



Eco-Halal Tourism as ASEAN Soft Power: Insights from Central Sulawesi

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Abstract. Halal tourism has become a dynamic force in Southeast Asia, functioning not only as an economic catalyst but also as a medium for cultural diplomacy and regional identity formation. While prior scholarship has predominantly examined established destinations such as Lombok, Langkawi, and Kuala Lumpur, less attention has been given to the role of eco-halal tourism in advancing ASEAN's soft power and sustainability agenda. This study explores Paisupok Lake in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, as a peripheral, community-based destination that integrates eco-halal glamping, circular economy practices, and community empowerment. Employing a mixed-methods approach including visitor surveys, stakeholder interviews, and analysis of policy documents. The research demonstrates how halal-compliant services, community participation, and conservation-oriented practices align with the objectives of the ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan (2016-2025) and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community framework. The findings reveal that eco-halal tourism in peripheral destinations strengthens local economic resilience while simultaneously enhancing ASEAN's cultural diplomacy by projecting inclusivity, sustainability, and cultural distinctiveness. The paper concludes that eco-halal tourism should be conceptualized not merely as a niche segment but as a strategic instrument of ASEAN's soft power, contributing to regional identity, climate adaptation efforts, and global visibility.

Keywords: Eco-halal tourism, Community Based Tourism, Climate Resilience, ASEAN Soft Power, Circular Economy, Cultural Diplomacy.

1 Introduction

Tourism has become a central pillar of Southeast Asia's regional development and cultural diplomacy, functioning both as an economic catalyst and as a vehicle of soft power [1]. Within the ASEAN framework, tourism plays a strategic role in promoting inclusivity, sustainability, and regional identity, as articulated in the ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan (ATSP) 2016-2025 [2]. Against this backdrop, halal tourism has emerged as

one of the most dynamic and rapidly expanding sectors, propelled by the growing demand among Muslim travelers for destinations that harmonize leisure, spirituality, and ethical hospitality ([3]; [4]).

Over the past decade, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei have positioned themselves as frontrunners in halal tourism through comprehensive strategies involving branding, certification, and infrastructure development ([5]; [6]). Yet, scholarly attention has largely focused on well-established destinations such as Lombok, Langkawi, and Kuala Lumpur [7], leaving peripheral and community-based sites underexplored. These lesser-known areas often possess significant potential for integrating environmental sustainability, local empowerment, and halal-compliant practices as an intersection that can enrich ASEAN's regional tourism identity and promote inclusive development.

Recent empirical work in Indonesia underscores this potential. [8] examined visitor preferences at Paisupok Lake, a water-based glamping destination in Central Sulawesi, and found strong market interest in eco-luxury experiences that combine comfort, nature immersion, and community participation. Their findings demonstrate how sustainable tourism models in peripheral regions can foster local economic growth, environmental stewardship, and cultural resilience. These insights highlight the need to investigate how eco-halal destinations such as Paisupok contribute to ASEAN's broader soft power agenda by aligning tourism development with sustainability and inclusivity objectives.

In this context, eco-halal tourism which merges ecological sustainability, halal hospitality, and community participation represents a new paradigm for both academic inquiry and policy formulation. The theoretical foundation of this study draws upon soft power theory [9] and cultural diplomacy perspectives [10], conceptualizing tourism as a form of attraction-based influence rather than merely economic exchange. Within this framework, destinations like Paisupok Lake offer a valuable opportunity to explore how community-driven, halal-compliant, and environmentally conscious tourism can project ASEAN's collective identity as an inclusive, sustainable, and ethically grounded region.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine how eco-halal tourism, as exemplified by Paisupok Lake, contributes to three interrelated dimensions: 1) Local community empowerment, 2) Environmental and cultural sustainability, and 3) ASEAN's soft power and cultural diplomacy. Using a mixed-methods approach, comprising visitor surveys, stakeholder interviews, and policy document analysis, this paper contributes to ongoing debates in ASEAN studies by positioning halal tourism not only as a market phenomenon but also as a strategic resource for regional identity-building and global engagement.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Halal Tourism and the ASEAN Context

Halal tourism has rapidly evolved into one of the most dynamic sectors in Southeast Asia, reflecting the region's substantial Muslim population and the global shift toward ethical and value-based travel ([4]; [6]). Within the ASEAN framework, halal tourism is recognized as a key contributor to both economic growth and cultural diplomacy, aligning with the ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan (ATSP) 2016-2025, which prioritizes inclusivity, sustainability, and regional integration [2]. The existing scholarship has largely concentrated on urban and coastal destinations such as Lombok, Langkawi, and Kuala Lumpur, emphasizing their significance in national branding and competitiveness ([3]; [11]). However, this geographical concentration leaves peripheral and community-based destinations underexplored, despite their potential to merge environmental sustainability with halal-compliant hospitality ([5]; [12]).

A growing body of research now advocates for a more context-sensitive and sustainability-oriented approach to halal tourism. For instance, [8] found that domestic travelers at Paisupok Lake in Central Sulawesi increasingly sought eco-luxury experiences that blend comfort, environmental integrity, and halal authenticity. Their findings demonstrate that halal tourism's potential extends beyond market dynamics, contributing to environmental conservation and community empowerment. These insights reinforce the view that eco-halal tourism can play a strategic role in advancing ASEAN's soft power and regional identity. By integrating halal hospitality with sustainability and community participation, destinations like Paisupok illustrate how peripheral regions can align with ASEAN's aspiration to project itself as an inclusive and culturally diverse bloc ([10]; [13]).

2.2 Community-Based Tourism and Local Empowerment

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) emphasizes participatory governance, local ownership, and equitable benefit-sharing [14]. Within ASEAN, CBT has been widely promoted as a strategy for inclusive rural development, enabling communities to retain agency and economic benefits [15]. Integrating CBT principles into halal tourism can foster socially and culturally responsive destinations, ensuring that local communities remain at the center of both economic and cultural outcomes ([16]; [17]).

Recent literature also highlights the synergy between CBT and the circular economy, which emphasizes the reuse of local materials, recycling initiatives, and renewable resources to sustain both livelihoods and ecosystems ([18]; [19]). The use of bamboo and recycled wood in eco-lodges and glamping sites, such as those developed in Paisupok [8] exemplifies how local innovation can embed circular economy principles in tourism. This approach not only promotes sustainability but also enhances resilience by reducing environmental footprints and preserving traditional craftsmanship.

2.3 ASEAN Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy

The concept of soft power, introduced by [9] and further developed in the ASEAN context by [10], refers to the capacity of states or regions to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. Tourism has become a critical vehicle for exercising soft power, allowing ASEAN to project its image as a region of harmony, diversity, and sustainability ([20]; [13]).

Within this framework, halal tourism represents a distinctive dimension of ASEAN's cultural diplomacy. When coupled with ecological and community-based practices, it conveys an image of the region as Muslim-friendly, environmentally responsible, and culturally inclusive. Eco-halal destinations such as Paisupok Lake thus serve not only as platforms for local empowerment but also as symbols of ASEAN's collective soft power. As highlighted in the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Blueprint, tourism contributes to economic prosperity, shared identity, and mutual understanding among member states [2].

2.4 Theoretical Framework

2.4.1 Research Background

Tourism in ASEAN has increasingly evolved beyond its conventional economic role, becoming a medium for cultural diplomacy, sustainability, and identity construction ([10], 2019; [20]). The convergence of halal tourism, eco-tourism, and community-based tourism (CBT) presents new opportunities to link environmental stewardship with cultural representation and value-based engagement ([12]; [16]). Despite this potential, the interrelationship between local empowerment, sustainability innovation, and soft power projection remains insufficiently examined in empirical research.

Peripheral destinations such as Paisupok Lake in Central Sulawesi exemplify how eco-halal tourism can integrate ecological conservation, community participation, and spiritual well-being [8]. These features align closely with ASEAN's broader strategy to strengthen regional cohesion and global influence through soft power and cultural diplomacy [13]. Grounded in these theoretical and empirical insights, this study develops a conceptual framework that positions eco-halal tourism as a mechanism for advancing ASEAN's soft power by fostering community empowerment, environmental sustainability, and ethical diplomacy.

2.4.2 Theoretical Propositions

Based on the research questions and the existing literature, the study advances the following theoretical propositions:

- P1. Eco-halal tourism promotes local empowerment by enabling inclusive participation and equitable benefit-sharing within rural communities ([14]; [15]).
- P2. Eco-halal tourism enhances ASEAN's soft power through the projection of shared cultural and ethical values grounded in sustainability and inclusivity ([9]; [10]).
- P3. The incorporation of circular economy principles in tourism supports environmental stewardship and community innovation, aligning with ASEAN's sustainability agenda ([18]; [19]).

P4. The integration of community-based eco-halal tourism into ASEAN’s tourism governance can serve as a strategic tool for regional branding and cultural diplomacy (Varman & Fadhli, 2023; Ali et al., 2023).

2.4.3 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study (see Figure 1) connects three interdependent dimensions:

1. Local Empowerment and Participation, representing the community-based tourism foundation that emphasizes inclusive governance and equitable benefits.
2. Sustainability and Circular Economy Practices, reflecting environmental stewardship, resource optimization, and innovation for resilience.
3. ASEAN Soft Power Projection, encompassing cultural diplomacy, regional identity-building, and attraction-based influence.

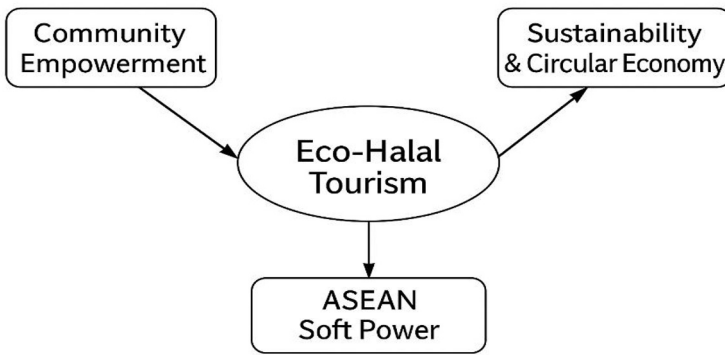


Fig. 1. Conceptual model of eco-halal tourism as ASEAN soft power. Source: Author’s elaboration (2025).

This framework illustrates how eco-halal tourism operates as a bridge linking local-level sustainability and empowerment initiatives with ASEAN’s macro-level objectives of inclusivity, identity formation, and soft power development. Through this integration, eco-halal tourism is conceptualized not merely as a market segment but as a multidimensional mechanism for sustainable and diplomatic regional transformation.

3 Method

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods case study design to investigate how eco-halal tourism contributes to local empowerment, sustainability, and ASEAN soft power projection. The mixed-methods approach was selected to capture both the quantitative aspects of visitor preferences and the qualitative dimensions of community participation,

policy implications, and socio-cultural meaning [21]. The case study design provided contextual depth by focusing on Paisupok Lake in Banggai Kepulauan, Central Sulawesi, as a representative model of eco-halal tourism in a peripheral ASEAN setting.

3.2 Participants

Two groups of participants in this study were involved:

- 1) Visitors (n = 200) surveyed to identify their preferences for halal wellness activities, environmental sustainability, and cultural experiences. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling among domestic and regional tourists visiting or expressing interest in eco-halal destinations.
- 2) Community Stakeholders (n = 12) including local tourism operators, village leaders, government officials, and small business owners. These participants were engaged through semi-structured interviews to explore community perspectives on empowerment, sustainability, and halal tourism practices. All participants were informed of the study's purpose, and ethical clearance was maintained through informed consent and data anonymity procedures [22].

3.3 Instruments

Three primary instruments were employed for data collection:

- 1) Structured Visitor Questionnaire, designed to measure motivational drivers, preferred activities (e.g., glamping, agro-tourism, hot spring bathing), and the importance of halal-compliant facilities such as prayer rooms and halal food. The survey used Likert scales ranging from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important).
- 2) Interview Guide, developed based on themes of community empowerment, sustainable resource management, and cultural diplomacy.
- 3) Document Analysis Template, used to examine ASEAN tourism policies (e.g., ATSP 2016–2025) and national tourism master plans for alignment with eco-halal and soft power strategies [2].

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted between February and March 2025. Surveys were distributed both in-person and online, allowing for broader respondent representation. Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and later transcribed into English. Secondary data were retrieved from academic literature, tourism policy documents, and community archives. The triangulation of methods strengthened validity by ensuring consistency across sources and perspectives [23].

3.5 Data Analysis

3.5.1 Quantitative Analysis

Descriptive statistics were applied to summarize visitor profiles, motivations, and preferences using percentage distributions and mean values. Cross-tabulations were also used to examine relationships between demographic variables (e.g., age, education,

travel purpose) and preferences for halal wellness experiences. Data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0 software.

3.5.2 Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data from interviews and policy documents were analyzed using thematic content analysis [24]. Coding was performed inductively to identify key themes under three major dimensions: 1. Community empowerment and participation, 2. Environmental sustainability and circular practices, 3. ASEAN soft power and cultural diplomacy. Findings from both analyses were then triangulated to construct a holistic understanding of how eco-halal tourism functions as a soft power mechanism.

3.5.3 Research Validity and Limitations

Validity was reinforced through data triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking among local respondents to confirm interpretation accuracy. However, the study is limited by its focus on a single case, Paisupok Lake which may reduce generalizability to other ASEAN contexts. Future comparative studies across multiple ASEAN destinations (e.g., Malaysia, Brunei, Thailand) are recommended to validate and expand the findings.

4 Result and Discussion

4.1 Visitor Preferences for Eco-Halal Wellness Tourism

The survey of 200 respondents revealed a strong inclination toward eco-halal tourism activities that combine wellness, environmental appreciation, and halal-compliant hospitality. Table 1 summarizes the respondents' preferred activities and facilities.

Table 1. Visitor preferences for halal wellness tourism in Pacet and Trawas (n= 200).

Activities / Facilities	Percentage (%)
Hot Spring Bathing	75%
Mountain Trekking	60%
Agro-Tourism	48%
Halal Food Availability	80%
Prayer Facilities	72%
Family-Friendly Amenities	65%
Relaxation & Stress Relief	62%
Spiritual Well-Being Activities	60%

Source: Primary Data, (2025).

The results show that halal food availability (80%) and prayer facilities (72%) remain the most critical determinants of destination satisfaction, confirming previous findings that highlight religious compliance as a non-negotiable aspect of Muslim travel behavior ([3]; [6]). At the same time, the substantial interest in wellness-based experiences, such as hot spring bathing (75%) and relaxation or stress-relief activities (62%), indicates a growing preference for destinations that integrate physical rejuvenation with spiritual well-being. This reflects the global shift toward halal wellness tourism, wherein leisure and faith-based values are perceived as complementary [7].

Comparable patterns were reported by [8] in their study of Paisupok Lake, Central Sulawesi, where visitors favored immersive experiences that blend natural serenity, comfort, and spirituality. These similarities suggest that rural halal wellness destinations such as Pacet and Trawas can attract a comparable market segment seeking balance between recreation, ethical consumption, and spiritual fulfillment.

4.2 Community Empowerment and Circular Practices

Interview findings identify three principal pathways through which eco-halal tourism fosters community empowerment:

1. **Local Economic Participation.** Residents are increasingly involved in providing halal culinary services, traditional crafts, and agro-tourism experiences. These activities generate inclusive livelihood opportunities and reduce dependence on external tourism operators.
2. **Cultural Continuity.** The integration of local arts and rituals, such as Tari Dero in Central Sulawesi and Seni Hadrah in East Java which enhances community pride and reinforces collective identity. This process illustrates how tourism can function as a medium for cultural preservation rather than commodification.
3. **Circular Economy Application.** Local enterprises have begun adopting environmentally conscious practices, including waste minimization, the reuse of local materials (e.g., brick-based architecture), and organic waste composting. These efforts align with [18] conceptualization of cultural heritage as part of a sustainable circular ecosystem.

Taken together, these outcomes demonstrate that eco-halal tourism serves as a living laboratory for community resilience, where local wisdom and sustainability innovations intersect. This supports [14] argument that community-based tourism achieves its greatest impact when local participation is combined with environmental stewardship.

4.3 Eco-Halal Tourism and ASEAN Soft Power Projection

The integration of halal and eco-tourism principles in destinations such as Paisupok Lake, Pacet, and Trawas offers significant implications for ASEAN's cultural diplomacy and image-building. Under the ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan (2016-2025), inclusivity and sustainability are identified as core pillars of regional cooperation. The present findings suggest that eco-halal tourism advances these priorities through three soft power mechanisms:

- **Attraction.** Positioning ASEAN as a culturally diverse yet unified region that embraces ethical, family-oriented, and spiritually conscious tourism.

- Values Projection. Halal-friendly and environmentally responsible destinations embody shared ASEAN norms of respect, moderation, and ethical consumption.
- Identity Formation. By empowering communities and celebrating local diversity, eco-halal tourism reflects ASEAN’s motto of “unity in diversity,” reinforcing its socio-cultural agenda ([10]; ([9]).

This aligns with [8], who argue that eco-halal glamping initiatives in Central Sulawesi contribute not only to local development but also to ASEAN’s soft power diplomacy by portraying rural Indonesia as part of a regional model of sustainable, faith-based tourism.

4.4. Theoretical and Practical Implications

From a theoretical perspective, the findings validate the multi-scalar linkage between community-based sustainability and ASEAN-level diplomacy. The Eco-Halal Tourism Model developed in this study illustrates a bottom-up soft power process, where local participation and sustainability practices contribute to ASEAN’s regional narrative of inclusivity, ethics, and resilience. From a practical standpoint, the study provides a roadmap for policymakers and tourism practitioners to:

- Integrate halal certification and wellness branding into local tourism programs.
- Promote community-owned enterprises that apply circular economy principles and equitable benefit-sharing.
- Position eco-halal destinations as flagship sites for ASEAN cooperation on sustainable and ethical tourism.

These recommendations reinforce the idea that tourism functions not only as an economic sector but also as a diplomatic instrument for strengthening ASEAN’s global visibility and cultural cohesion.

4.5. Discussion Summary

Table 2 shows the summary of this research’s findings.

Table 2. Key findings and theoretical contribution.

Core Themes	Key Findings	Theoretical Contribution
Visitor Preferences	High demand for halal- compliant and wellness- oriented services	Expand market understanding of muslim wellness tourism
Community Em- powerment	Economic inclusion, cultural pride, and local innovation	Strengthens community- based tourism framework
Circular Economy Practices	Adoption of reuse, recycling, and waste minimization	Extends sustainability dis- course in rural contexts
ASEAN Soft Power	Tourism as a tool for regional identity and diplomacy	Connects tourism with soft power and cultural diplomacy theory

Source: Author’s elaboration (2025).

5 Conclusion and Suggestions

5.1 Conclusion

Building upon the preceding discussion, this study positions eco-halal tourism in Central Sulawesi, particularly at Paisupok Lake as a concrete embodiment of ASEAN's sustainable and inclusive development vision. The findings reveal that eco-halal tourism not only meets the rising demand among Muslim travelers for ethical and nature-based experiences but also acts as a catalyst for community empowerment, cultural continuity, and environmental stewardship. Visitor survey results confirm that preferences for halal food, prayer facilities, and family-friendly activities coexist with a strong appreciation for environmental conservation and local culture. This intersection fosters a holistic tourism model that harmoniously integrates faith, nature, and community that reflects the principles of sustainability and inclusivity articulated in the ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan (2016-2025).

At the local level, Paisupok Lake illustrates a bottom-up model of soft power formation, wherein community-based initiatives strengthen social cohesion and advance responsible tourism narratives. At the regional level, eco-halal tourism operates as a soft power mechanism, enabling ASEAN to project values of diversity, inclusivity, and ethical coexistence to the global community. Theoretically, this research extends the discourse on tourism as cultural diplomacy by positioning halal and ecotourism as converging pathways for advancing ASEAN's socio-cultural identity. It demonstrates that soft power emerges not only from formal institutions and state diplomacy but also from community-led practices that embody shared regional values. In this sense, eco-halal tourism transcends its market orientation and becomes a cultural instrument of moral and environmental leadership, reinforcing ASEAN's image as a region of harmony, sustainability, and ethical growth on the global stage.

5.2. Suggestions and Future Research Directions

5.2.1 Policy-Level Recommendations

ASEAN policymakers should institutionalize eco-halal tourism guidelines that integrate sustainability, religious compliance, and community empowerment within regional tourism strategies. Regional cooperation mechanisms could develop cross-border eco-halal tourism routes, fostering shared ASEAN branding as both a Muslim-friendly and pluralistic region.

5.2.2 Community and Practice-Level Recommendations

Local tourism cooperatives and SMEs should receive targeted training in halal certification, eco-friendly operations, and digital marketing to enhance competitiveness and inclusivity. Encourage the adoption of circular economy principles, such as waste reduction, local sourcing, and sustainable infrastructure to ensure long-term ecological balance and economic resilience.

5.2.3. Academic and Research Recommendations

Future research can employ AI-driven sentiment or content analysis to examine how eco-halal destinations shape ASEAN's image and narrative in global tourism discourse. Comparative cross-country studies among ASEAN member states could reveal diverse cultural expressions of halal-based soft power and governance practices. Longitudinal case studies are recommended to explore how community participation and policy support evolve as eco-halal tourism matures within national and regional frameworks.

In conclusion, Paisupok Lake serves as both a microcosm of community-based eco-halal tourism and a symbolic bridge to ASEAN's broader soft power agenda. Its trajectory underscores that the future of halal tourism rests not solely on economic profitability but on its capacity to foster sustainability, intercultural understanding, and a shared regional identity.

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