

Spiritual Tourism Without Staging the Sacred: Evidence from Tanjung Puting

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ABSTRACT

Spiritual tourism increasingly encompasses contemplative encounters with nature and culture, yet the development of spiritually themed products in protected-area destinations raises questions about cultural authority, conservation, and commercialisation. This study explores whether an ecotourism destination in Tanjung Puting, Central Kalimantan, Indonesia, could support a community-sensitive spiritual tourism offer without transforming sacred practices into visitor performances. An exploratory sequential mixed-methods approach draws on the authors' existing field-study summary comprising four key-informant interviews and a purposive survey of 100 visitors. Qualitative findings identify two potential interpretive resources: a locally described reflective account of orangutan-forest relationships and the ethical meaning of community practices associated with collective protection and harmony. Survey summaries indicate that 82% of respondents expressed interest in a nature-and-culture-oriented spiritual package, 78% favoured forest reflection, 65% were interested in cultural interpretation, and 71% preferred a three-day, two-night itinerary. A reported price-interest interval was IDR 3.5–5.0 million, although individual price distributions are unavailable. Integrating supply-side accounts and visitor preferences, the paper develops a provisional model of consent-based interpretation, low-impact contemplation, community governance, and conservation-compatible delivery. Its contribution is not a claim that sacred rituals are tourism assets, but an approach to designing experiences around publicly shareable values while reserving restricted knowledge and ceremonies for cultural custodians. Findings suggest potential product-market alignment but do not establish commercial feasibility, community-wide consent, or long-term ecological outcomes. The proposed framework requires participatory validation and a carefully monitored pilot before implementation.

Keywords: spiritual tourism; cultural governance; nature-based reflection; Tanjung Puting; sustainable tourism

ABSTRAK

Wisata spiritual semakin mencakup pengalaman kontemplatif dengan alam dan budaya, namun pengembangan produk wisata bertema spiritual di kawasan konservasi menimbulkan pertanyaan mengenai kewenangan budaya, perlindungan lingkungan, dan komersialisasi. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi kemungkinan pengembangan wisata spiritual berbasis ekowisata di Tanjung Puting, Kalimantan Tengah, tanpa menjadikan praktik sakral sebagai pertunjukan wisata. Pendekatan metode campuran sekuensial eksploratori digunakan dengan mengacu pada ringkasan penelitian lapangan yang mencakup wawancara dengan empat informan kunci dan survei purposif terhadap 100 wisatawan. Temuan kualitatif mengidentifikasi dua sumber interpretasi potensial, yakni pemaknaan reflektif hubungan orangutan dan hutan serta nilai-nilai perlindungan dan keharmonisan bersama dalam praktik masyarakat setempat. Hasil survei menunjukkan bahwa 82% responden berminat terhadap paket wisata spiritual yang terintegrasi dengan ekowisata, 78% menyukai refleksi di hutan, 65% tertarik pada interpretasi budaya, dan

71% memilih perjalanan tiga hari dua malam. Kisaran kesediaan membayar yang dilaporkan adalah Rp3,5–5 juta, meskipun distribusi jawaban individual tidak tersedia. Integrasi perspektif pelaku lokal dan wisatawan menghasilkan model konseptual yang menekankan interpretasi berdasarkan persetujuan komunitas, aktivitas kontemplatif berdampak rendah, tata kelola budaya, serta kesesuaian dengan konservasi. Kontribusi penelitian terletak pada pemisahan nilai budaya yang dapat dibagikan kepada publik dari upacara yang tetap berada dalam kewenangan pemangku tradisi. Temuan menunjukkan keselarasan awal antara sumber daya pengalaman dan preferensi wisatawan, tetapi belum membuktikan kelayakan komersial, persetujuan komunitas secara menyeluruh, atau dampak ekologis jangka panjang. Karena itu, diperlukan validasi partisipatif dan uji coba terpantau sebelum implementasi.

Kata kunci: wisata spiritual; tata kelola budaya; refleksi berbasis alam; Tanjung Puting; pariwisata berkelanjutan

1. INTRODUCTION

Spirituality has become an important dimension of contemporary tourism scholarship because travel can provide opportunities for meaning-making, reflection, connectedness, and the reassessment of everyday priorities. Unlike pilgrimage focused on prescribed religious obligations, spiritual travel may encompass journeys in which visitors seek experiences they regard as personally restorative or transformative without necessarily identifying with a religious tradition (Norman, 2011; Timothy & Olsen, 2006). These journeys may unfold in natural settings, through encounters with cultural knowledge, or in moments of silence rather than through participation in formal ceremonies. This wider understanding makes ecotourism destinations potentially relevant to spiritual tourism, but it also creates conceptual and ethical challenges when visitors' desired experiences intersect with living indigenous or local traditions.

Protected areas make these challenges especially visible. Forests, rivers, biodiversity, and community livelihoods do not exist as interchangeable tourism commodities. Their meanings are embedded in ecological relations, territorial governance, and sometimes cultural practices whose visibility to outsiders is deliberately limited. A destination may be attractive to visitors because it evokes tranquility and existential reflection, but such interest does not constitute permission to access sacred knowledge or to convert a ceremony into a performance. Research on tourism empowerment stresses that community control and equitable benefit sharing are central to genuinely sustainable development (Scheyvens, 1999), while scholarship in Indonesia shows that debates over authenticity and commercialisation must attend to local people's own interpretations and control over representation (Cole, 2007).

Tanjung Puting National Park and its surrounding tourism landscape in Central Kalimantan provide a distinctive setting for investigating these tensions. The destination is strongly associated with tropical forest excursions, river-based tourism, and orangutan conservation. Adjacent settlements and the wider Kotawaringin Barat region also contain diverse cultural resources, including community-managed representations of longhouse heritage and locally significant customary traditions. For example, the national tourism-village platform identifies Rumah Betang in Pasir Panjang Tourism Village as a cultural interpretive attraction (Ministry of Tourism, n.d.). Separately, the Kotawaringin Barat

tourism office documents Nyanggar and Babarasih Banua as traditions associated with coastal communities in Kumai (Dinas Pariwisata Kabupaten Kotawaringin Barat, 2018). These are not evidence that every practice belongs to the same cultural or religious community, or that the protected area itself is the setting for the ceremonies.

Against this background, tourism diversification entails more than adding meditation to an existing wildlife itinerary. The planning question is how an optional contemplative layer can be designed around ecological interpretation and culturally authorised knowledge while preserving the autonomy of community custodians and the integrity of conservation sites. Demand and supply considerations must therefore be examined together: tourists may express interest in meaningful encounters, whereas local actors may recognise both interpretive possibilities and moral limits on what may be presented. A product that achieves a high preference score but violates cultural boundaries is not viable from a sustainability perspective.

Existing work offers important insights into the meanings of spiritual travel (Willson et al., 2013), the relationship between meaning and transformative experiences (Kirillova et al., 2017a; Kirillova et al., 2017b), community empowerment (Boley & McGehee, 2014), and indigenous participation in conservation-oriented tourism (Latip et al., 2018). Nevertheless, these strands do not automatically produce an operational method for negotiating spiritual-tourism product design in an Indonesian protected-area setting. The present study addresses this practice-oriented gap by integrating an exploratory supply-side account with descriptive visitor preferences and developing a bounded, governance-first product proposition. It does not claim to be the first study of spirituality, Dayak heritage, or community-based tourism in the region.

Three research questions guide the paper: (RQ1) Which environmental and cultural meanings do knowledgeable local tourism actors identify as suitable – or unsuitable – for visitor interpretation? (RQ2) What are the reported preferences of surveyed visitors concerning contemplative activities, cultural interpretation, itinerary length, and price? (RQ3) How can these perspectives be integrated into a provisional spiritual-tourism experience that respects cultural authority and conservation constraints? The analysis contributes a staged model in which cultural permission and ecological safeguards are design conditions rather than post hoc marketing considerations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Spiritual tourism, meaningful experience, and nature-based contemplation

Norman (2011) treats spiritual tourism as travel undertaken with an intentional orientation toward spiritual benefit, while Timothy and Olsen (2006) show that tourism and religion intersect through diverse sacred places, motivations, and journeys. Spiritual experience should therefore not be reduced to a single visitor profile or equated with consuming an explicitly religious ritual. Willson et al. (2013), drawing on phenomenological inquiry, demonstrate that spirituality in travel is closely related to the personal construction of meaning, purpose, connectedness, and transcendence. This perspective is helpful for destinations where meaningfulness may emerge from an encounter with a forest ecosystem rather than from entry into a sacred ceremony.

The concept of existential authenticity offers a further analytical lens. Wang (1999) argues that tourists' authentic experiences can be rooted in felt modes of being rather than simply in the objective authenticity of a visited object. Later empirical work suggests that perceived meaningfulness and existential dimensions are consequential aspects of transformative tourism (Kirillova et al., 2017b). For the present study, these insights support a distinction between an ethically facilitated reflective experience and the inappropriate promise that visitors will access an authentic indigenous spiritual state. The former may be designed as a self-directed invitation; the latter presumes authority over meanings that tour operators do not possess.

Nature-based contemplation similarly requires careful framing. A systematic review of forest bathing reports potentially beneficial psychological outcomes across studied interventions, subject to methodological differences and limitations (Siah et al., 2023). Such evidence does not justify claiming that a commercial forest walk in Tanjung Puting produces clinical benefits, nor does it demonstrate that guided reflection is interchangeable with religious practice. It does, however, support treating quiet, low-stimulus time in natural settings as a plausible visitor activity worthy of further evaluation. Interpretation should remain optional, inclusive of different belief systems, and compatible with wildlife observation rules.

Cultural representation and the boundary between interpretation and ritual

Cultural tourism operates within unequal relations of visibility, authority, and value. Research in eastern Indonesia demonstrates that community members may welcome opportunities to articulate identity and gain economic benefits, while outsiders' expectations of authenticity can also constrain how local culture is represented (Cole, 2007). The implication is not to reject all interpretation, but to ask who decides what may be said, performed, filmed, distributed, and commercially branded. Content that is meaningful in an everyday community context may be shareable, whereas rituals linked to obligations, restricted knowledge, or specific custodians may not be.

UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage places the participation of heritage-bearing communities at the centre of safeguarding (UNESCO, 2003). Its later ethical principles emphasise that communities should have a primary role in safeguarding their own heritage (UNESCO, 2015). The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples recognises indigenous peoples' rights concerning cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and cultural expressions (United Nations General Assembly, 2007). These instruments support a governance principle for spiritual tourism: the tourism enterprise cannot presume transferable ownership of cultural knowledge simply because tourists are interested in it.

In Kotawaringin Barat, cultural specificity is particularly important. Official documentation describes Nyanggar/Babarasih Banua in relation to coastal Kumai and highlights collective values of safety, solidarity, and social harmony (Dinas Pariwisata Kabupaten Kotawaringin Barat, 2018). Those publicly documented values can inform a discussion of community responsibility, but this does not make the ceremony a generic "Dayak ritual" or authorise a staged reproduction. Other traditions associated with Kaharingan communities, including Tiwah, have different ritual meanings and cultural

custodians; conflating them would obscure significant distinctions. This study consequently treats cultural traditions as contexts for negotiation over interpretation, not as inventories of attractions available for packaging.

Community participation, conservation, and product legitimacy

Scheyvens (1999) conceptualises empowerment in ecotourism through economic, psychological, social, and political dimensions. Boley and McGehee (2014) operationalise residents' perceived empowerment, illustrating that tourism benefits should be examined through more than income alone. Work on indigenous participation in conservation-oriented tourism further shows how knowledge, environmental consequences, and perceived economic opportunities shape engagement (Latip et al., 2018). Together, these contributions suggest that a spiritual tourism product requires ongoing community influence over decision-making, narrative control, and benefit allocation.

Product feasibility therefore has at least three independent conditions. Experiential acceptability concerns whether visitors value the proposed activities. Cultural legitimacy concerns whether the relevant custodians consent to the content and retain authority to alter or withdraw it. Ecological compatibility concerns whether activities fit protected-area regulations, visitor limits, wildlife-welfare requirements, and site-specific management rules. Positive results in one domain cannot compensate for failure in another. This three-condition proposition informs the integration of qualitative themes and quantitative descriptive findings below.

3. METHODS

Design and study setting

The underlying study followed a qualitative-to-quantitative sequence: initial in-depth interviews informed subsequent visitor preference assessment. Accordingly, it is described here as an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design, rather than an explanatory sequential design, which conventionally begins with quantitative results (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The qualitative stage sought to identify meanings and potential boundaries of interpretation; the quantitative stage described visitor interest in possible product features. Integration occurred at the interpretation and product-concept stages, using a joint-display logic that connects qualitative insights and quantitative responses without asserting statistical causation (Guetterman et al., 2015).

The research setting is the Tanjung Puting ecotourism landscape and neighbouring settlements within the wider Kotawaringin Barat tourism system. The proposed spiritual-tourism product is not treated as permission to conduct new activities inside restricted zones of the national park. A cultural encounter in an adjacent tourism village and a contemplative activity along an existing permitted route must be assessed separately under their respective governance rules.

Participants and data sources

The source field-study summary reports four key informants involved in the qualitative component. They were selected for knowledge relevant to local tourism operations, cultural meaning, and the destination context. Because the underlying material available for preparation of this manuscript does not provide a full role-by-role respondent matrix

or verbatim transcripts, no demographic or institutional breakdown beyond that summary is asserted. The original research plan anticipated more interviews; the four interviews actually reported are treated as a small exploratory corpus, and thematic saturation is not claimed. This distinction is important because saturation should be assessed rather than inferred from the existence of themes (Guest et al., 2020).

The quantitative component comprised 100 visitors recruited using purposive eligibility criteria identified in the source study: a minimum age of 17 years and a previous visit to the Tanjung Puting area within five years. The survey covered interest in a nature-and-culture spiritual tourism package, preferred activities, preferences for interpretive guidance, desired duration, and indicative willingness to pay. A probability sample was not used; reported percentages therefore describe this respondent group and cannot be generalised to all visitors or the broader tourism market.

Analysis and integration

The original qualitative study summary reports the use of thematic analysis, yielding two principal themes. These are treated in the present manuscript as reported field-study findings rather than independently recoded transcripts. Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis framework informs the discussion of meaning and contextualisation, but intercoder agreement, new code counts, and transcript-based quotations are not fabricated. Descriptive survey figures are reproduced from the written results table and narrative of the source study. No inferential tests, confidence intervals, regression analyses, importance–performance mapping, or individual-level willingness-to-pay estimates are reported because underlying observations and relevant outputs were not available for verification.

A structured joint display was used to link (a) what the local qualitative account makes available or places off-limits, (b) what the surveyed visitors say they prefer, and (c) which product features could be piloted subject to further consent and approvals. These integrated propositions are managerial and conceptual inferences; they are not separate observations from fieldwork. Information from official tourism and cultural sources was used to avoid conflating local traditions or mislocating cultural attractions within the national park.

Research transparency and ethical boundaries

The analysis uses only aggregate quantitative results and non-attributable qualitative theme summaries from the source research document. It does not publish identifiable statements by individual custodians. The available summary does not specify the institutional ethics approval or exemption record, the exact interview dates, raw questionnaire, or signed permissions to use particular cultural narratives for commercial purposes. Consequently, this paper makes no claim that a proposed package has already obtained community-wide consent, protected-area approval, or market validation. Any field implementation must follow appropriate institutional research procedures, documented informed consent, and explicit authorisation from the relevant cultural and conservation authorities.

4. RESULTS

Locally described sources of meaning

The first reported theme concerns a locally articulated idea described in the source study as “Mamaliar Orangutan.” Within the four-informant exploratory account, orangutans were discussed not only as protected wildlife but also as a point of reflection on respect, patience, restraint, and human relationships with the forest. These interpretations suggest a potential shift in visitor narration: rather than viewing orangutans only as objects of observation, a guide might facilitate reflection on coexistence, habitat fragility, and stewardship. Importantly, this theme is a situated account from a small set of informants. It is not presented here as a universally recognised Dayak doctrine, a formal conservation protocol, or a verified cultural practice shared by all surrounding communities.

The second theme concerns how local practices associated with protection, collective responsibility, and harmony might inform cultural interpretation without being enacted for tourists. The source study initially described this in connection with Menyanggar. However, official regional documentation locates Nyanggar/Babarasih Banua within coastal Kumai cultural practice; it should not be collapsed into an undifferentiated repertoire of Dayak/Kaharingan rites (Dinas Pariwisata Kabupaten Kotawaringin Barat, 2018). A cautious interpretation of the finding is that knowledgeable community members may be willing to discuss publicly shareable ethical values while maintaining limits on sacred enactment. Such a boundary creates an interpretive resource but does not license the recreation of the ritual itself.

Together, these two themes offer a modest yet consequential supply-side insight: contemplative tourism might be organised around care for the environment and respectful learning, rather than around the spectacle of sacred practice. The distinction shifts product design from “what sacred performance can be offered?” to “what forms of reflection and local knowledge may be shared on community-defined terms?”

Descriptive visitor preferences

The visitor survey summary indicates notable interest in the proposed spiritual-tourism concept. Among 100 respondents, 82% reportedly expressed interest in a package integrating ecotourism and spiritual or reflective experiences. 78% preferred forest meditation or reflection activities, 65% were interested in cultural and spiritual storytelling by local guides, and 71% selected a three-day, two-night package duration. A small-group format of four to eight participants was also described as desirable in the source narrative, but no percentage was provided for that group-size preference.

The source additionally reports an indicative willingness-to-pay interval of IDR 3,500,000–5,000,000 per person. This should not be mistaken for an observed average price, a median, a majority-supported price band, or a willingness-to-pay distribution. The original summary does not indicate how the price question was framed or how many respondents selected each amount. At most, it signals an early price hypothesis for testing during subsequent product research.

The findings suggest a potential overlap between the respondents' desire for contemplative time in nature and the supply-side possibility of non-ritual, conservation-linked interpretation. Yet survey interest is not equivalent to booking behaviour. Selection bias, social desirability, familiarity with the destination, and the lack of a competing-price choice task may all inflate expressed interest. The preference data should therefore be read as exploratory directional evidence only.

Table 1 – Reported visitor preferences (purposive sample, n = 100)

Survey item	Reported result	Interpretive caution
Interest in combined ecotourism and reflective/spiritual package	82% (82 of 100)	Stated interest, not booking conversion
Preference for forest meditation or reflection	78% (78 of 100)	Subject to access, safety, and conservation rules
Interest in guide-led cultural or spiritual narrative	65% (65 of 100)	Requires community permission and accurate interpretation
Preference for three-day, two-night package	71% (71 of 100)	Does not establish preferred programme cost
Indicative willingness-to-pay interval	IDR 3.5–5.0 million/person	Interval reported; underlying distribution not supplied

Bringing the two perspectives together

The qualitative and quantitative findings are compatible in some areas but also create an ethical asymmetry. Visitors express substantial interest in a reflective experience, while the local account identifies restrictions concerning sacred practices. Compatibility is strongest where reflection and conservation interpretation can be delivered without privileged cultural access. By contrast, a visitor's curiosity about ritual is not evidence that the community can or should make the ritual available. The integrated interpretation is thus a conditional—not automatic—alignment between visitor demand and local supply.

The joint display in Table 2 translates this conditional alignment into product implications. The column labelled “design inference” is deliberately separated from field evidence to avoid presenting a planning proposal as a measured outcome. Where evidence is absent—for example, willingness to host visitors in a particular village, contractual benefit sharing, or the carrying capacity of a proposed stopping point—the entry remains an implementation requirement.

Table 2 – Joint display linking field-study evidence to conditional product implications

Local qualitative theme	Survey evidence	Design inference (not observed implementation)	Unresolved requirement
Forest stewardship and reflective orangutan interpretation	78% favour forest reflection; 82% overall interest	Optional low-impact reflection alongside established wildlife interpretation	Specific permissions, carrying capacity, and wildlife safeguards
Values of collective protection and harmony; ritual boundaries	65% value cultural interpretation	Share publicly authorised ethical narratives; do not stage sacred ceremonies	Cultural custodians' consent and narrative review
Potential three-day experience	71% prefer 3D2N	Pilot manageable multi-day programme linked to existing tourism supply chain	Co-design itinerary, logistics, and safety
Potential premium positioning	Reported IDR 3.5–5.0m interval	Treat pricing as testable market hypothesis, not confirmed market price	Costing and revealed booking/choice tests

A provisional package concept: “Jalur Sangga”

Drawing on the integration, the original source study proposed a three-day, two-night concept named “Jalur Sangga.” The present manuscript refines this as a candidate pilot itinerary rather than an established, marketed tourism product. “Jalur Sangga” aims to combine existing, authorised ecotourism experiences with optional self-reflection and voluntary community-led cultural interpretation. It does not promise spiritual transformation, access to ritual specialists, private ceremonies, or entry to culturally restricted spaces.

A potential sequence is: Day 1, arrival and orientation about conservation, cultural protocols, informed consent for photographs, and a short optional reflection; Day 2, an existing authorised wildlife or forest excursion with naturalist interpretation and quiet contemplation only where permitted; Day 3, an optional cultural exchange in an appropriate neighbouring tourism-village setting followed by a facilitated discussion of shared environmental responsibilities and departure. This schedule is illustrative. Its route, sites, guides, transport, safety plan, and permissions must be negotiated before operational use.

Table 3 – Provisional “Jalur Sangga” three-day pilot concept – not an approved operating itinerary

Stage	Optional experience	Lead and safeguards	Planned learning outcome
Day 1: orientation	Welcome, conservation briefing, codes of conduct, short silent reflection	Licensed operator + conservation guidance; no promise of spiritual transformation	Visitor understands respectful conduct and boundaries
Day 2: nature	Approved forest/river programme, wildlife interpretation, optional quiet pause	Authorised guide; route, group size, and wildlife-distance rules determined by manager	Contemplation linked with ecological responsibility

Stage	Optional experience	Lead and safeguards	Planned learning outcome
Day 3: cultural learning	Optional community-led conversation or publicly shareable heritage interpretation; departure	Community-appointed interpreter; voluntary participation, no sacred performance	Recognition of cultural plurality and custodians' authority

Crucially, the proposal excludes staged ceremonies, claims of healing or guaranteed well-being, and any depiction of orangutans as religious objects. A local steering group should determine whether even the term “spiritual tourism” accurately represents the programme or whether less appropriative language such as “reflective ecotourism and cultural learning” is preferable. Consent must be specific to a proposed story, activity, setting, and recording practice – not a one-time blanket agreement to commercial use.

5. DISCUSSION

From resource identification to permission-based experience design

The study's core contribution is the analytical distinction between a potential source of meaning and a culturally legitimate tourism resource. Ecotourism has often described natural or cultural assets as inputs into product development, but spiritually inflected heritage cannot be treated as an unrestricted stock of attractions. The meanings that give a ritual importance may be precisely what makes it inappropriate to stage for outsiders. The source interviews indicate that publicly discussable values – such as responsibility toward the forest and collective protection – may be interpreted without reproducing sacred acts. Yet the source data are too limited to establish a community consensus.

This distinction extends earlier arguments concerning authenticity. Wang (1999) suggests that existential authenticity can emerge from a visitor's own state of being, whereas Cole (2007) cautions that local communities' assessments of representation may differ from those of visitors and officials. In Tanjung Puting, an authentic encounter need not consist of observing an apparently “traditional” ceremony performed for tourists. It might instead involve respectful learning from an authorised storyteller, a candid acknowledgement that certain knowledge is private, and a self-directed reflection on human responsibility toward a vulnerable ecosystem. The experience can be meaningful to a visitor without asserting access to a sacred practice.

Conceptually, this approach reframes cultural restraint as an enabling design principle rather than a limitation to be overcome. Refusing to commodify a sacred ceremony is not evidence that the destination lacks tourism potential. On the contrary, clear boundaries can improve interpretive credibility and reduce conflict by distinguishing public heritage education from restricted practice. UNESCO's (2003, 2015) safeguarding framework reinforces the importance of community participation and the right to define what is transmitted, withheld, or reinterpreted.

Reflective demand and conservation practice

The 78% stated preference for forest reflection provides an experiential direction consistent with the literature on meaningful travel and nature-based well-being (Kirillova et al., 2017; Siah et al., 2023). However, conservation objectives must take

priority over convenience or atmosphere. A quiet forest stop is appropriate only when consistent with the national park's authorised activities, safety requirements, wildlife buffers, and visitor management. The appeal of a secluded setting cannot justify opening a sensitive habitat or disturbing orangutans. "Forest bathing" should not be presented as a scientifically verified treatment in this specific context.

This priority also suggests how guides' responsibilities would change. Instead of maximising close-range wildlife sightings, trained interpreters could emphasise observation etiquette, habitat interdependence, visitor restraint, and mindful attention to the environment. Such interpretation could support a reflective experience without attaching externally imposed spiritual labels to particular animals, sites, or community beliefs. The resulting product may be valued by visitors who seek quiet and meaning but do not seek participation in another group's ritual practices.

Stated interest and commercial viability

The survey results provide encouraging but narrow evidence. More than four-fifths of respondents were reportedly interested in a reflective ecotourism concept, and approximately seven in ten preferred a three-day, two-night itinerary. These are descriptive proportions within a purposively recruited visitor group. They cannot estimate the prevalence of demand in the full visitor population, predict conversion rates, or establish willingness to book at the reported price interval. Without individual-level data, price sensitivity, and alternative package comparisons, even a conservative revenue forecast would be speculative.

Commercial validation should proceed in stages. First, stakeholders should develop a transparent cost sheet covering licensed guiding, transport, permitted accommodation, local interpretation fees, conservation payments, insurance, and contingency. Second, prospective visitors should be exposed to a realistic itinerary and explicit exclusions so that willingness to pay refers to a defined product rather than an abstract notion of "spiritual travel." Third, a limited pilot should measure actual booking, completion, satisfaction, resident perceptions, and ecological compliance. Distinguishing stated preference from revealed demand is especially necessary for a product that might be branded as "premium" without evidence of sustained willingness to pay.

Governance-first feasibility

The joint findings support a proposed three-gate feasibility framework: cultural legitimacy, ecological compatibility, and market-operational feasibility. Cultural legitimacy asks whether authorised custodians agree to the proposed interpretation and have a continuing right to amend or withdraw it. Ecological compatibility asks whether activities are permissible and low-impact within the relevant protected-area and village management systems. Market-operational feasibility asks whether visitors actually book a product that can be delivered safely at a price covering fair compensation and responsible operations. Each gate should have an explicit stop condition.

This model draws on community-empowerment scholarship. Scheyvens (1999) argues that ecotourism must be evaluated partly through local control and distribution of benefits; Boley and McGehee (2014) show that empowerment spans psychological, social,

and political dimensions. An effective governance arrangement therefore cannot be limited to hiring local guides. It should allow cultural custodians to decide which narratives are shareable, communities to negotiate compensation and recording restrictions, and conservation managers to determine permissible routes and visitor conduct. Such a model can strengthen legitimacy while ensuring that economic incentives do not override either cultural or environmental constraints.

Table 4 – Three-gate feasibility framework for community-sensitive spiritual tourism

Gate	Minimum evidence before pilot	Stop / redesign condition	Suggested monitoring indicator
1. Cultural legitimacy	Specific permission from appropriate custodians; agreed storytelling limits; benefit-sharing terms	Consent absent/withdrawn; cultural content contested	Protocol adherence; custodian feedback; benefit allocation
2. Ecological compatibility	Approved route, activity, duration, group size, wildlife protocols, contingency plan	Protected-area restriction or disturbance risk	Incidents, guide compliance, waste, wildlife distance
3. Market and operational viability	Itemised costs, trained personnel, product-price test, insurance, service standards	Unsafe operations or revenues insufficient for fair and responsible delivery	Actual bookings, cost recovery, satisfaction, complaints

Theoretical implications

Three implications emerge. First, spiritual tourism at a protected-area destination may arise from interpretive framing and visitor meaning-making, not from the extraction of sacred practice as entertainment. This develops the experiential insight of Norman (2011) and Willson et al. (2013) by highlighting that the content of a spiritual experience must be negotiated with hosts as well as chosen by guests. Second, the study proposes a dual-perspective integration in which local qualitative accounts and visitor descriptive preferences are read together but are not treated as normatively equivalent: visitor demand cannot override a community's right to withhold cultural knowledge. Third, the three-gate framework offers a preliminary mechanism for distinguishing product desirability from ethical and conservation feasibility.

The contribution remains provisional. The four-informant corpus is insufficient to represent the diversity of cultural perspectives across surrounding communities. The resulting framework is analytically useful but has not been validated through participatory implementation or longitudinal evaluation. Its value is as a structured proposition for further study and pilot testing, not a universally demonstrated model.

Managerial and policy implications

For destination management, the immediate priority is to establish a community-led design forum before advertising any spiritual-tourism experience. This forum should include appropriate representatives selected by the relevant communities, tourism operators, the protected-area authority, village stakeholders, and government agencies.

Decisions should address language, protocols, permissions, use of names and images, financial arrangements, and the right to withdraw an activity. Representation must be assessed at the level of the cultural knowledge being shared; no single stakeholder can automatically speak for every local group.

Second, prospective guides require training in both cultural interpretation and refusal skills. Training should cover accurate source attribution, differentiated histories and traditions, respectful ways to respond when visitors request restricted experiences, wildlife-welfare expectations, and handling of photography and social-media content. Guides should not be encouraged to invent spiritual stories to make a product more marketable. If a community considers a story unsuitable for circulation, the itinerary must accommodate that decision without penalising the community economically.

Third, product development should adopt low-volume, monitorable pilots. The four-to-eight-person group size mentioned in the source summary may be a useful early design hypothesis, but its acceptability must be checked against protected-area rules and local preferences. Pilot monitoring could include number of bookings, realised average sale price, complaint rates, local income shares, guide workload, participant understanding of conservation messages, cultural-custodian feedback, and any observed disturbance or non-compliance. A null or negative result on cultural or ecological indicators should prompt immediate modification or suspension, even when visitor satisfaction is high.

Fourth, destination marketers should use truthful non-extractive language. Descriptions such as “guided reflection,” “river-and-forest interpretation,” or “community-authorised cultural learning” are more defensible than promises of access to ancestral rites or guaranteed transformation. The experience should make space for secular as well as religious visitors and should avoid presenting specific communities as timeless or culturally homogeneous. Partnerships with accommodations and tour operators can distribute benefits, but agreements should be transparent and periodically reviewed.

Finally, public agencies and higher education institutions could support participatory training, ethics guidelines, longitudinal impact assessments, and visitor research. Evaluation must include community-defined well-being and cultural safeguarding outcomes, not merely arrivals and sales. A programme that stimulates demand but undermines cultural authority should not be described as sustainable tourism.

Limitations and future research

This study is subject to five interrelated limitations. First, the qualitative stage comprises only four reported key informants. Their themes are exploratory, not evidence of saturation or consensus across different Dayak groups, coastal communities, government agencies, and tourism businesses. Second, the survey is a non-probability sample of 100 previous visitors, potentially favouring respondents already positively disposed toward ecotourism. Third, only summary-level survey figures are available for the present manuscript; the absence of item wording, individual responses, and missing-data information prevents independent estimation of uncertainty, correlation, and willingness-to-pay distribution. Fourth, a percentage discrepancy appears in a graphic in the source draft; the present text consistently uses the written table and narrative value

of 78% for forest reflection, pending checking against the original survey dataset. Fifth, the “Jalur Sangga” itinerary is a proposed concept that has not been piloted, costed, or approved for protected-area and cultural access.

Future research should therefore expand and diversify interviews, include culturally appropriate consent processes, and document how different communities distinguish public knowledge from restricted practice. A follow-up survey should use a transparent sampling frame and experimentally compare alternative product descriptions and price points. Actual booking or discrete-choice data would provide stronger evidence than stated general interest. A pilot programme should jointly evaluate visitor experience, resident empowerment, distribution of financial benefit, guide practice, and ecological performance over time. The effects of cultural interpretation on visitor understanding can be examined without seeking to measure or appropriate sacred efficacy.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Tanjung Puting's ecotourism setting presents an exploratory opportunity to connect nature-based reflection and community-authorised cultural learning. In the available study summary, four informants identified forest-related ethical meanings and boundaries around ritual interpretation, while 100 surveyed visitors reported interest in a contemplative package (82%), forest reflection (78%), cultural storytelling (65%), and a three-day, two-night itinerary (71%). These descriptive findings provide an initial basis for a carefully designed product hypothesis, not proof of full-market demand or community approval.

The proposed “Jalur Sangga” concept reframes spiritual tourism as a voluntary experience of meaning-making, conservation education, and respectful encounter rather than the performance of sacred culture. Its viability is conditional on three independently necessary tests: cultural legitimacy, ecological compatibility, and actual market-operational feasibility. The wider conclusion is that spiritual tourism in protected areas should be developed with restraint, consent, and accountable community governance, preserving the right of cultural custodians to determine not only what visitors may experience but also what must remain outside the tourism economy.

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