

WHEN CONSERVATION HARMS:

Religious Ethics, Agrarian Justice, and Policy Reform in Tesso Nilo, Indonesia

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KEYWORD	ABSTRACT
Ecological Justice Agrarian Justice Hybrid Governance Religious Values Tesso Nilo	<p>This study critically examines the governance of Tesso Nilo National Park (TNTN) in Riau, Indonesia, by highlighting the interplay between ecological conservation, agrarian justice, and religious values. Through a qualitative case study, the research reveals that top-down conservation policies have marginalized local communities, criminalized smallholders, and empowered corporate actors, creating a sharp divide between legal authority and social legitimacy. Despite systemic exclusion, communities demonstrate active resistance and engage in cooperative environmental initiatives grounded in Islamic ethical values such as <i>khalifah</i> (stewardship), <i>amanah</i> (responsibility), and <i>mashlahah</i> (public good). These values provide a normative framework for sustainable resource governance. The findings suggest that a hybrid governance model—integrating state institutions, civil society, and religious actors—is essential to foster inclusive coexistence and achieve dual justice: ecological sustainability and agrarian equity. This research contributes to environmental governance literature by proposing a faith-based justice framework that bridges ecological preservation with local sociocultural legitimacy</p>

INTRODUCTION

Conservation policies in Indonesia often present tensions between environmental protection and the fulfillment of local communities' agrarian rights. This tension is evident in the case of Tesso Nilo National Park (TNTN), an important conservation area in Riau Province that is home to endangered species such as Sumatran elephants and tigers (Margono et al., 2014; WWF Indonesia, 2020). The establishment of TNTN through the Minister of Forestry Decree No. SK.6588/Menhut-VII/KUH/2014 was done in a top-down manner without meaningful participation from local communities who have long lived and managed the land within. As a result, many residents experienced criminalization for activities that were considered as encroachment, even though historically they had cleared land long before the area was designated as a national park (Komnas HAM, 2016).

Ironically, in the same situation, corporate actors who massively expand oil palm plantations in the TNTN area often escape legal sanctions. They even use manipulative practices such as nominee loans to avoid regulations (Wibowo & Sirait, 2017). This law enforcement imbalance indicates a structural bias in conservation governance, where the state is repressive towards small communities but permissive towards large-scale actors. The imbalance shows a disconnect between protective forestry policies and agrarian policies that should be pro-people. The crisis of conservation governance

in TNTN is not only a technical issue, but also involves complex political, social and cultural dimensions. The highly centralized and technocratic conservation approach tends to ignore the existence of local communities as legitimate ecological subjects. In fact, many of them have developed adaptive, sustainable land management systems based on local wisdom. In this context, ecological justice cannot be separated from agrarian justice. As stated by Peluso and Lund (2011), environmental conservation will fail if it not accompanied by recognition of land rights and a decent life for local communities.

Conservation policy reform needs to start from recognizing the social-ecological reality on the ground. Efforts to revise the Minister of Forestry's decree on the designation of TNTN are important as a form of correction to the designation of areas that do not consider the existence of villages, hamlets and community gardens. A localization approach - which distinguishes between areas of high ecological value and areas that have changed function significantly could be a fairer policy compromise (Eko & Prasetyo, 2021). This would not only reduce tenurial conflicts, but also enable the establishment of more inclusive and sustainable forest governance. However, conservation policy reform cannot be separated from ethical and normative aspects. In a religious society like Riau, religious values play an important role in shaping people's views and practices towards nature. Islamic concepts such as *khalifah* (caretaker of the earth), *amanah* (responsibility) and *mashlahah* (public good) can serve as a moral framework to bridge ecological and agrarian justice. In this perspective, conservation area management is not only determined by state law, but also by spiritual ethics that emphasize balance, sustainability and social justice.

Unfortunately, this religious value-based approach is still rarely adopted explicitly in conservation policy formulation. Many previous studies have only focused on agrarian conflicts, ecological damage and regulatory weaknesses, without touching on the moral and spiritual aspects that can strengthen policy legitimacy (Colchester et al., 2006; Obidzinski et al., 2012; Myers et al., 2018). In fact, the integration of ecological justice principles, agrarian and religious values can pave the way for forest governance that is not only technocratically oriented, but also multidimensionally just. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the practices and challenges of TNTN governance by integrating the perspectives of ecological and agrarian justice within the frame of religious values. The study seeks to fill the literature gap by developing a conceptual framework that places local communities as the main actors in the management of conservation areas, as well as assessing the possibility of more equitable, participatory and spiritual policy reforms. Using Agrawal and Lemos' (2007) hybrid governance approach, this study explores the interaction between state, civil society and corporate actors in shaping the dynamics of conflict and coexistence on the ground.

Theoretically, this study expands the discourse on natural resource governance by bringing together three dimensions: ecological, agrarian, and religious. Practically, the results of this study are expected to provide input for the design of conservation policies that not only protect biodiversity, but also respect the agrarian rights and spiritual values of local communities as part of a complete environmental justice.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to deeply understand the dynamics of Tesso Nilo National Park (TNTN) governance in the context of tensions between ecological justice and agrarian justice. This approach was chosen because it allows a comprehensive exploration of social, political and ecological processes involving various actors with different interests in the management of conservation areas (Yin, 2018). This study focuses on two administrative regions surrounding TNTN, namely Pelalawan Regency and Indragiri Hulu Regency, Riau Province. These two areas were purposively selected as they are the areas most affected by tenurial conflicts, land encroachment practices, as well as inequality of access and recognition of land rights within conservation areas. The

focus of the analysis is directed at: (1) how state authorities manage the TNTN area, (2) how local communities respond to applicable conservation policies, and (3) how possible governance reforms can integrate the principles of ecological and agrarian justice based on religious values.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through three main techniques, namely: (1) **In-depth interviews**, which were conducted with key informants from various backgrounds, including TNTN Hall officials, indigenous community leaders, local farmers and cultivators, environmental activists, and representatives of civil society organizations involved in regional governance advocacy. Interviews were semi-structured to capture narratives, perceptions and practices related to area management. (2) **Field observations**, conducted to document the social-ecological practices of the community, such as land use patterns, community interactions with forestry officials, participatory conservation activities, as well as conflict and coexistence dynamics that occur in the area around TNTN. (3) **Document study**, including review of forestry and agrarian policies, laws and regulations related to conservation areas, official reports of the government and NGOs, media archives, as well as investigation documents and recommendations of institutions such as Komnas HAM and Eyes on the Forest.

Data Analysis and Validation

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, by identifying thematic patterns from the data from interviews, observations, and documents. The analysis process was conducted iteratively through several main stages: (1) Initial coding, to capture key issues such as agrarian conflict, community criminalization, area management legitimacy, and actor dynamics. (2) Thematic categorization, based on themes relevant to the theoretical framework, such as distributional justice, rights recognition, and participation in decision-making (Fraser, 2009). (3) Critical interpretation of power relations and governance structures that emerge in field practice. The analytical framework in this research refers to the theory of natural resource governance as well as ecological and agrarian justice approaches. Ecological justice is understood as the fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, recognition of affected communities, and equal participation (Schlosberg, 2007). Meanwhile, agrarian justice refers to access to and control over resources by groups that have been marginalized (Borras & Franco, 2010). To strengthen the analysis, this research also adopts Agrawal and Lemos' (2007) hybrid governance approach that maps the interaction between state, civil society and private sector actors in shaping actual governance practices. To maintain data validity, both source and method triangulation strategies were used. Findings were also cross-checked with key informants (member checking) to ensure accuracy of interpretation. In addition, researchers developed an audit trail to document each process of data collection, processing and analysis in a transparent and systematic manner.

FINDINGS

Inequality of Conservation Governance in TNTN

This research found that conservation governance in Tesso Nilo National Park (TNTN) is still dominated by a centralized and technocratic approach. The management authority, namely the TNTN Center under the Ministry of Environment and Forestry (MoEF), tends to adopt a state-based conservation model that closes the space for local community participation. The planning process up to the implementation of conservation programs is carried out in a top-down manner, where communities living around or even within the national park area are not involved in important decision-making, including zoning, area monitoring, and other conservation programs. Consequently, this conservation approach creates a distance between state policies and local realities. This condition is clearly reflected in the Land Use and Concession Map of Tesso Nilo National Park (TNTN), compiled by WWF Riau Program in February 2006.

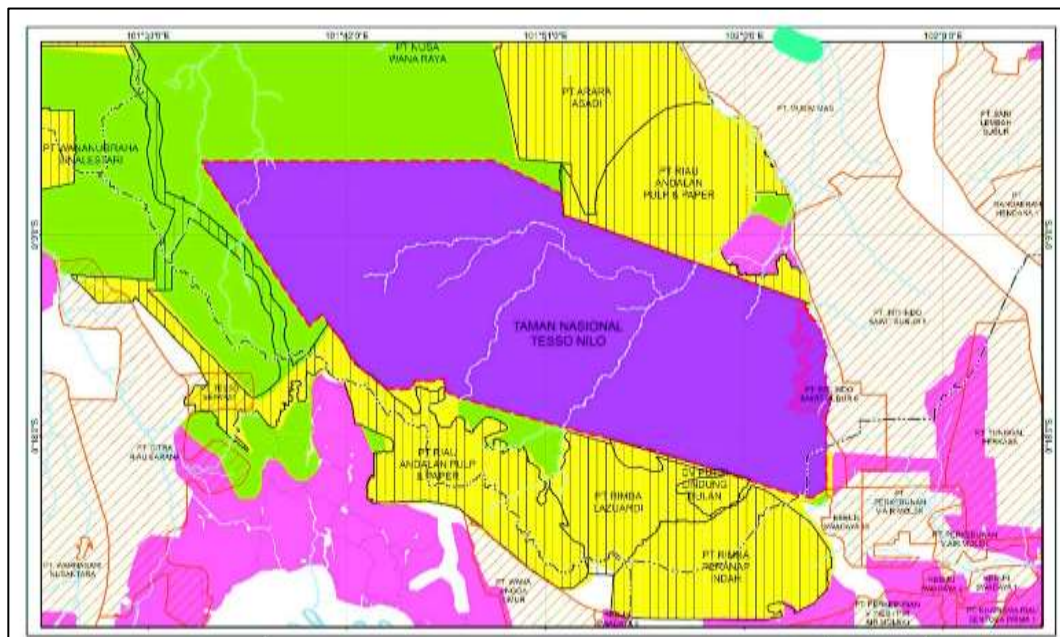


Figure 1. Land Use and Concession Map of TNTN Area
Source: Satellite Data GIS Unit, WWF Riau Program (February 2006)

This map shows that the core conservation area is surrounded by industrial concessions, both Industrial Plantation Forest (HTI) and oil palm plantations, as well as community use areas. The absence of an effective buffer zone indicates weak protection of the core zone from external pressures. The existence of companies such as PT RAPP and PT Arara Abadi reinforces the assumption that the spatial orientation around TNTN favors corporate interests over ecological preservation. The condition of the area is also increasingly degraded due to massive encroachment. The Forestry Department's 2009 Map of the Estimated Extent of Encroachment in TNTN notes that by 2009, around 19,976 hectares of the area had been encroached upon.

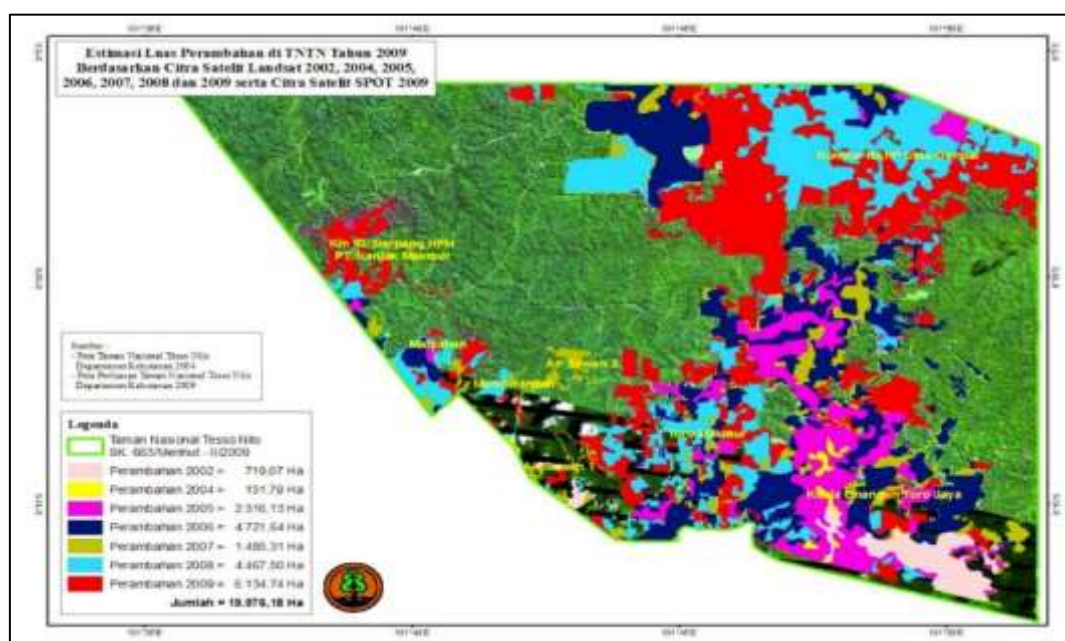


Figure 2. Map of the Estimated Extent of Encroachment in TNTN
Source: Ministry of Forestry 2009

This phenomenon shows weak supervision and law enforcement, and marks the co-optation of conservation space by various economic actors. The encroachment process is not only carried out by smallholders seeking livelihoods, but also by well-capitalized actors who supply illegal palm oil to formal industries. This reflects inequality in the distribution of power and access to forest resources, and shows the failure of conservation approaches that do not take into account the social-ecological dimension as a whole. A 2021 statement from the Forest Area Rescue (PKH) Task Force said that the imbalance in conservation governance in TNTN is not only ecological, but also institutional and political. The area has been an arena for conflicts of interest between conservation, customary tenure, illegal agrarian expansion, and electoral politics. The inability of both the TNTN Center and WWF to control the expansion of illegal palm oil - which is now part of the Riau palm oil industry supply chain - shows the weak reach and authority of the state over legally protected areas. Meanwhile, the latest data from the TNTN Center (2023) reinforces this finding. Of the total area of 83,068 hectares, only about 21.7% (18,000 ha) is still natural forest. Meanwhile, 45.7% has been occupied by illegal oil palm plantations, 12% by smallholders, and 14.5% has gray status without legal clarity. Only 6% of the area is under a formal conservation partnership scheme. This imbalance highlights the weakness of state intervention in area protection and the pressure from market forces. The Spatial and Land Use Map around TNTN issued by WWF in 2006 shows how the national park area is spatially fragmented by industrial activities and community settlements.

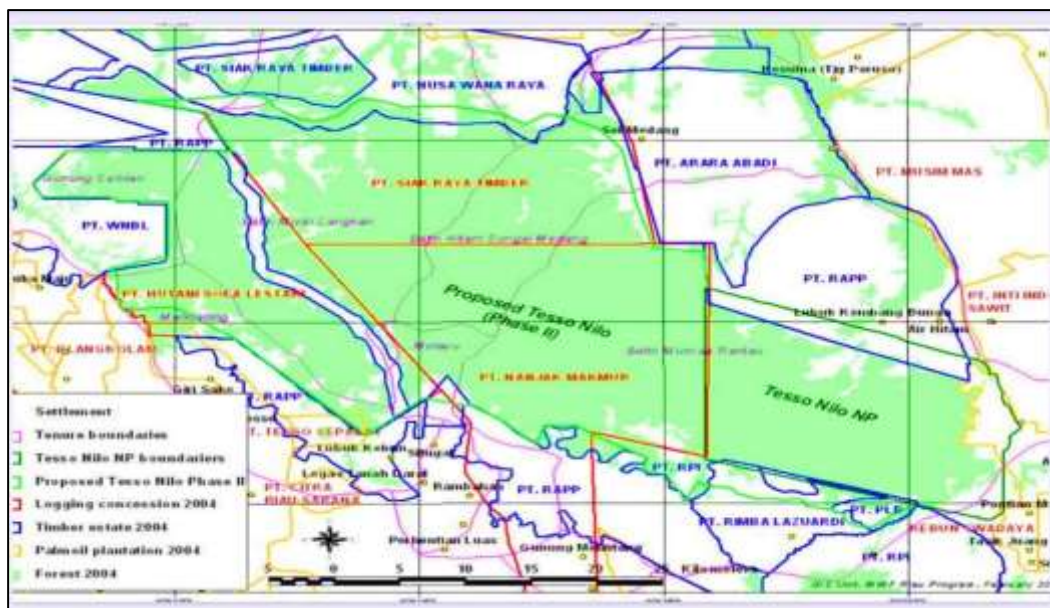


Figure 3. Spatial and Land Use Map around TNTN
Source: GIS Unit, WWF Riau Program (February 2006)

This fragmentation makes it difficult to restore the ecosystem as a whole and confirms that conservation policies have not integrated spatial and agrarian justice as part of the sustainability agenda. These findings are in line with the investigation of the Forest Area Control Task Force (PKH), which identified a number of structural factors in the failure of TNTN conservation, including: the TNTN area originated from a Limited Production Forest (HPT) area that had social-tenurial burdens from the beginning; rampant illegal buying and selling practices and electoral political intervention; and the weak capacity of state institutions and conservation partners such as WWF to control the rate of deforestation. Illegal palm oil supply chain networks connected to formal industries signify economic co-optation of conservation areas. Socially, local communities are positioned merely as objects of policy, not subjects with tenure rights or local knowledge on area management. In fact, various studies show that the long-term success of conservation is highly dependent on the level of community participation, especially in areas that have long been inhabited

and managed in a customary or traditional manner. This problem is exacerbated by the discrepancy between village administrative boundaries and national park boundaries. Many villages existed long before the establishment of TNTN in 2004, but are now legally within the conservation area. This legal disharmony has led to conflicting land claims, deepening the gap between conservation legality and the social legitimacy of local communities.

Criminalization and Stigmatization of Local Farmers

This research found that conservation policies in Tesso Nilo National Park (TNTN) not only create inequality in natural resource management, but also trigger criminalization and stigmatization of local farmers. Field data from six villages located in or around the TNTN area show that most residents who clear subsistence agricultural land - especially for food crops and small-scale rubber or palm oil plantations - are often accused of being illegal encroachers. For example, in Lubuk Kembang Bunga Village and Toro Jaya Hamlet, residents who have lived for generations since the 1980s have reportedly experienced forced evictions, confiscation of farming tools, and even detention by forestry officials and forestry police. Whereas, historically, the existence of these communities predates the establishment of TNTN as a conservation area in 2004, and similar conditions are also reflected in the findings of Komnas HAM (2016) which noted that many villages and hamlets included in the national park area experienced criminalization because their activities were considered as forest encroachment, even though they had historically cleared land long before the establishment of the area. The absence of legal recognition of their existence and tenurial rights makes communities highly vulnerable to repressive state actions.

Ironically, this harsh legal approach does not appear to be applied fairly. Field findings show that a number of large companies, such as palm oil companies that operate plantations within the core zone of the national park, continue to operate without significant hindrance. Several key informants mentioned that company fields of more than 200 hectares are still being actively operated within the TNTN area until 2023, but there is no equivalent law enforcement process as experienced by smallholders. Legal loopholes, weak supervisory capacity, and power relations between corporations and state apparatus are suspected to be the causes of this omission. This asymmetry of treatment shows the existence of double standards in conservation law enforcement and confirms the partiality of policies to large capital actors compared to small people. The impact of this criminalization not only targets the legal and economic aspects of the community, but has also created a crisis of confidence in state institutions. Interviews with residents of Desa Petani and Desa Kesuma reveal a deep disappointment with the state, which is more present as a "guardian of corporate interests" than a protector of people's rights. Structural inequalities in conservation policy not only weaken the legitimacy of the state in the eyes of local communities, but also have the potential to become a long-term obstacle to environmental conservation efforts. Without social justice in forest protection, conservation will continue to be resisted by communities who feel impoverished and excluded in the name of conservation that they themselves do not define.

Religious Values in Local Management Practices

The results of the study revealed that both indigenous and migrant Malay communities (Javanese, Batak, Minang) living around the Tesso Nilo National Park (TNTN) area practice various religious values in natural resource management, especially those derived from Islamic teachings. The concept of *khalifah fil ardh*-human beings as God's representatives on earth-is an ethical foundation that demands responsibility towards nature. In the Qur'an, Allah says: "*Remember when your Lord said to the angels: Surely I will make a caliph on earth*" (QS. Al-Baqarah [2]: 30). This verse gives the message that humans are not given absolute power over the earth, but rather a mandate to protect and care for it. This responsibility is emphasized in the principle of *mashlahah* (public benefit) and the prohibition of doing damage (*fasad*) as stated in the word of Allah: "*And do not make mischief on the earth after Allah has repaired it*" (QS. Al-A'raf [7]: 56). In the social and ecological context, the community also

practices the principle of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*, which is relevant to prevent over-exploitation of nature. The Prophet said: "Verily the world is green and beautiful, and verily Allah has made you managers of it, then He will see how you act" (HR. Muslim). This Hadith emphasizes that human behavior towards the environment will be the subject of moral and spiritual judgment.

Both classical and contemporary scholars have emphasized the ecological dimension of Islam. Imam Al-Ghazali, for example, in *Ihya Ulumuddin* explains that maintaining the balance of God's creation is part of *maqashid shari'ah* (the main purpose of sharia). Contemporary scholars such as Prof. M. Quraish Shihab interpret the concept of *khalifah* not only in a socio-political context, but also as an ecological mandate to maintain harmony between humans, other creatures and nature. He emphasizes that any form of exploitation that damages the earth falls into the category of transgression (*zulm*). Local community practices such as *rimbo larangan* (forbidden forest), shifting cultivation that follows ecological rotation, and village deliberation in decision-making reflect the translation of these values into practical wisdom. In *rimbo larangan*, there is a prohibition on the exploitation of certain types of trees or animals in order to maintain ecological balance and ensure the sustainability of resources for future generations. Local beliefs also state that violations of the forest ban will incur the wrath of nature, which from an Islamic perspective can be understood as a form of *sunatullah* - the natural consequence of violating the divine law of balance. Unfortunately, these religious values and local management systems have not been recognized in national conservation policies, which are still dominated by secular and technocratic approaches. This misalignment creates a gap between state policies and local practices, and hinders collaborative and sustainable conservation. In fact, integrating Islamic values and local wisdom into conservation policies can strengthen social legitimacy and encourage community participation in preserving the environment. This is in line with the spirit of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (mercy for all nature), which is the main essence of Islamic teachings in the relationship between humans and the universe.

Community Resistance and Cooperative Initiatives

This research found that the community's response to the inequality of conservation governance in Tesso Nilo National Park (TNTN) is not passive. On the contrary, residents have shown various forms of resistance that are strategic and organized. In Lubuk Kembang Bunga and Bagan Limau villages, for example, the community formed a farmers' communication forum that regularly held dialogues with the local government and the TNTN Center to voice their aspirations and fight for recognition of the traditional management areas they had cultivated long before the establishment of the national park area. In Air Hitam Village, several community groups even collaborated with legal aid institutions to advocate for the criminalization of farmers accused of encroaching on forest areas, even though the land had been inhabited for generations. In addition, in Petapahan Village, residents took collective action to resist the eviction of their cultivated land by joint forces, with the support of local traditional and religious leaders. These actions show that communities have strong enough political awareness and social capacity to fight for ecological and agrarian justice amid structural pressures from exclusive conservation policies.

However, such resistance is not always confrontational. This research also noted the emergence of various cooperative initiatives that reflect the community's commitment to environmental conservation. In Lubuk Kembang Bunga Village, for example, a village youth group initiated a forest restoration program by planting local species in the TNTN buffer zone, in collaboration with environmental NGOs and private donors. In Bagan Limau village, farmers developed an agroforestry system based on rubber, areca nut and spice plants to replace illegal palm oil, while maintaining secondary forest cover. Meanwhile, in several other villages such as Petapahan and Air Hitam, conservation education activities are carried out through majelis taklim and Friday sermons, which convey religious messages about the importance of preserving God's creation and protecting nature from destruction. These initiatives demonstrate the adaptive ability of communities to develop alternative approaches to conservation that are more inclusive, locally-based

and long-term oriented. These findings strengthen the argument that local communities are not obstacles to conservation, but rather important actors who can be strategic partners in the management of conservation areas. When given genuine space for participation and supported through adequate legal recognition and empowerment, communities are able to make significant contributions in maintaining the sustainability of the TNTN ecosystem. These facts challenge old assumptions in conservation policy that tend to marginalize the role of communities in favor of a centralized and exclusive approach to conservation.

The Need for Governance Reform Based on Multiple Justice

Based on the research findings, there is an urgent need to reform the overall governance of Tesso Nilo National Park (TNTN). The current governance has proven unable to accommodate the complex social-ecological realities on the ground, and has actually deepened the imbalance between the state's conservation interests and the needs of local communities. Therefore, policy reforms need to be directed towards a localization approach, among others through re-zoning areas that consider ecological functions as well as social functions that have been carried out historically by the community. In the context of the need for multiple justice-based governance reforms, the existence of customary rights of indigenous peoples in the Tesso Nilo area is an important dimension that must be recognized. The TNTN Land Rights Recognition Map, compiled by WWF Riau Program (2006), shows explicitly that customary territories - mainly belonging to the Petalangan community - have long existed in and around the national park area, including in the area proposed for TNTN expansion.

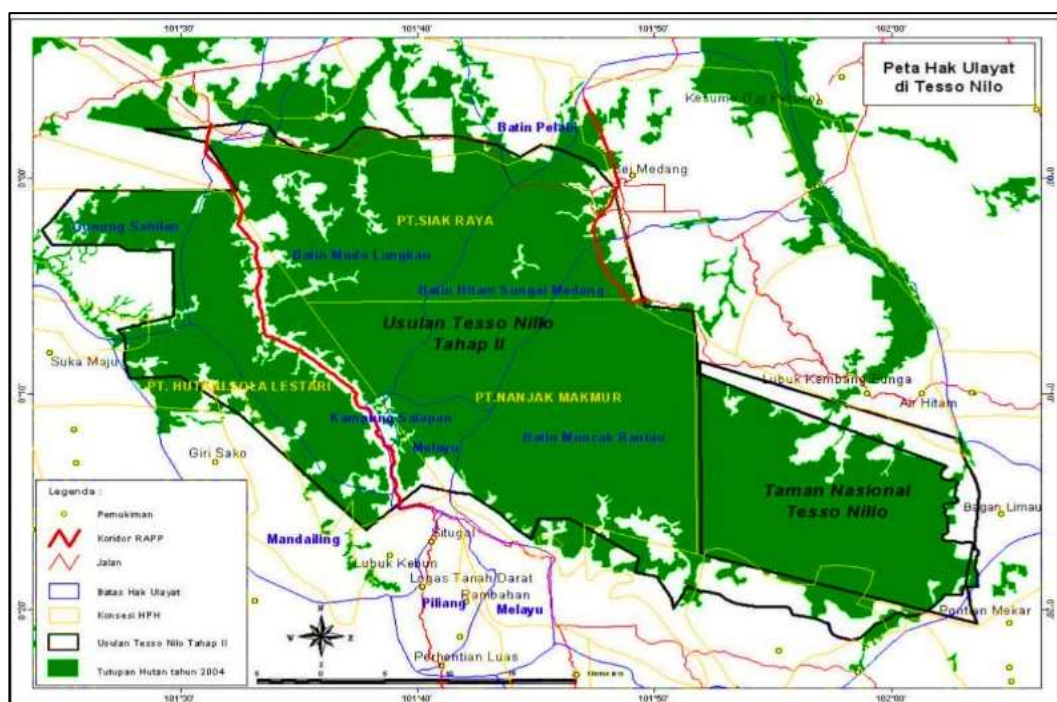


Figure 4. Map of Recognition of Ulayat or Customary Land Rights of TNTN

Source: GIS Unit, WWF Riau Program (February 2006)

However, indigenous peoples' claims often overlap with company concession licenses and formal conservation areas designated by the state. This tension reflects the duality of the spatial control system between state law and customary law in the community. Therefore, conservation governance reform should be directed at integrating customary rights into the formal legal system, recognizing customary rights, and opening participatory spaces in decision-making related to area management. This step is not only important to build social legitimacy for conservation, but also to ensure equitable ecological sustainability for all stakeholders. The findings of the 2025 Forest Area Management Task Force (PKH) further reinforce the urgency of reforming the governance of Tesso

Nilo National Park (TNTN). The Task Force noted that the customary rights of local communities were not recognized in the process of designating national park areas, a condition that reflects serious agrarian injustice. In addition, the management of conservation areas is dominated by powerful political-economic actors without adequate accountability mechanisms, emphasizing the importance of structural and social justice-based reforms. The Task Force is also pushing for the palm oil fresh fruit bunch (FFB) supply chain from the TNTN area to be legally investigated, signaling the need for ecological justice enforcement that targets large law-breaking actors, rather than merely marginalizing smallholders.

This approach allows for more flexible and contextualized management, and opens up space for integration between conservation and community life. In addition, governance reforms must be accompanied by mechanisms for formal recognition of community management rights over customary or traditional management areas. Without this recognition, conservation practices will continue to risk marginalizing local communities. The implementation of a moratorium on the practice of criminalizing citizens, as well as the establishment of regulations that uphold the principles of ecological and agrarian justice, are important prerequisites in creating equitable and sustainable governance. These principles emphasize the fair distribution of benefits and burdens, recognition of people's historical relationship with nature, and protection of the right to life and space for the existence of vulnerable communities. Moreover, religious values lived and practiced by local communities—such as the trust as *khalifah*, the principle of *mashlahah*, and ecological sharia norms—can be an important moral and cultural bridge in the process of governance reform. Such values not only strengthen social legitimacy, but also broaden the ethical basis for shaping more inclusive and equitable conservation governance. Therefore, the reform of Tesso Nilo National Park (TNTN) should be based on the principle of double justice: ecological justice to preserve the environment, and agrarian justice to guarantee the right to life and land rights of local communities who have long been part of the Tesso Nilo ecosystem.

DISCUSSION

Disconnection between State Conservation and Social Justice

The findings of this research show a fundamental disconnect between state conservation policies and social justice principles at the local level. The conservation approach applied in Tesso Nilo National Park (TNTN) still dominantly views the forest as an entity that must be separated from humans. In this paradigm, local communities are often positioned as a threat to the preservation of nature, rather than as an integral part of the ecosystem that has historical knowledge, practices and relations with the area that is now claimed as a conservation area (West, Igoe, & Brockington, 2006; Li, 2007). Such disconnection reflects a form of ecological exclusion, whereby the state disenfranchises communities over their living spaces through top-down delimitation (Peluso & Vandergeest, 2011). As a result, traditional forms of management such as *rimbo larangan*, shifting cultivation, or village deliberation are not recognized within the state's legal and policy framework. This suggests that state conservation tends to ignore the social and historical dimensions of ecological landscapes that have been managed by communities for generations (Brosius, 1999; Dove, 2006).

This is in line with Schlosberg's (2007) critique that ecological justice cannot be achieved simply by maintaining a physical environmental balance, but must include the distribution of rights, recognition of local identities and practices, and participation in decision-making processes. In the context of TNTN, conservation policies reproduce injustice through the revocation of access rights and criminalization of local communities. Similarly, Peluso and Lund (2011) assert that control over space is not only legalistic, but also political—where the "power to conserve" often operates alongside the "power to exclude." Thus, the failure of conservation policies to integrate social justice creates a gap between the ecological goals of the state and the social realities of local communities. Reforming the governance of conservation areas such as TNTN requires recognizing the existence and

contribution of communities as legitimate subjects, not just objects of conservation. Only through an approach that combines ecological and agrarian justice can conservation become an instrument that not only protects nature, but also upholds people's human rights and well-being (Fraser, 2009; Hall, Hirsch, & Li, 2011).

Law Enforcement Paradox: Repressive to Farmers, Tolerant to Corporations

The results of this study reveal a paradox in the practice of law enforcement in the Tesso Nilo National Park (TNTN) area. The state, through law enforcement officers and conservation authorities, applies a repressive approach to poor people who are active in areas claimed as national parks. People who open fields for subsistence purposes or inhabit areas that have been inhabited for generations are often criminalized as "forest encroachers" without considering the historical, social and economic context behind their existence (Peluso & Vandergeest, 2011; Walhi, 2020). In contrast, law violations committed by corporations such as illegal expansion of oil palm plantations or exceeding concession boundaries are often tolerated or even protected through legal loopholes and networks of power (Hall, Hirsch, & Li, 2011; Human Rights Watch, 2019).

This selective enforcement suggests a double standard in the state's treatment of different actors. This not only creates legal injustice, but also reinforces structural inequality and the reproduction of agrarian injustice. Within the framework of Fraser's (2009) theory of social justice, this situation reflects injustice in three dimensions: maldistribution of resources, misrecognition of the identity and contribution of local communities, and misrepresentation in decision-making processes. Discrimination in law enforcement exacerbates the marginalization of local communities, who not only lose access to land and resources, but also experience social and political delegitimization (Fraser, 2009; Li, 2014). This inequality also shows that the law is not neutral, but operates in the context of power relations involving the state, market and community. In the context of TNTN, the law becomes an instrument that perpetuates the interests of political and economic elites, while weakening the bargaining position of the most vulnerable communities (Peluso & Lund, 2011; Li, 2007). Therefore, conservation governance reform cannot be separated from law enforcement reform, including the need for accountability mechanisms for state apparatus, strengthening legal protection for smallholders, and eliminating discriminatory practices that benefit corporations.

The Potential of Religious Values as an Ethical Framework for Governance

In the context of the governance crisis of conservation areas such as Tesso Nilo National Park (TNTN), religious values have great potential as a source of environmental ethics that can strengthen social legitimacy and improve conservation effectiveness. Such values not only serve as individual moral guidelines, but also form a communal system of norms that regulate human relationships with nature. In the Malay community and indigenous tribes around TNTN, Islamic values such as khalifah (caretaker of the earth), amanah (moral responsibility) and mashlahah (public benefit) are part of the framework of life that encourages a responsible attitude towards the environment. The Qur'an affirms that humans were created as khalifah on earth (QS. Al-Baqarah [2]: 30), a divine mandate that implies an ethical obligation to preserve nature. The command not to do fasad (damage) is affirmed in QS. Al-A'raf [7]: 56, which reads: "And do not make mischief on the earth after Allah has repaired it." These verses are not only normative, but also the basis for social interpretations of the ecological crisis, where environmental destruction is seen as a violation of the divine order.

Furthermore, the Prophet Muhammad's hadith emphasizes the importance of ecological responsibility: "No Muslim plants a plant, and it is eaten by a human, animal or bird, but it will be a charity for him" (HR. Bukhari and Muslim). This Hadith suggests that the preservation and care of God's creation is a form of worship with social value. In this framework, resource management should not be based on exploitative interests alone, but rather on the value of rahmah (compassion)

to all creatures. The potential for religious values is also evident in local community practices, such as the concepts of rimbo larangan, pantang larang, and village deliberation, which are not only customary, but also rooted in religious ethics. In the practice of rimbo larangan, there is a prohibition to carelessly exploit trees and animals in areas that are considered sacred and protected. Violation of this prohibition is believed to bring calamity, both spiritually and ecologically, which in Islam can be linked to the principle of sunatullah-that damage will return to humans as a result of imbalance towards nature (see QS. Ar-Rum [30]: 41).

Scholars such as Imam Al-Ghazali in *Ihya Ulumuddin* state that "damage to nature is part of injustice," and maintaining the sustainability of creation is part of *maqashid al-syari'ah* - the purpose of Islamic law to preserve religion, soul, mind, offspring, and property. In this perspective, the environment falls into the category of protection of property and life, because the destruction of nature will affect the survival of humans and the entire ecosystem. However, these religious values have not been systematically integrated into national conservation policies. The conservation approach in Indonesia is still technocratic and secular, which separates the spiritual and cultural dimensions from the area management agenda. This imbalance is one of the causes of social resistance to conservation policies, as seen in many cases in TNTN, where local communities feel marginalized from the decision-making process. Thus, the integration of religious values into conservation governance can be a middle ground between the ecological interests of the state and the social legitimacy of communities. This approach not only strengthens the collective ethical base, but also opens a collaborative space between the state, religious institutions and local communities. In the context of TNTN, the involvement of religious leaders, da'wah institutions and local religious forums in faith-based conservation education programs has shown great potential to build ecological awareness based on spiritual beliefs, not merely legal instruments.

Hybrid Governance as an Alternative Model

The findings of this research show that in the context of conservation governance conflicts in Tesso Nilo National Park (TNTN), the hybrid governance model offers a more adaptive and inclusive alternative to the centralized state conservation approach. Referring to the concept of environmental governance proposed by Agrawal and Lemos (2007), hybrid governance refers to an institutional configuration in which state actors, local communities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) work together in a dynamic coexistence mechanism. In this approach, authority and responsibility for natural resource management is not monopolized by the state, but shared through collaborative networks across actors (Lemos & Agrawal, 2006; Ostrom, 1990). The research found that some relatively successful local initiatives in restoring the environment and maintaining social harmony were born from a combination of religious norms, community social control, and facilitation by NGOs. For example, village deliberation-based forest area management assisted by environmental NGOs was able to build a participatory area monitoring system, while instilling the value of ecological responsibility through a mosque-based da'wah and education approach. In this context, Islamic values such as *khalifah*, *mashlahah*, and *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* not only serve as moral guidelines, but also become the basis for legitimacy in collective management (Hidayat, 2016; Salim, 2019).

This hybrid governance model shows that the integration of formal institutional capacity, local wisdom and external support can create more sustainable and equitable governance. Such an approach also allows for more authentic participation by local communities, while strengthening accountability between actors in safeguarding shared resources (Berkes, 2009). Therefore, conservation governance in TNTN needs to be reoriented from a state-centric approach towards a collaborative model based on the principles of equality, recognition and proportional role sharing.

Urgency of Reform: From Technical Protection to Inclusive Coexistence

The research results emphasize the importance of paradigm transformation in conservation policy in Tesso Nilo National Park (TNTN). So far, the conservation approach is still predominantly protectionist and technocratic, where the state acts as the only authorized actor in protecting the area, while local communities are positioned as objects to be monitored, controlled, and even criminalized (Peluso & Vandergeest, 2011; West, Igoe, & Brockington, 2006). This approach has not only failed to address encroachment and deforestation, but has also led to social conflict and distrust between citizens and state officials (Li, 2007). Therefore, conservation governance reform must move away from the logic of technical protection towards an inclusive coexistence model—an approach that recognizes and activates the role of local communities as an integral part of the forest management system. In this model, communities are no longer treated as outsiders to be monitored, but rather as co-managers who have the rights, responsibilities and capacity to engage in decision-making, monitoring and ecosystem restoration (Berkes, 2009; Lemos & Agrawal, 2006). This approach is in line with the recognition justice principle in social and ecological justice theory, which emphasizes the importance of formal recognition of the identity, contributions and rights of indigenous peoples and local communities in natural resource governance (Fraser, 2009).

Field experience shows that when communities are given the space to genuinely participate—for example through participatory zoning mechanisms, recognition of customary forests, or conservation partnerships—the level of compliance with conservation rules increases significantly, along with a growing sense of ownership and shared responsibility for the area's sustainability (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999; Fisher et al., 2005). Therefore, conservation reform involves not only revising technical policies, but also reorganizing power relations, repositioning the roles of actors, and integrating local values that support sustainability. These reforms are becoming increasingly urgent in the face of the complexity of today's ecological and social challenges. Without a shift towards inclusive coexistence, conservation will continue to be trapped in a cycle of conflict and inequality, and fail to address the needs of ecological and agrarian justice simultaneously (Schlosberg, 2007; Hall, Hirsch, & Li, 2011).

CONCLUSION

This research concludes that the governance of Tesso Nilo National Park (TNTN) reflects a structural imbalance between the state's conservation interests and the agrarian rights of local communities. The centralized and technocratic conservation model has proven unable to address the social-ecological complexity of the area, and has even exacerbated tenurial conflicts, criminalization of farmers, and ecological fragmentation due to illegal palm oil expansion, which is more protected than prosecuted. The state's repressive approach towards small communities but permissive towards corporate actors shows double standards in law enforcement and creates a crisis of trust in state institutions. However, local communities are not passive. They show resistance and cooperative initiatives, including in the development of conservation practices based on Islamic religious values such as the principles of *khalifah*, *amanah*, and *mashlahah*, which are deeply embedded in the lives of the Malay community and other tribes around TNTN. These values provide a moral and ethical framework that can strengthen the legitimacy of participation-based governance and sustainability.

For this reason, TNTN governance reform should be directed towards a hybrid governance model that integrates the roles of the state, local communities and non-state actors in a collaborative manner. An inclusive coexistence approach that recognizes customary rights, community participation and religious values as ethical foundations is a prerequisite for creating double justice: ecological justice to protect nature and agrarian justice to guarantee the right to life of communities who have long been part of the Tesso Nilo landscape. Such reforms are essential for realizing

conservation area governance that is more equitable, sustainable and rooted in the local context.

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