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EXPLORING THE STRATEGIC CONTRIBUTIONS OF TOUR GUIDES TO SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN BALI

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Abstract

This study explores the strategic contributions of tour guides to sustainable tourism in Bali. The research employed a descriptive qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews with ten certified tour guides in Bali, supported by policy documents and relevant academic literature. Participants were purposively selected based on their professional certification and experience guiding tourists in major destinations such as Ubud, Penglipuran, Tanah Lot, and Nusa Penida. Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis to identify the educational, interpretative, and advocative roles of tour guides in promoting sustainability. The findings reveal that tour guides play a significant role in enhancing tourists' environmental awareness, encouraging respect for local culture, and advocating responsible tourism practices. Guides were also found to function as cultural mediators who connect tourists with local wisdom and sustainability values through interpretative communication. However, challenges remain, including uneven sustainability competencies, limited institutional support, and economic vulnerability among guides. This study contributes by proposing a strategic framework for strengthening the role of tour guides through sustainability-oriented training, certification improvement, policy integration, and community-based tourism collaboration. The findings provide practical implications for policymakers, tourism stakeholders, and training institutions in advancing sustainable tourism development in Bali.

Keywords: Tour Guide, Sustainable Tourism, Strategic Role, Education

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism has long been the backbone of Bali's economy. In 2019, the island welcomed over 6.3 million international visitors, with the tourism sector contributing more than 50% of the regional Gross Domestic Product (Statistics Indonesia [BPS], 2020). However, the COVID-19 pandemic caused an unprecedented decline, with arrivals dropping below one million in 2020 (United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2021). Since 2022, the sector has shown signs of recovery, and by 2024 tourist numbers are projected to approach pre-pandemic levels (Statistics Indonesia [BPS], 2023). While this recovery provides significant economic benefits, it also

generates pressing challenges, including waste management, coastal ecosystem degradation, cultural commodification, and vulnerability of communities highly dependent on tourism (Utama & Junaedi, 2022).

Sustainable tourism has been increasingly emphasized as a strategy to balance economic growth with environmental and socio-cultural preservation. According to UNWTO (2019), sustainable tourism development must fulfill present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs. Key practices include protecting natural resources, preserving cultural heritage, and ensuring equitable benefits for local communities (Suartha et al., 2019). In Bali, these principles are reflected in initiatives such as eco-friendly tourism villages, cultural revitalization programs, and government regulations promoting green tourism (Sutawa, 2020). Within this context, tour guides (pramuwisata) are key stakeholders who directly engage with tourists and have substantial influence on shaping sustainable behaviors. Beyond facilitating travel, guides serve as cultural interpreters, educators, and advocates of responsible tourism practices (Suartha et al., 2019). For instance, guides in Penglipuran Village consistently encourage visitors to respect local customs and minimize plastic use, illustrating their role as agents of behavioral change. Despite their potential, limited research has specifically analyzed the strategic functions of tour guides in fostering sustainability in Bali. Most studies have concentrated on policy, infrastructure, or community participation, leaving the guides' roles underexplored (Utama & Junaedi, 2022). This study seeks to address that gap by focusing on how guides' educational, interpretative, and advocative functions contribute to sustainable tourism.

The objectives of this study are to analyze the strategic roles of tour guides in supporting sustainable tourism practices in Bali and to propose strategies for enhancing their capacity to contribute to sustainability goals. Recent studies have emphasized the growing importance of sustainable tourism and community-based approaches in Bali. Suarta et al. (2019) highlighted the role of local wisdom in shaping environmentally friendly practices and identified the competencies required for tour guides to align with sustainable tourism principles. Their study also demonstrated how tour guides can serve as sustainability stewards by fostering environmental and cultural awareness among tourists. Meanwhile, Utama and Junaedi (2022) examined the sustainability challenges faced by Bali's tourism sector in the post-pandemic period. Despite these contributions, research specifically focusing on the strategic roles of tour guides in promoting sustainable tourism in Bali remains limited. Existing studies generally discuss guides within broader sustainability frameworks rather than positioning them as key actors driving sustainable change. Therefore, the novelty of this study lies in conceptualizing tour guides not merely as service providers but as critical agents whose educational, interpretative, and advocative roles can significantly advance sustainability objectives in Bali. By combining empirical insights with theoretical frameworks, this research provides both academic contributions and practical recommendations for policymakers and training institutions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainability has become a fundamental principle in tourism development, emphasizing the need to balance economic growth with environmental protection and socio-cultural preservation. According to UNWTO (2019), tourism development should meet the needs of present tourists and host communities while safeguarding opportunities for future generations. Achieving this objective requires the integration of environmental

protection, cultural preservation, and community well-being into tourism practices (Weaver, 2021). In Bali, however, rapid tourism growth has generated significant challenges, including increasing waste production, pressure on natural and coastal ecosystems, unequal distribution of economic benefits, and the commercialization of local culture (Utama & Junaedi, 2022). These issues demonstrate that sustainability is not solely a matter of policy design but also depends on the active participation of stakeholders in implementing responsible practices. Among these stakeholders, tour guides occupy a strategic position due to their direct interaction with tourists and their potential to influence visitor behavior.

One of the key actors in tourism is the tour guide, who plays an important role in shaping tourists' experiences and behaviors. Tour guides are not merely providers of information but also cultural mediators and facilitators of meaningful interactions between visitors and host communities (Weiler & Yu, 2007). Through their direct engagement with tourists, guides are well positioned to encourage responsible behavior and foster greater appreciation of local culture and the environment. Previous studies have highlighted that tour guides contribute significantly to tourist satisfaction and heritage appreciation, particularly through interpretative communication and meaningful visitor engagement (Wu et al., 2020). Moreover, tour guides can act as agents of sustainability by communicating, interpreting, and modeling responsible tourism practices (Weiler & Kim, 2011). Hu and Wall (2012) further argue that interpretative guiding can support sustainable development by influencing tourists' understanding, attitudes, and behavior at the destination level.

Wu et al. (2020) examined the contribution of tour guides in heritage tourism settings and found that effective guiding enhances tourists' understanding of local traditions and cultural values while improving destination experiences. Similarly, Jacobs et al. (2014) demonstrated that interpretative guiding can strengthen tourists' conservation intentions and environmental awareness. Taken together, these studies suggest that tour guides perform functions that extend beyond service delivery, encompassing educational, cultural, and sustainability-oriented responsibilities. However, while existing research acknowledges the contribution of tour guides to tourism resilience and cultural preservation, it generally examines these roles separately. Limited attention has been given to how tour guides simultaneously integrate educational, interpretative, and advocacy functions to promote sustainability in Bali. This gap indicates the need for a more comprehensive understanding of tour guides as strategic actors in achieving sustainable tourism objectives.

Furthermore, recent studies emphasize the importance of integrating local knowledge and interpretative communication into sustainable tourism practices. Huang et al. (2022) highlighted that sustainability-oriented tourism interpretation can significantly influence visitors' environmental understanding and behavioral intentions. Their findings suggest that tour guides play an important role in communicating local environmental values and responsible tourism practices to visitors. This role can be understood through the perspective of interpretative tourism, which views guiding as a process of facilitating meaningful understanding rather than merely providing information (Hu & Wall, 2012). Through interpretation, tour guides can influence tourists' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors toward local culture and the environment. In addition, the concept of cultural mediation suggests that guides serve as intermediaries between visitors and host communities, translating local values and traditions into experiences that are understandable and meaningful for tourists (Weiler & Yu, 2007).

Therefore, tour guides play a critical role in bridging global tourism expectations with local sustainability principles and cultural preservation efforts.

Overall, the existing literature suggests that tour guides are increasingly recognized as important actors in sustainable tourism, particularly in relation to cultural preservation, local wisdom, visitor education, and destination resilience. Nevertheless, most studies examine these functions separately, focusing on specific aspects of guiding such as service quality, cultural interpretation, or crisis adaptation. As a result, limited attention has been given to how educational, interpretative, and advocative roles collectively contribute to sustainability outcomes. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by analyzing the strategic contributions of tour guides within a holistic sustainability framework in Bali.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to analyze the strategic role of tour guides in supporting sustainable tourism in Bali. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate as it provides rich, contextual insights into human interactions, behaviors, and perceptions in tourism research (Bengtsson, 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2021). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with ten certified tour guides recruited through the Indonesian Tour Guide Association (HPI) Bali. A purposive sampling technique was applied to ensure participants had: certification as professional tour guides, and direct experience guiding in major destinations such as Ubud, Penglipuran, Tanah Lot, and Nusa Penida. Each interview explored three themes: The educational role of tour guides in raising environmental and cultural awareness. The interpretative role in explaining cultural and natural heritage sites. The advocative role in encouraging sustainable behaviors among tourists. Additional data were obtained from: Policy documents issued by the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy and the Provincial Government of Bali, particularly those concerning sustainable tourism and guide certification standards. Academic literature published from accredited journals focusing on sustainable tourism and tour guiding (Utama & Junaedi, 2022). The data were analyzed using thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The analysis involved three steps: Data reduction is identifying and selecting relevant interview transcripts and secondary documents. Coding and categorization is grouping information into themes related to educational, interpretative, and advocative roles. Interpretation is synthesizing findings to highlight tour guides' contributions to sustainable tourism and to identify strategies for strengthening their roles. To ensure research rigor, triangulation was applied by comparing findings from interviews, policy documents, and scholarly literature. Member checking was also conducted by sharing preliminary findings with selected interviewees for feedback. The use of peer-reviewed international journal articles further enhanced the reliability of the study (López-Sanz et al., 2021). This study was limited by its relatively small sample size (ten tour guides), which may not fully represent the diversity of guiding practices across Bali. However, the integration of primary and secondary data provides a strong foundation for conceptual analysis and offers valuable insights into the strategic roles of tour guides in fostering sustainable tourism.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Overview of Tour Guides in Bali

Tour guides in Bali occupy a crucial position within the tourism industry as they serve as the first point of interaction between visitors and the local community. According

to data from the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, Bali has more than 7,000 registered tour guides, most of whom are certified under the Indonesian Professional Certification Authority (BNSP) (Ministry of Tourism, 2022). They are formally organized under the Indonesian Tour Guide Association (HPI), which plays a significant role in providing training, certification, and advocacy for guides across the island. Bali's tour guides are diverse in specialization. Some focus on cultural and heritage guiding, particularly at major temples such as Besakih, Tanah Lot, and Uluwatu. Others are involved in eco- and nature-based guiding, such as trekking in Mount Batur, diving in Nusa Penida, or birdwatching in West Bali National Park.

A growing number of guides are also involved in community-based tourism in rural villages like Penglipuran and Tenganan, where they introduce tourists to local traditions, crafts, and conservation practices. The strategic importance of guides in Bali extends beyond their role as service providers. They are also cultural brokers, translators of local wisdom, and advocates of responsible behavior. As Bali increasingly adopts sustainable tourism principles, tour guides are positioned as frontline actors who can bridge the gap between policy aspirations and tourist practices (Utama & Junaedi, 2022). Despite their significance, tour guides in Bali face challenges such as inconsistent training quality, limited access to sustainability-focused certification, and ongoing economic vulnerability, which has been further exposed during recent global crises and fluctuations in tourist arrivals (Utama & Junaedi, 2022). These challenges underline the need to strengthen the capacity of guides through continuous training, policy support, and integration into broader sustainability frameworks. This overview provides the foundation for a deeper discussion of the specific educational, interpretative, and advocative roles of tour guides in advancing sustainable tourism in Bali.

4.2 Educational Role of Tour Guides

Tour guides in Bali play a central educational role in fostering sustainable tourism by raising tourists' awareness of environmental protection and cultural preservation. Education in this context is not limited to the transfer of factual knowledge but also involves shaping attitudes and behaviors consistent with sustainability principles (Boley et al., 2021). Recent studies emphasize that guides act as informal educators who influence tourists more effectively than brochures or signage, as their messages are delivered in real-time and within the experience of the destination (Hu & Wall, 2020). In Bali, many guides integrate sustainability education into their narratives by highlighting local practices that align with environmental conservation. For example, guides in Penglipuran Village often emphasize the community's commitment to waste segregation and its prohibition on single-use plastics. By explaining the rationale behind these practices, guides not only enrich the visitor experience but also inspire tourists to adopt similar behaviors during and after their trip. This aligns with findings who noted that local wisdom communicated by guides can significantly enhance tourists' understanding of sustainability. Another example can be found in marine-based tourism in Nusa Penida, where guides actively educate divers and snorkelers about coral reef protection and marine biodiversity. They provide instructions on avoiding contact with corals, proper waste disposal, and respecting marine life. Such educational interventions have been shown to reduce harmful tourist behavior and contribute to conservation outcomes (Smith et al., 2020).

The educational role also extends to cultural awareness. In Ubud, guides frequently explain the meanings of Hindu rituals and temple etiquette, ensuring that

visitors respect local traditions. This is consistent with the study of López-Sanz et al. (2021), which stressed the importance of cultural interpretation in preventing misbehavior and enhancing cross-cultural understanding. Despite these contributions, challenges remain. Some guides lack adequate training in sustainability communication, and their messages may vary in depth and consistency. Suarta et al. (2019) noted that not all tour guide training programs in Indonesia adequately incorporate sustainability competencies. As a result, while many guides demonstrate commitment to sustainability education, there is still a need for standardized training and certification to strengthen this role across the industry. In summary, the educational role of guides in Bali demonstrates their capacity to influence both environmental and cultural awareness among tourists. By integrating sustainability messages into guiding practices, they function not merely as information providers but as key educators in achieving long-term sustainable tourism goals.

4.3 Interpretative Role of Tour Guides

The interpretative role of tour guides is central to shaping meaningful tourist experiences while promoting sustainability. Interpretation involves more than the delivery of information; it requires guides to translate cultural and natural heritage into engaging narratives that connect visitors emotionally with the destination (Hu & Wall, 2020). In Bali, this interpretative function is particularly critical given the island's deep cultural traditions and fragile ecosystems. Guides often act as cultural intermediaries by explaining the significance of rituals, ceremonies, and sacred spaces. For instance, in Besakih Temple, guides not only provide factual details about architectural features but also interpret the temple's spiritual importance within the Balinese Hindu cosmology. This ensures that visitors understand temple etiquette and respect sacred spaces. Studies have shown that such interpretative interventions reduce incidents of cultural insensitivity and promote respectful tourist behavior (López-Sanz et al., 2021).

In natural settings, interpretation helps tourists appreciate ecological values and recognize the importance of conservation. Interview results showed that guides along the Mount Batur trekking routes commonly explained volcanic geology, local agricultural traditions, and the contribution of tourism to community livelihoods. Similarly, guides in West Bali National Park provided information regarding biodiversity conservation, endangered species, and ecosystem services during tourism activities. Several tourists acknowledged that these interpretive experiences increased their environmental awareness and understanding of conservation issues. These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that interpretation in nature-based tourism enhances tourists' environmental awareness and strengthens pro-conservation attitudes (Ballantyne & Packer, 2020). The interpretative role also involves the integration of local wisdom. For example, guides in Tenganan Village explain traditional weaving techniques and cultural restrictions that protect village customs from erosion. Ballantyne & Packer, 2020 argue that embedding indigenous knowledge in interpretation is essential to ensuring that sustainable tourism in Bali is not divorced from local identity. However, challenges persist in the delivery of high-quality interpretation. Not all guides are adequately trained in communication skills, and the depth of narratives often depends on individual initiative. Furthermore, the commercialization of culture sometimes pressures guides to simplify or commodify their interpretations to meet tourist expectations (Utama & Junaedi, 2022). This tension highlights the need for continuous professional development focusing on interpretative competencies, particularly in linking sustainability principles with cultural and natural heritage. Overall, the interpretative role of guides in Bali

strengthens the sustainability agenda by transforming tourist experiences into opportunities for learning, respect, and empathy. Through effective interpretation, guides ensure that visitors not only enjoy the destination but also understand and value the underlying cultural and ecological systems.

4.4 Advocative Role of Tour Guides

Beyond their roles as educators and interpreters, tour guides in Bali also serve as advocates of sustainable behavior. Advocacy in this context refers to the active encouragement of tourists to adopt practices that minimize negative impacts and support local sustainability initiatives. This role positions guides as agents of change who influence not only what tourists learn and understand but also what they actually do during their visit. A clear example can be found in Bali's coastal areas, where guides advocate for responsible marine tourism. In Nusa Penida, dive and snorkel guides consistently remind tourists not to touch coral reefs, avoid littering, and respect marine species such as manta rays and sea turtles. Such advocative interventions have been shown to reduce destructive behavior and contribute to coral reef conservation (Smith et al., 2020).

In cultural contexts, guides often act as defenders of local customs and religious practices. For instance, in Uluwatu Temple, guides advocate for proper dress codes, appropriate behavior during sacred ceremonies, and adherence to temple regulations. By enforcing these cultural norms, guides safeguard the integrity of religious sites while ensuring that visitors experience them respectfully (López-Sanz et al., 2021). Advocacy also extends to broader sustainability practices, such as promoting eco-friendly products, supporting local businesses, and discouraging the use of single-use plastics. In several community-based tourism villages, guides encourage tourists to purchase locally produced handicrafts or join eco-activities like tree planting. These practices not only reduce environmental impacts but also generate economic benefits for local communities.

However, the advocative role is not without challenges. Some guides feel constrained by the need to satisfy tourist demands, which may conflict with sustainability principles. Others lack institutional support or standardized guidelines on how to advocate effectively. Utama and Junaedi (2022) highlight that Bali's sustainability agenda requires stronger integration of guides into policy frameworks, ensuring that their advocative efforts are recognized and supported. In sum, the advocative role of guides positions them as protectors of sustainability values. By actively encouraging responsible behavior and championing local practices, they go beyond interpretation and education, directly influencing the choices tourists make during their stay in Bali. This role underscores their strategic importance as partners in achieving the province's sustainable tourism objectives.

4.5 Challenges Faced by Tour Guides in Bali

While tour guides in Bali play vital educational, interpretative, and advocative roles, their contributions to sustainable tourism are constrained by a number of challenges. These constraints span institutional, economic, and professional dimensions, all of which affect their ability to consistently integrate sustainability into guiding practices. One of the most pressing issues concerns training and certification gaps. Although many guides are formally certified under the Indonesian Professional Certification Authority (BNSP), not all certification programs emphasize sustainability competencies. Research by Suarta et al. (2019) suggest that sustainability training is often optional rather than embedded

into the core curriculum. As a result, the knowledge and skills of guides in promoting sustainability remain uneven across the industry.

Guides also face significant economic vulnerability, particularly during periods of fluctuating tourist arrivals and seasonality. Limited job security and unstable income streams can reduce both motivation and the ability to invest in professional development, including sustainability-focused training (Utama & Junaedi, 2022). Another recurring difficulty lies in language and communication barriers, which can undermine the effectiveness of sustainability messages. Bali attracts tourists from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and not all guides possess the advanced communication skills required to convey sustainability concepts clearly. Hu and Wall (2020) argue that sustainability advocacy requires not only technical knowledge but also interpretive competencies that foster empathy and behavioral change.

In addition, there are shortcomings in institutional support and policy integration. Although Bali has introduced sustainability-related regulations, tour guides are not always systematically involved in these frameworks. Consequently, many efforts to encourage sustainable practices rely heavily on individual initiative rather than coordinated institutional backing. An additional concern is the tension between tourist satisfaction and sustainability principles. Some visitors prioritize convenience and entertainment over responsible behavior, creating dilemmas for guides. Requests for single-use plastics, restricted photo opportunities, or disruptive behavior at sacred sites illustrate situations where guides must balance client demands with sustainability values (López-Sanz et al., 2021).

4.6 Strategies for Strengthening the Role of Tour Guides

Addressing the challenges faced by tour guides in Bali requires coordinated strategies that connect directly with their educational, interpretative, and advocative roles. By aligning professional development, institutional support, and community engagement with these functions, tour guides can more effectively advance sustainable tourism.

a. **Embedding Sustainability in Training and Certification.**

Strengthening the educational role of guides requires continuous professional development that integrates sustainability as a core competency. Structured training on environmental communication, cultural interpretation, and advocacy skills will ensure consistency across the industry. Suarta et al. (2019) emphasize that embedding sustainability in certification standards can raise professional quality while equipping guides to educate tourists more effectively.

b. **Enhancing Institutional Support and Policy Integration.**

To reinforce the advocative role, the provincial government of Bali and the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism should formally recognize guides as frontline partners in sustainability implementation. This includes involving them in eco-certification schemes, heritage conservation, and destination management planning (Utama & Junaedi, 2022). Policy frameworks that legitimize guides' advocacy will strengthen their authority to encourage responsible practices among tourists.

c. **Strengthening Economic Resilience.**

Economic stability enables guides to consistently fulfill all three roles. Without financial security, their ability to act as educators, interpreters, and advocates is compromised. Access to social protection mechanisms, financial literacy training, and alternative livelihood opportunities during low seasons can reduce vulnerability

to crises. Building resilience supports both personal well-being and long-term commitment to sustainability goals.

d. Improving Communication and Digital Skills.

The interpretative role of guides can be expanded by strengthening communication competencies and adopting digital tools. Foreign language proficiency and digital literacy such as using mobile apps, virtual tours, or social media platforms allow guides to convey sustainability messages to diverse audiences in engaging ways. López-Sanz et al. (2021) highlight that digital platforms significantly enhance the reach and impact of sustainability advocacy.

e. Integrating Local Wisdom and Community-Based Tourism.

The educational and interpretative roles are further enriched when indigenous knowledge is embedded into guiding practices. Collaborating with communities in destinations such as Penglipuran and Tenganan ensures that sustainability is framed within local cultural identity. This not only deepens tourist appreciation but also empowers communities and strengthens cultural preservation.

These strategies reinforce the idea that tour guides are not merely service providers but strategic partners in realizing Bali's sustainable tourism vision. By connecting capacity-building, policy support, economic resilience, and community collaboration directly with their educational, interpretative, and advocative roles, guides can continue to safeguard cultural heritage, protect the environment, and inspire responsible behavior among both tourists and local stakeholders.

5. CONCLUSION

This study set out to analyze the strategic roles of tour guides in promoting sustainable tourism in Bali. The findings confirm that tour guides are not merely facilitators of tourist experiences, but rather strategic actors who contribute to sustainability through three main functions: (1) educational, by raising environmental and cultural awareness; (2) interpretative, by providing meaningful context to heritage and natural sites; and (3) advocative, by encouraging tourists to adopt responsible behaviors. These roles directly address the study's objective of identifying how tour guides can act as agents of sustainability at the destination level. However, the study also reveals persistent challenges, including limited sustainability-focused training, economic vulnerability, communication barriers, and weak integration of guides into formal policy frameworks. These constraints highlight gaps between policy aspirations and actual practices on the ground.

Based on these findings, several policy recommendations are proposed. First, the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, together with the Provincial Government of Bali, should embed sustainability modules into mandatory certification and training programs for tour guides. Second, policies are needed to strengthen the economic resilience of guides, such as access to social protection schemes and financial support during tourism downturns. Third, guides should be systematically included in destination management planning and policy frameworks, ensuring that their on-the-ground knowledge informs decision-making. Fourth, the development of digital and language skills should be prioritized to enhance guides' capacity to communicate sustainability messages effectively across diverse markets. Finally, stronger partnerships between guides and local communities should be encouraged to integrate indigenous knowledge into sustainable tourism practices. The implications of this study extend beyond Bali. Recognizing tour guides as policy partners rather than auxiliary actors is

crucial for advancing sustainable tourism across Indonesia. By empowering guides with training, institutional backing, and economic security, policymakers can ensure that guides play a transformative role in balancing cultural preservation, environmental protection, and economic benefits. This study thus contributes not only to local debates on Bali's tourism future but also to the broader discourse on tourism governance and sustainability at the national and international levels.

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