This study seeks to formulate a tourism development model that combines the creative economy with the principle of sustainability. The urgency lies in the need to create a balance between the utilization of tourism potential and the preservation of the natural and cultural environment. Without the right model, tourism development risks damaging the ecosystem and local wisdom which are the basic capital of this area.

This study aims to provide concrete solutions to the economic problems of the people on the slopes of Mount Merbabu. By integrating the creative economy into tourism development, it is hoped that there will be a diversification of income sources that can improve community welfare while reducing dependence on the traditional agricultural sector which is vulnerable to climate change. The urgency of this research

is empowering local communities. Through the development of a tourism-based creative economy, people are not only spectators in their area but can play an active role as the main actors in development. It is also a strategy to restrain the rate of urbanization by creating attractive economic opportunities for the younger generation in the area. This research is expected to be a pilot model for the development of other mountain tourism areas in Indonesia. The success of the integration of the creative economy in sustainable tourism on the slopes of Mount Merbabu can provide valuable lessons for similar efforts in other areas, thus contributing to the development of more sustainable national tourism.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Creative Economy and Sustainable Tourism

The creative economy is a sector that relies on individual creativity, skills, and talents that have the potential to create prosperity through the creation and utilization of individual creativity and inventiveness (Howkins, 2013). In regional development, the creative economy has proven to be an effective catalyst for growth, especially in areas with rich natural and cultural resources. As stated by Nugroho et al. (2023), the creative economy not only creates economic added value but also contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage and strengthening local identity. The concept of sustainable tourism, as defined by UNWTO, emphasizes the management of all resources in such a way that economic, social, and aesthetic needs can be met while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biodiversity, and life support systems. Rachmawati (2023) in her research emphasized that sustainable tourism must pay attention to three main aspects: environmental sustainability, socio-cultural sustainability, and economic sustainability.

Integration of the Creative Economy in Tourism

Research by Widodo & Kusuma (2021) shows that the integration of the creative economy into tourism development can create significant added value for tourist destinations. This is in line with the findings of Hemas & Wijaya (2022) who

revealed that creative economy products can enrich the tourist experience while creating a multiplier effect for the local economy. Mountainous areas have unique characteristics that require a special approach to their development. (Nugroho et al., 2023) emphasized the need to pay attention to environmental carrying capacity in tourism development in mountainous areas. Meanwhile, Kusumastuti (2022) in *Mountain Tourism Development: Challenges and Opportunities* identified several key factors for the success of mountain tourism development, including local community involvement, environmental preservation, and development of environmentally friendly infrastructure.

Community Empowerment

The aspect of community empowerment is a vital component in the development of sustainable tourism. Research by Dharma & Putra (2023) shows that effective empowerment programs can increase the capacity of local communities to manage tourism potential while maintaining environmental sustainability. The community-based empowerment model developed by Wijaya et al. (2022) has proven successful in increasing community participation in the creative economy in tourist areas. The development of the slopes of Mount Merbabu as a sustainable tourism destination based on the creative economy requires an understanding of these concepts. Proper integration between the creative economy and sustainable tourism, taking into account the characteristics of mountainous areas and empowering local communities, can be the key to the successful development of this area.

3. METHOD

To understand the potential of the creative economy in encouraging sustainable tourism on the slopes of Mount Merbabu, this study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive research type. This approach was chosen because it can reveal the complexity of social, cultural, and economic phenomena inherent in the lives of people in mountainous areas. The study was conducted in five villages located on the slopes of Mount Merbabu, in Magelang Regency, Central Java. The selection of this location took into account the diversity of creative economy potential and tourism

conditions in each village. The research period lasted for six months, from July to December 2024, taking into account seasonal variations that can affect the dynamics of tourism and the creative economy activities of the community.

In collecting data, this study relied on two main sources. Primary data was obtained through interviews with 25 key informants consisting of community leaders, local creative economy actors, tourism managers, village government representatives, and tourists. Meanwhile, secondary data was collected from various village planning documents, tourist visit statistics data, and relevant regional development reports. Data collection was carried out through several complementary techniques. Participatory observation allows researchers to be directly involved in community activities so that they can directly understand the potential and challenges that exist. Interviews were conducted to obtain detailed information from key informants. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted three times to validate the findings and formulate development strategies with stakeholders. Documentation techniques were used to analyze various documents that supported the primary data.

Data analysis used the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana which includes the stages of data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion. This process was carried out continuously throughout the research to ensure the depth of the analysis. To ensure the validity of the data, this study used triangulation techniques of sources, techniques, and time. The research was conducted in three main stages. The preparation stage includes research instruments, permit processing, and initial mapping of key informants. The implementation stage focuses on collecting and analyzing field data, as well as validating findings through FGDs. The final stage includes the preparation of reports, presentation of research results, and finalization of reports. Through this comprehensive method, the research is expected to produce useful and meaningful findings about the potential of the creative economy as a driver of sustainable tourism on the slopes of Mount Merbabu.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The slopes of Mount Merbabu hold extraordinary creative economic potential as a supporter of sustainable tourism. From the results of research conducted for six months, various interesting aspects were revealed that show how the creative economy can be the main driver of tourism in this area. The traditional culinary sector emerged as one of the most prominent potentials. Along the slopes of Mount Merbabu, researchers found an amazing wealth of local culinary delights, ranging from *getuk merbabu* made from cassava from local gardens, to *jadah tempe* and *sayur lodeh* typical of the mountains which have unique flavors. The makers of these culinary delights, most of whom are mothers who are members of the PKK, inherit hereditary recipes which are the main strength in maintaining the authenticity of the taste. No less interesting, handicrafts based on local resources also show promising potential. Groups of craftsmen in this area produce bamboo weaving, wood carvings, and traditional weaving with typical Merbabu motifs. The uniqueness of these products lies in the use of local raw materials and designs that reflect local wisdom. The 40% increase in income of creative economy actors in this study also supports the results of Hemas & Wijaya (2022) study which found an increase in income of up to 45% within two years in other mountainous areas. This shows the consistency of the economic impact of creative economy development in mountainous areas.

When the creative economy is integrated with tourism, the impact is truly impressive. Villages that have succeeded in combining the two have experienced a significant increase in the average length of stay of tourists. Kopeng Village, for example, has succeeded in holding tourists for up to 2.5 days by offering craft workshops, a far increase from the previous 1 day. Tourists no longer just enjoy the scenery, but are also involved in creative experiences that enrich their visits. The economic impact of this integration is very real. In the past year, the income of creative economy actors has increased by an average of 40%. Even more encouraging, this phenomenon has created new jobs for the younger generation, providing an alternative to migrating to the city. The multiplier effect that has been created has driven the village economy as a whole. The integration of the creative economy with tourism which has succeeded in increasing the length of stay of tourists in the

Merbabu slopes is in line with the findings of Widodo & Kusuma (2021). In their research in other mountainous areas, it was found that tourist destinations offering creative economic products managed to increase the average length of stay of tourists from 1.5 days to 2.8 days. This figure is not much different from the findings in the Merbabu area which reached 2.5 days.

However, the journey of developing the creative economy in this region is not without challenges. The problems of product standardization, limited access to digital markets, and minimal business management skills are still major obstacles. To overcome it, the study proposes the establishment of creative economy centers in each village, equipped with business management and digital marketing training programs. Strengthening cooperation with online marketplaces and the establishment of creative economy actor associations are also key strategies. The integrated development model resulting from this study emphasizes collaboration between various stakeholders. This model includes four main components: strengthening human resource capacity, developing products based on local wisdom, integrating with tour packages, and developing a digital marketing system. The initial implementation of this model in pilot villages has shown promising results, with an increase in turnover of up to 60% in three months. To ensure the sustainability of the program, the study recommends the establishment of a special creative economy management unit at the regional level. This unit will play a role in coordinating product development, marketing, and quality control, as well as facilitating cooperation with external parties. Through this approach, the creative economy is expected to become an effective driving force for sustainable tourism on the slopes of Mount Merbabu.

5. CONCLUSION

The Mount Merbabu Slope area has diverse and unique creative economic potential, especially in the traditional culinary sector and handicrafts based on local resources. This potential is valuable capital in developing sustainable tourism in the area. The integration of the creative economy and tourism has been proven to have a significant positive impact. It can be seen from the increase in the average length of

stay of tourists from 1 day to 2.5 days, as well as an increase in the income of creative economy actors by 40% in a year. More importantly, this integration has succeeded in creating new jobs for the younger generation and reducing the rate of urbanization. Despite facing challenges such as product standardization, digital market access, and limited business management skills, this study has succeeded in identifying effective development strategies. The establishment of creative economy centers, training programs, and strengthening cooperation with online marketplaces are key to overcoming these challenges.

The integrated development model resulting from this study, which includes strengthening human resource capacity, developing products based on local wisdom, integrating with tour packages, and developing a digital marketing system, has shown its effectiveness in encouraging the growth of the creative economy and sustainable tourism in the area. The success of creative economy development on the slopes of Mount Merbabu shows that community-based initiatives with the right approach can be an effective model for developing sustainable tourism in mountainous areas. This model has the potential to be replicated in similar areas in Indonesia, with adjustments to the local characteristics of each region. The results of this study contribute to the development of science in the field of creative economy and sustainable tourism while also providing practical guidance for the development of mountainous tourism areas in Indonesia.

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