

The Capacity of Tour Guides in Interpreting Marine Tourism-Based Tourist Attractions in South Sulawesi

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Abstract:

This study aims to analyze the capacity of tour guides in interpreting Marine Tourism-based attractions in South Sulawesi, focusing on two representative locations: Salemo Island (Pangkep Regency) and Pannikiang Island (Barru Regency). The region holds significant Marine Tourism potential due to its rich marine ecosystems, coastal cultural heritage, and unique local attractions. However, the role of tour guides in translating this potential into meaningful, informative, and emotionally engaging narratives remains underdeveloped. A qualitative descriptive research method was employed using a thematic analysis approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 3 (three) informants, participatory observation, and field documentation. Findings reveal that while several guides possess a basic understanding of ecological and cultural aspects, their interpretive delivery is often limited to one-way informational approaches, lacking visual aids and digital tools. There is a notable disparity in interpretive competency among guides, particularly in storytelling ability, two-way communication with tourists, and adaptability to environmental challenges such as adverse weather. Three main challenges were identified: the absence of adequate interpretive infrastructure, insufficient preparedness in managing on-site contingencies, and the lack of standardized interpretive training programs. To address these issues, the study emphasizes the importance of thematic training modules that include storytelling techniques, marine conservation principles, intercultural communication, and digital media integration. This research contributes to the discourse on sustainable Marine Tourism by positioning tour guides as key agents of educational engagement and environmental awareness. Strategic recommendations are proposed to strengthen interpretive capacity and foster the development of inclusive, meaningful, and environmentally responsible tourism experiences in South Sulawesi.

Keywords: Interpretive Capacity, Marine Tourism, South Sulawesi, Sustainable Tourism, Tour Guiding

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis kapasitas pemandu wisata dalam menginterpretasikan daya tarik wisata bahari berbasis *Marine Tourism* di Sulawesi Selatan, dengan fokus pada dua lokasi representatif, yakni Pulau Salemo (Kabupaten Pangkep) dan Pulau Pannikiang (Kabupaten Barru). Wilayah ini memiliki potensi wisata bahari yang tinggi, mencakup keanekaragaman ekosistem laut, kekayaan budaya pesisir, dan keunikan atraksi lokal yang berdaya tarik tinggi. Namun demikian, kemampuan pemandu dalam mengonstruksi narasi interpretatif yang informatif, edukatif, dan persuasif masih beragam. Penelitian menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dengan pendekatan tematik melalui observasi, wawancara mendalam terhadap 3 (tiga) informan dan dokumentasi. Hasil menunjukkan sebagian pemandu telah memahami aspek ekologis dan budaya lokal, namun penyampaian interpretasi masih bersifat satu arah dan minim inovasi visual maupun digital. Tiga tantangan utama ditemukan, yaitu keterbatasan infrastruktur interpretatif, rendahnya kesiapan menghadapi dinamika lingkungan, serta belum adanya standar pelatihan berbasis interpretasi. Penelitian merekomendasikan pelatihan tematik yang menekankan *storytelling*, konservasi laut, komunikasi lintas budaya, dan pemanfaatan teknologi digital untuk memperkuat peran pemandu wisata dalam mendukung pengembangan wisata bahari yang inklusif, edukatif, dan berkelanjutan di Sulawesi Selatan.

Kata Kunci: Interpretasi Wisata, Pariwisata Berkelanjutan, Pemandu Wisata, Sulawesi Selatan, Wisata Bahari.

Introduction

Indonesia is the largest archipelagic country, straddling the equator and along global trade routes, and holds significant potential for marine tourism development thanks to its natural and cultural riches. The government continues to encourage tourism development to attract international visitors as a source of foreign exchange. The natural beauty and coastal culture are key attractions, supporting tourism development that impacts the local economy. Development focuses typically on the panorama, ecosystem, arts and culture, and the unique characteristics of each region's communities. Tourist arrivals have an impact on local residents' income. This impact stems from tourist consumption in hotels, restaurants, and transportation, which influences household wages, taxes, savings, consumption, and net income. As a result, national tax revenues also increase (Seetanah, 2018; Tohmo, 2018).

One of the maritime-based cultural activities found in South Sulawesi, such as the Ara community in Bulukumba Regency, performs a number of rituals during the boat-building process. The boat-building process involves several ceremonies, starting with the Ana'bang Kalabiseng (saving and paying) ceremony, the Annattara ceremony, and the Ammosi (giving center) ceremony, which includes a series of events. Pangkep and Barru Regencies also have strong maritime cultural potential. Coastal communities are generally involved in fishing and shipping, creating a close connection between their daily lives and the sea. Makassar, the capital of South Sulawesi, also has a significant influence on maritime culture. As a center of trade and shipping, Makassar has become a meeting place for various ethnicities and maritime cultures. Maritime traditions in Makassar encompass various aspects of community life related to the sea, including seafood-based cuisine and maritime festivals.

Tourism in Indonesia has shown positive growth in recent years, as evidenced by numerous promotions for its development. The diversity of cultures, customs, flora, and fauna found across the thousands of islands throughout Indonesia makes Indonesia a country with significant potential for development as a tourist destination. The tourism sector in South Sulawesi Province offers significant potential for development into a tourism industry, as the province's administrative division consists of 21 regencies and 3 cities, each with its own distinct tourism offerings.

In recent decades, tourism has become an important part of the Indonesian economy. Indonesia has a wealth of tourist attractions to offer, showcasing its richness and cultural diversity, including temples, historical museums, and art markets showcasing local crafts. Marine tourism, on the other hand, utilizes attractions such as the sea and beaches as the main attraction, attracting tourists. According to Junaid (2018), marine tourism is currently growing rapidly, along with increasing tourist interest in visiting destinations with coastal and marine potential. Destinations with marine attractions have a great potential to become global tourist destinations, especially in Indonesia, which is rich in marine areas. However, achieving this requires strategic steps and sustainable policies. Understanding the principles, objectives, and management of marine tourism is an important foundation for optimal destination development.

Marine tourism marketing and promotion encompasses a range of strategies and activities designed to attract tourists to coastal and marine locations through various communication channels. This includes developing a destination brand identity, advertising campaigns, online and

offline promotions, and collaboration with travel agents and the media. The goal of this marketing and promotion is to raise the profile of marine tourism destinations, attract more tourists, and highlight the location's attractiveness by emphasizing the natural beauty of the sea and coastline (Said et al., 2024). Nazhima (2019) stated that the development of tourism products that focus on marine ecotourism aims to create activities that support nature conservation.

Recognizing the potential of maritime areas spread across provinces and regencies/cities endowed with marine resources, the government is developing these areas as tourist attractions. Bali has undeniably become Indonesia's tourism hotspot, and the government recognizes the need to develop tourism in other regions, particularly maritime-based provinces and regencies/cities, to become leading destinations. This is being done to attract and distribute tourists throughout Indonesia, thereby increasing tourist visits (Islahuddin et al., 2022).

In line with developments this decade related to the variety of destinations available, maritime-related tourist attractions in Indonesia are increasingly diverse, such as the presence of cruise ships and yachts. In this regard, Amirullah et al. (2024) suggest that education in tourism is becoming increasingly important, in line with the global trend where tourists increasingly seek experiences that deepen their knowledge of nature and contribute to its preservation.

The role of a tour guide is at the forefront of a tourist journey, where the tourist's experience of visiting a tourist destination is highly complex and depends on the services provided. The interpretive activities of tour guides are one of the factors that contribute to a memorable experience. This study investigates the role of tour guides in the development of sustainable tourism. Jamaliah et al., (2024) suggest that interpretations provided by tour guides in marine tourism play a crucial role in enhancing tourists' understanding of the marine environment and encouraging conservation behavior. Arismayanti (2019) states that tour guides function as mediators between tourists and the marine environment they visit. Although tour guides are crucial actors in the industry, their contribution to sustainability has been largely overlooked. This study explores how tour guides can enhance the tourist experience, manage resources, and promote the local economy to achieve sustainable tourism goals. Blamey (2001) also stated that the capacity of tour guides is the key to the success of sustainable tourism destinations.

This research has significant significance for the development of a sustainable tourism industry in South Sulawesi, particularly in the marine tourism sector. Marine tourism is a dynamic sector that contributes significantly to economic development, particularly in coastal areas. Jugović et al., (2011) emphasize that the concept of sustainable tourism balances economic growth with environmental protection. With its abundant marine resources and stunning natural beauty, South Sulawesi has great potential as a leading marine tourism destination. However, the main challenge faced is the lack of capacity of tour guides to interpret tourist attractions in an effective and engaging manner for tourists. Gaps in information delivery by tour guides can lead to a less than optimal experience for tourists and hinder the development of the tourism industry as a whole. Therefore, this research is crucial in identifying the skills and competencies needed by tour guides to provide a better experience for tourists.

Furthermore, this research not only focuses on improving the capacity of tour guides in communication and interpretation, but also considers their role in preserving the environment. The capacity of a tour guide includes not only technical skills, but also cultural understanding, communication skills, and in-depth local knowledge (Black & Weiler, 2005). Marine tourism has a direct impact on marine ecosystems, and tour guides with a deep understanding of conservation

principles can act as environmental conservation agents. With the right interpretive approach, they can raise tourists' awareness of the importance of maintaining marine ecosystem sustainability and encourage responsible tourism behavior. Therefore, this research makes an important contribution to creating a balance between tourism economic development and environmental sustainability, thereby creating positive long-term impacts for local communities.

This research also has broad implications for the development of marine tourism management policies and strategies in South Sulawesi. The results of this study can be the basis for designing training programs for tour guides, both in terms of improving communication competency and understanding of marine-based tourist attractions. Using observation-based research methods and in-depth interviews, this study provides more comprehensive insights into the factors that influence the effectiveness of tourist attraction interpretation by guides. The findings of this study are expected to assist local governments, tourism industry players, and local communities in creating more attractive, sustainable, and globally competitive tourist destinations. Therefore, based on the concepts above and the empirical facts encountered, prospective researchers are interested in developing a research title entitled "The Capacity of Tour Guides in Interpreting Marine Tourism-Based Tourist Attractions in South Sulawesi."

This study aims to analyze and evaluate the capacity of tour guides in interpreting Marine Tourism-based tourist attractions in South Sulawesi. specifically, the objectives to be achieved in this study are; 1) To identify and understand the level of knowledge of tour guides regarding Marine Tourism-based tourist attractions in South Sulawesi, including aspects of natural resources, coastal culture, and other marine tourism potentials. 2) To analyze the role and ability of tour guides in enhancing the tourist experience through delivering informative, interesting, and educational interpretations of marine tourism attractions. 3) To identify the challenges and obstacles faced by tour guides in the process of interpreting Marine Tourism-based tourist attractions, both in terms of human resources, supporting facilities, and environmental conditions of tourist destinations.

Method

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to deeply explore the capacity of tour guides to interpret marine-based tourist attractions in South Sulawesi. This approach was chosen because it can reveal the meanings, experiences, and interpretive practices of tour guides in a real-world context (Sugiyono, 2019).

The research was conducted at two representative marine tourism locations: Salemo Island (Pangkep Regency) and Pannikiang Island (Barru Regency). These two locations were chosen because they have distinct yet complementary characteristics, reflecting the diverse marine tourism potential in South Sulawesi. The research subjects included local tour guides, destination managers, and tourists. Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on the criteria of experience, direct involvement, and professional qualifications. Three certified advanced tour guides were designated as key informants, while destination managers and tourists served as supporting informants.

Primary data was collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and field documentation of guiding activities. Meanwhile, secondary data was obtained from documents, reports, and literature related to marine tourism development and tour guide competency. The data collection process was conducted during the field period between [add implementation time if applicable, for example: May to August 2024].

The primary research instrument was the researcher herself, assisted by a semi-structured interview guide and observation sheets. The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis, which included data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data validity was strengthened through triangulation of sources and techniques to ensure the consistency and validity of the research results.

Results and Discussion

This research was conducted in two main locations that represent the characteristics of developing marine tourism destinations in South Sulawesi Province: Salemo Island in Pangkajene and Pulau (Pangkep) Regency and Pannikiang Island in Barru Regency. These two islands were chosen purposively because they have unique characteristics that reflect the dynamic potential of marine tourism, both from an ecological, social, and economic aspect. Salemo Island is known as one of the islands with high marine biodiversity and community activities that still maintain maritime traditions, such as traditional fishing and the use of local fishing boats as a means of tourist transportation. Meanwhile, Pannikiang Island has its own appeal as a conservation area and an important habitat for various species of seabirds and other marine biota, making it a potential destination for the development of conservation-based marine ecotourism.

These two locations were chosen not only for their natural beauty, but also because they represent the complex interactions between humans and the marine environment in the context of sustainable tourism. The presence of local tour guides, who play an active role in providing information, raising tourists' environmental awareness, and guiding responsible tourism behavior, was an important factor in selecting the research locations. Tour guides on both islands serve not only as guides or travel facilitators, but also as interpreters, bridging local knowledge with tourists' understanding of the importance of marine ecosystem preservation.

From a travel industry perspective, these two destinations offer a concrete example of how marine tourism activities develop organically through local community participation. The management of tourist attractions such as snorkeling, diving, mangrove exploration, and educational activities about marine life on both islands demonstrates the collaborative efforts of the community, local government, and tourism industry players. This strengthens Salemo Island and Pannikiang Island's position as concrete examples of community-based tourism development aligned with sustainability principles.

In addition to social and cultural factors, ecological considerations were also a key factor in selecting the research locations. The two islands have distinct marine ecosystem characteristics, allowing researchers to compare patterns of tourist interaction with the environment in a broader context. Salemo Island, for example, has relatively accessible coral reefs and is a popular tourist destination for underwater activities. Conversely, Pannikiang Island is known for its calmer waters, suitable for observing coastal ecosystems, making it an ideal location for research on conservation-based tourism. These differences in characteristics allow for a comprehensive analysis of how the management of marine tourism attractions adapts to local ecological and social conditions.

Tour Guides' Understanding of Marine Tourism Attractions

Table 1. Observation Checklist of Tour Guides' Understanding of Marine Tourism Attractions

No	Observed Aspects	Indicator	Guide	Fulfilled	Information
1	Understanding marine ecosystems	Explaining coral reefs, marine biota, mangroves, ecological functions	Asdar	✓	Providing factual explanations while guiding in the snorkeling area of Samalona Island
2	Delivery of local cultural narratives	Conveying folklore, island history, fishing community customs	Informant	✓	Explaining the origins of the Bajo and the traditions of the fishing village of Jinato Island
3	Direct interaction with local communities	Inviting tourists to visit local homes, have dialogues, try local activities	Informant	✓	Tourists are invited to enter residents' homes and chat on the pier.
4	Story/narrative based interpretive approach	Using legends, personal stories, or metaphors to explain tourist attractions	Informant	✓	Bringing personal stories about marine conservation and guiding experiences
5	Use of interpretation aids (brochures, images, digital tools)	Display visuals (maps, illustrations, underwater images, etc.) while guiding	All	✗	No visual aids, just use verbal explanations
6	Participatory approach	Invite tourists to ask questions, discuss, or do educational activities	Informant	⚠ Part	Sometimes it invites discussions, but not all sessions are participatory.
7	Adaptation to weather and tourist conditions	Changing the route or duration of guiding during bad weather / adjusting to the elderly and children	Informant	✓	Reduce snorkeling time and replace it with beach observation
8	The existence of interpretation support facilities (information posts, docks)	Infrastructure is available to support guiding activities.	All	✗	Minimal pier, no information center or educational boards
9	Scientific and structured interpretation techniques	The explanation is delivered in a coherent manner, in accordance with interpretation theory (thematic, relevant, meaningful)	All	⚠ Limited	Still predominantly informative in nature, not yet fully thematically interpretive
10	Readiness of interpreted materials	The facilitator brings notes, a list of topics, or presentation materials.	All	✗	No evidence of written or systematic preparation of materials was found.

Source: Researcher, 2025

Interviews and field observations indicate that tour guides' understanding of the marine tourism attractions in South Sulawesi has developed quite well, although it remains empirical and has not yet been formulated within a scientific interpretation framework. In general, the guides understand that the main attractions of marine tourism in this region include the richness of the marine ecosystem, the beauty of the beaches, the diversity of biota, and the socio-cultural uniqueness of the coastal communities. This understanding is evident in the informants' eloquent descriptions of natural physical elements such as coral reefs, white sand, and the functions of the marine ecosystem.

Research results obtained through in-depth interviews and field observations indicate that the capacity of marine tourism guides in South Sulawesi has undergone significant development, particularly in terms of understanding the potential and attractions of coastal areas. In this context, marine tourism appeal is understood as a combination of the richness of marine ecosystems, the

beauty of coastal landscapes, marine biodiversity, and the social and cultural life of coastal communities.

One of the tour guides demonstrated a strong fundamental understanding of the physical and ecological elements of the tourist area. In several guiding sessions, he fluently and coherently explained the ecological functions of coral reefs, the interactions between marine life, and the geographical conditions of the local waters. He also shared interesting facts such as how white sand formations naturally form and how ocean currents around island clusters contribute to the distribution of nutrients to the marine ecosystem.

However, despite his extensive knowledge, Asdar's method of conveying information remains descriptive and one-way. He tends to convey what tourists see, for example, the colorful fish, the shape of the coral, or the clarity of the water, without delving deeper into the meaning of these phenomena. This indicates that his interpretive capacity remains at the informative, rather than transformative, stage. In the context of the theory of tourism interpretation proposed by Tilden (1977), ideal interpretation does not stop at description, but rather seeks to uncover hidden meanings and build personal relationships between tourists and tourist attractions.

This situation indicates that the guides' cognitive capacity, particularly in articulating the ecological and philosophical values of natural resources, is still limited by field experience that has not been integrated with conceptual understanding based on environmental science and interpretive communication. Guides are not yet equipped with sufficient tools to construct a narrative framework that can bridge the gap between fact and meaning, between information and the transformation of understanding.

In contrast to the informant's approach, other guides demonstrated a more contextual and in-depth guiding style. In several field sessions on Jinato Island, the informant not only described the natural conditions but also engaged tourists in direct interactions with coastal communities, particularly the fishing community and the Bajo tribe. He interjected narratives about local traditions, stilt houses, environmentally friendly fishing techniques, and cultural values entrenched within the island's communities. This approach aligns with the concept of eco-cultural interpretation, which emphasizes the importance of the interconnectedness of ecological and social systems in shaping meaningful tourism experiences.

Through a personal and contextual storytelling style, the informant successfully transforms the guiding process into a cross-cultural learning experience. Tourists become not just spectators, but active participants in the appreciation of values. They don't simply observe fishing boats, but understand how they were built, who used them, and what they mean for the survival of the local community. This is where the educational and transformative dimensions of interpretive tourism truly come into play. Experiences like these have the potential to foster empathy, reflection, and even change attitudes toward marine conservation.

However, such good practices are still not evenly distributed across the region. In the case of the informant, although he possessed good communication skills and was able to capture tourists' attention through the use of popular language, his approach remained conventional in terms of media delivery. He did not use visual aids, interactive maps, or any digital media to support the narrative. This is a significant shortcoming, as it has been shown that the use of visual media can increase tourists' information retention rates by up to 60%.

The lack of educational media in the informant's guiding practice indicates that technological innovation has not yet become part of the basic skills of guides in this region. Yet, in today's digital

era, multimedia-based tourism interpretation has greater appeal and can reach different learning styles of tourists (visual, audio, and kinesthetic). The absence of supporting media also limits the space for narrative exploration that could enrich the tourism experience.

Overall, the results of this study indicate that the capacity of marine tourism guides in South Sulawesi spans a broad spectrum. On the one hand, they possess a strong practical understanding of local potential and the ability to convey information fluently. However, on the other hand, their interpretive capacity—the ability to construct meaning, link ecological and cultural contexts, and utilize narrative-based and technology-based educational approaches—still needs systematic improvement.

One major challenge is the lack of training standards that integrate the thematic interpretation approach into guide training curriculum. Most training remains technical and limited to service aspects or route mastery. However, to make guiding a non-formal educational tool, capacity building is needed in basic ecology, cultural anthropology, and narrative and visual communication techniques.

Interpretive capacity isn't just about what a guide says, but how they craft meaning and build a relationship between tourists and the destination. When narratives about the sea can engage tourists' emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions, the guiding process becomes a transformative experience. In this case, the guide becomes more than just a conveyor of information, but also a facilitator of understanding and an agent of change, fostering ecological awareness and cultural appreciation.

Therefore, improving guide competency cannot be done in isolation but requires a holistic approach. Thematic training combining interpretation theory, local narratives, information technology, and a participatory approach needs to be developed as part of the marine tourism human resource development policy in this region. Furthermore, the integration of local knowledge into interpretation of design also needs to be strengthened so that tourists can experience the authenticity and uniqueness of the destination more deeply.

Improving the capacity of guides will also impact the image of a destination. When tourists experience experiences that are not only enjoyable but also enriching and personal, the destination will be remembered not just for its beauty but for its profound meaning. This is a crucial asset in developing sustainable, educational, and community-based tourism.

The Role of Interpretation in Enhancing the Tourist Experience

Table 2 Quality of Marine Tourism Interpretation

No	Interpretation Indicators	Criteria	Yes	No	Field Notes
1	The guide delivers local narratives (legends/folk tales)	The narrative is delivered in a complete and contextual manner.	✓	✗	The legend of Samalona Island is told while snorkeling
2	Tourists show emotional reactions (enthusiastic/amazed)	There are verbal/non-verbal expressions of involvement	✓	✗	Tourists seemed to be actively asking questions and nodding as the story progressed.
3	The guide relates scientific knowledge to local phenomena.	Delivered in easy to understand language	✓	✗	Explanation of the ecological function of coral reefs by Asdar
4	There is use of cultural analogies/symbols in interpretation	Used in explaining conservation values	✓	✗	Informants use the analogy of "ocean lung"
5	Tourists show reflection on environmental issues	There are critical questions/comments	✓	✗	Tourists ask about the impact of mass tourism
6	The guide uses a personal/reflective approach	There are personal stories/field experiences	✓	✗	Informant shares diving experience and finds reef damage

No	Interpretation Indicators	Criteria	Yes	No	Field Notes
7	Supporting media used (pictures, visual aids)	Brochures or photos are used during guiding	✓	✗	Asdar shows photos of coral reef damage before and after reclamation
8	The guide's language and intonation are interesting and communicative	Non-monotonous tone, communicative language	✓	✗	There was laughter and full attention during the guiding.
9	Interpretation time is proportional and not boring	Adjusted to tour duration	✓	✗	Each session is no more than 10 minutes but is packed
10	There is a follow-up or return question from the guide	The guide asks the tourists for their opinion.	✓	✗	The informant asked: "If you were the one living on this island, what would your attitude be?"

Source: Researcher, 2025

Observations show that a tour guide's interpretive capacity extends beyond technical skills in conveying information, but rather into a multidimensional competency encompassing communicative, ecological, cultural, and pedagogical aspects. This means that an effective guide must be able to integrate:

- 1) Local and scientific knowledge
- 2) Ability to convey narratively and affectively
- 3) Awareness of the role of environmental education
- 4) Interpersonal and visual communication skills

In this regard, interpretive capacity is a key indicator of the quality of guides in marine tourism destinations. In regions like South Sulawesi, which boasts rich marine biodiversity and culture, this role is even more significant.

These observational findings consistently emphasize that effective interpretation is contextual, relevant, and emotionally evocative. When guides connect local stories to the marine ecological context, tourists transform from mere recipients of information to meaning-making participants. This creates a multi-layered tourism experience: informative, emotional, and reflective.

The guide's role as a mediator of meaning also appears dominant, particularly in conveying conservation messages through personal stories. In the experiential interpretation approach, narrative serves not only as a communication medium but also as a tool for fostering ecological empathy. Tourists' critical and inquisitive responses demonstrate a growing environmental awareness, potentially encouraging more responsible tourism behavior.

In the sustainable tourism paradigm, the three main pillars of economic, social, and environmental sustainability must be maintained in balance. A sound interpretation, as demonstrated in the findings of this study, plays a role in strengthening the social and environmental dimensions through:

- 1) Friendly and contextual knowledge transfer.
Helping tourists understand the complexity of marine ecosystems without making it technically complicated.
- 2) Increased empathy and environmental awareness
Tourists not only have fun, but also go home with new understanding.
- 3) Behavioral changes
Potential for the formation of conservative and responsible attitudes towards the environment.

This strengthens the idea of "environmental learning through tourism", namely that tourism activities packaged with an interpretive approach can be an informal but effective medium for environmental education.

In the context of Samalona Island, for example, local narratives combined with conservation stories create a layered experience: informative, emotional, reflective, and educational. This is the ideal form of sustainable marine tourism.

Furthermore, the power of local narratives in conveying place identity also shapes tourists' perceptions of destinations. They no longer view islands as merely tourist destinations, but as cultural and ecological spaces with intrinsic value. This has implications for strengthening the image of educational and sustainable destinations.

The image of marine tourism destinations is often trapped in visual narratives: blue seas, white sand, and underwater beauty. However, a strong interpretation can shift tourists' perspectives from visual exoticism to an educational appreciation of the place's identity.

Local narratives and ecological interpretations indirectly shape the destination's brand image as not only beautiful but also meaningful and valuable. This is a process of destination rebranding through an interpretive approach, which ultimately supports ecological restoration efforts and sustainable image building.

If previously islands like Samalona were positioned as mass tourism destinations, then through interpretive strategies, their position can shift to become cross-cultural and ecological learning spaces, which educate tourists without having to be patronizing.

The role of interpretation in marine tourism is not merely a complement to guiding activities, but a central element in shaping meaningful experiences and fostering ecological awareness. Fieldwork demonstrates that an emotional narrative approach, combined with contextualized scientific knowledge, can create a tourism experience that is not only enjoyable but also educational. Therefore, developing the interpretive capacity of tour guides is crucial in efforts to build inclusive, reflective, and sustainable marine tourism.

Empirical observations show that the quality of interpretation directly impacts the depth of tourists' experiences during marine tourism activities. In several guiding sessions, interpretations delivered through a narrative approach have been shown to foster emotional engagement between tourists and the destination. For example, when the informant recounted the legend of Samalona Island, tourists' responses demonstrated strong emotional engagement and curiosity. This emphasizes that contextual interpretive narratives can transform tourists' perceptions from just "tourists" to "participants in meaning."

Conceptually, effectively serves interpretation as a tool for cognitive and affective transformation, enabling tourists not only to acquire information but also to experience a sense of connection to the places they visit. In this context, guides act as mediators of meaning, bridging scientific knowledge with local values. Asdar, for example, when explaining the ecological function of coral reefs as coastal protection, successfully transformed tourists' perspectives on the marine environment: from merely aesthetic objects to ecological systems with conservative values. This phenomenon underscores the importance of experiential interpretation as a means of non-formal environmental learning.

The informant's approach also demonstrates a strong interpretive dimension through personal and reflective storytelling, as he recounts the impact of destructive fishing on changes in the marine ecosystem. Tourist responses, which demonstrate reflection and environmental concern, demonstrate the interpretation's success in fostering environmental empathy. Thus, interpretation in the context of marine tourism serves not only as a mechanism for conveying

information but also as an environmental education instrument capable of triggering tourists' ecological awareness.

Interpretation in marine tourism activities has been proven to be a powerful tool for creating meaningful experiences. Through contextual and emotional narratives, guides are able to transform information into reflective awareness, strengthening tourists' connections with the destination. Thus, strengthening interpretive capacity not only impacts tourist satisfaction but also fosters a sustainable and educational destination image.

From Table 02, there are 10 indicators which overall can be grouped into three main themes:

1) Narrative and Emotional Aspects

Indicators: 1, 2, 4, 6, 10

Interpretations involving local stories (such as the Samalona legend) and the guide's personal stories have been shown to build emotional connections. This demonstrates the importance of storytelling and personal reflection as effective informal learning methods. The guide's counter-questions ("What if you lived on this island?") create a space for empathy and stimulate reflection, a dialogic approach to guiding.

2) Cognitive and Scientific Aspects

Indicators: 3, 5, 7

Scientific explanations of the ocean's ecological functions, combined with visual media, enhance tourists' cognitive dimensions. The use of simple, non-technocratic language is key to successfully conveying scientific information. Tourist responses to questions about the impacts of mass tourism indicate the emergence of critical awareness resulting from contextual interpretation.

3) Communication Aspects and Interaction Dynamics

Indicators: 8, 9

The use of communicative language and an engaging tone of voice demonstrate that the quality of interpersonal communication plays a significant role in creating a pleasant experience. A short interpretation time also ensures that the message is conveyed concisely but not tiringly.

These three themes demonstrate that effective interpretation is holistic: engaging emotions, stimulating cognition, and building social relationships. A tour guide's ability to manage these three aspects is the foundation of high-quality guiding in the context of marine tourism.

Although most of the indicators have been met, there are challenges that need attention for further development:

- 1) Reliance on individual narratives: The effectiveness of interpretation currently still depends on the initiative and experience of each guide. There is no structured standardization of interpretation as part of the official training system.
- 2) Limitations of interpretive media: The use of visual media does exist, but it's limited. Not all guides have supporting devices such as tablets, interactive maps, or short videos that could enhance their presentations.
- 3) Lack of systematic evaluation from destination management: There has not been a feedback and monitoring system that measures the effectiveness of interpretation from the tourist perspective on a periodic basis.

This challenge highlights the importance of developing a competency-based interpretive training curriculum specifically designed for marine tour guides. This training should encompass narrative, ecological, pedagogical, and presentation technology aspects.

Challenges in Interpreting Marine Tourism Attractions

Table 3 Challenges in Interpreting Marine Tourism Attractions

No	Observed Aspects	Indicator	Yes	No	Field Notes
1	The dock infrastructure supports guiding activities.	Safe dock, easy access, shelter available	✗	✓	Lanjangan Pier is narrow and sways during high tide
2	The guide is able to modify the plan in extreme weather conditions.	Use alternative interpretation strategies	✓	✗	Asdar turned the sea session into an on-shore mini talk
3	Visual aids are available during interpretation.	Posters, tablets, image media	✗	✓	Only one guide brought a manual map
4	Two-way interaction between guide and tourist	Tourists are invited to discuss/ask questions	✓	✗	Occurs in sessions with Informants, others are still monologic
5	The guide is prepared to face route changes.	Backup scenarios available	✓	✗	Emergency scenario only owned by 2 of 6 guides
6	Use of foreign languages according to tourists' needs	The guide uses active English	✗	✓	Generally passive or a mix of local language-English
7	Tourists are seen actively involved in the interpretation	Have questions, comments, or discussions?	✓	✗	Only happened in 3 out of 8 sessions
8	The guide uses storytelling techniques	Local and personal narratives are presented	✓	✗	Only 2 guides were consistent with storytelling
9	Availability of seating/shade during interpretation	Supporting tourist comfort	✗	✓	Tourists are seen standing for a long time during the beach session.
10	Punctuality and session management	Proportional and effective guiding time	✓	✗	On-shore sessions are more structured than sea sessions.

Source: Researcher, 2025

The results of field observations, as outlined in Table 03, demonstrate a number of challenges that systematically hinder the interpretive process. Based on an analysis of 10 observation indicators, three main dimensions of challenges can be grouped: (1) structural, (2) natural environment, and (3) guide competence. These three dimensions do not stand alone, but rather influence each other and reinforce the complexity of the problems in guiding practices in the field.

Tourism interpretation is an integral part of a meaningful tourism experience. In the context of marine tourism, the guide's role as interpreter is not only about conveying information but also creating meaning that enables tourists to understand, appreciate, and connect with the marine environment and local culture. However, interpretation practices in the field often face complex challenges stemming not only from the guide's personal competence but also from structural aspects, the environment, and the expectations of modern tourists.

Structural aspects include the physical conditions of tourist sites that affect the smoothness of interpretation, such as piers, shelters, visual aids, and tourist comfort facilities. Data shows that most guiding locations, particularly Lanjukang and Salemo Islands, have narrow piers that are unstable during high tides. This instability creates significant distractions for tourists. Instead of paying attention to the guide's explanations, tourists' focus is diverted to personal safety. In addition to the piers, the lack of complementary facilities such as seating and shade is also a concern. During interpretation sessions on the beach, tourists were seen standing for too long under the hot sun without shelter, resulting in decreased levels of focus and comfort. The lack of visual aids was also a major obstacle. Of the six guides observed, only one carried a manual map as an aid. There was no use of digital media, such as tablets or interactive images, which can strengthen the transfer of meaning through multisensory stimulation.

This situation indicates a lack of integration between spatial design and interpretation strategies. Modern interpretation demands spatial design that supports active and comfortable tourist engagement. Without synergy between place design and narrative content, interpretive messages risk losing their effectiveness.

Observational data shows that the physical conditions of tourist sites, particularly piers and shelters, are inadequate to support interpretive activities. Minimal facilities divert tourists' focus from interpretive content to aspects of comfort and safety, as seen on Salemo Island, Pangkajene and Regency Islands. In the Visitor Experience Management theory of Moscardo et al., (2004), a meaningful experience is only created if tourists' basic needs are first met.

Based on the ten indicators in the observation checklist, it was found that most of the challenges are multidimensional and interconnected. These challenges can be grouped into three broad categories:

- 1) Structural challenges, which include physical infrastructure such as docks, shelters, visual aids, and the convenience of guiding locations.
- 2) Environmental challenges, namely uncertain natural conditions such as extreme weather and sudden route changes.
- 3) Human competency challenges include adaptive abilities, use of storytelling, mastery of foreign languages, and the capacity for two-way interaction with tourists.

The combination of these three dimensions directly impacts the quality of interpretation. As demonstrated in field notes, the unstable pier on Lanjukang Island made tourists focus more on safety than on absorbing the interpretation's message. Similarly, the lack of seating during beach sessions caused physical discomfort and reduced tourists' focus on the guiding content.

Conclusion

The research results show that tour guides in South Sulawesi's understanding of the potential of marine tourism attractions is at a basic to intermediate level. They are able to explain physical and ecological elements such as coral reefs, marine life, and coastal vegetation, and are knowledgeable about the local customs and culture of coastal communities, such as the Bajo tribe and traditional fishermen. This demonstrates that the guides are familiar with the social and environmental context of the destination.

Several guides, such as Informan and Informan, have demonstrated the potential to employ interpretive strategies based on storytelling and a reflective approach. The narratives they construct facilitate two-way dialogue and create a more meaningful tourism experience, where tourists not only receive information but also engage emotionally and cognitively. This approach emphasizes that the guide's role is not merely as a transmitter of information, but also as a facilitator of transformation in tourists' understanding of destinations and environmental issues. However, this practice has not been standardized across the board, and significant differences in the quality of interpretation between guides remain.

Furthermore, this study identified three main challenges affecting the quality of marine tourism interpretation: limited supporting infrastructure, guides' low preparedness for dynamic environmental conditions, and interpretive competency gaps. The absence of visual aids, unrepresentative dock conditions, and minimal educational facilities contribute to suboptimal information delivery. Furthermore, their ability to adapt to extreme weather and two-way communication skills remain limited. Therefore, enhancing guides' capacity through competency-

based training in interpretation, marine conservation, and the use of digital technology is a strategic step to strengthen their role in developing sustainable, inclusive, and educational marine tourism in South Sulawesi.

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