

# *A Visit with the Bajo People of Indonesia: Is this sustainable tourism?*

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## Introduction

The Bajo people (referred to as the Bajo in the case, and also known as the Bajau) reside in eastern Indonesia in communities connected to the sea and spread out throughout several regions (Kusuma, et al., 2017). Many Bajo live in Southeast Sulawesi, the southeastern peninsula of the large island of Sulawesi located east of Borneo that is known for its coral reefs and dive sites, including the Islands of Buton (Indonesia Tourist Information, 2019). The Bajo reside in villages built over the ocean. These villages can either be connected to the shore or located out in the ocean, requiring a boat for access. Cultural tourists often want to visit Bajo villages to learn about their way of life. The Bajo living in the villages built on rocks in the ocean that are still connected to land are more integrated into typical Indonesian life than those living out in the ocean. The Bajo villages located out in the ocean are more marginalized and the residents live on the fringes of society. Due to their limited access, tourist excursions to those villages are more complicated to conduct, but offer unique experiences.

This case study explores a situation involving some of the ways that the Bajo in eastern Indonesia make a living using a variety of fishing techniques and salvaging wreckage from the sea, as observed during a visit to one of their villages by tour operators that try to operate in a sustainable manner. This case offers information about sustainable tourism to provide a context for the case, including a focus on sustainability, stakeholder theory, and community-based tourism. It also includes information about Indonesia, the Bajo, the dilemma involved with possibly providing tours to places where such situations can occur, and the possible implications.

## Background

### *Sustainable Tourism*

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2005), sustainability principles refer to the environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development, and a suitable balance must be established between these three dimensions to guarantee its long-term sustainability." As noted by several scholars (Elkington, 1994; Slaper & Hall, 2011), sustainable tourism centers on seeking an equilibrium between, people, planet, and profit. Sustainable

tourism is also expected to be ethical (UNWTO, 2019). In the context of sustainable tourism, objectives are varied and the aim is to balance the goals of economic growth, environmental conservation, gender mainstreaming, education, and good governance (United States Agency for International Development, 2019). The United States Agency for International Development (USAID, 2019) works to incorporate tourism into its actions by doing the following: encouraging the reduction of poverty via effective enterprise development and sharing profits with communities; providing education and training to go along with tourism; promoting gender equality in tourism-related activities; safeguarding environmental conservation and preservation with regard to the natural resources that tourism depends upon; and developing collaborative partnerships with developing countries, donors, and private partners (USAID, 2019). Tourism activities connected with these kinds of initiatives may involve a variety of stakeholders and include cultural tourism, volunteer tourism, and ecotourism, and require tour guides with a focus on interpretation (see definitions in Figure 1).

### *Indonesia and the Islands of Buton*

Indonesia is the fourth most populated country in the world, with over 260 million people, and is composed of more than 12,000 islands spread out over a distance that is wider than the United States (U.S.) (CIA, 2017). Most of the islands are uninhabited, and over 50 percent of the country lives on the island of Java. Most of the other inhabited islands are more sparsely populated, and there are hundreds of different cultural groups with many ways of life that each have their own local languages, but the Indonesian language unifies the country. The ocean plays a large part in the lives of many, including those who work as fisherman, seaweed farmers, shipping company employees, offshore oil platform workers, tour operators, and scuba diving tour operators.

Tourism is important to Indonesia, with approximately 1.3 million foreign tourists arriving in the country in April of 2019 (Trading Economics, 2019). In 2017, 14 million visitors came to the country, resulting in 6.2 percent of the gross domestic product (Haan, 2018). The island of Bali has been a major focus of tourism in Indonesia, with a variety of scenic beaches and natural areas, interesting cultural attractions, and opportunities for volunteer tourism (International Volunteer HQ, n.d.). However, although the tourism industry is important to Indonesia, and as a destination the country has beautiful scenery and interesting cultural traditions and activities to offer, its tourism growth and develop-

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Figure 1

## Definitions Related to the Case and Sustainable Tourism

Term	Definition
<b>Community based tourism</b>	Community based tourism focuses on the engagement of the host community in planning, developing, and conducting tourism activities to craft a more sustainable industry (Hall, 1996).
<b>Cultural tourism</b>	Cultural tourism can be defined as tourism that focuses on a country or region's culture, particularly the lifestyles, history, art, religion, and other elements of the people in those geographical areas (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2009).
<b>Ecotourism</b>	Ecotourism is defined as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education" (The International Ecotourism Society, 2015). Currently ecotourism involves education, conservation, and sustainable travel.
<b>Interpretation</b>	Interpretation can be defined as the planned endeavor to generate for the visitor (tourist) an understanding of the history and importance of events, people, and objects with which a site is associated (Alderson & Low, 1985). According to some scholars, interpretation can enhance ecological and cultural sustainability in tourism by reducing and managing the effects of visitor behaviors and encouraging long-term conservation (Weiler & Ham, 2001). Tour guides are involved in interpretation when they lead their groups on journeys to the sites.
<b>Mediation and cultural brokering</b>	Two interpretive functions that tour guides engage in include mediation and cultural brokering (Ap & Wong, 2001). In their mediating role, tour guides help visitors to come to their own conclusions and allow them to learn from their tour experiences. Culture brokering entails connecting and facilitating the interactions between groups of people of various cultural backgrounds to help to lessen conflicts or generate transformation (Jezewski & Sotnik, 2001). It has been proposed that cultural brokers are 'interpreting' culture (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006).
<b>Stakeholders</b>	Stakeholders are those groups with an interest in the management, operation, and results of an organization, unit, or object (Freeman, 1984), and sustainable tourism can be considered via the stakeholder approach and theory (Byrd, 2007). Using the stakeholder approach, the interests of all parties need to be considered in decision making, and at times those interests may compete and be in conflict (Freeman, 1994; Lawrence, Wickins, & Phillips, 1997).
<b>Tourist guide/ Tour manager/Tour director</b>	A tourist guide can be defined as "a person who guides visitors in the language of their choice and interprets the cultural and natural heritage of an area (in) which (the) person normally possesses an area-specific qualification usually issued and/or recognised by the appropriate authority." Whereas, "a tour manager/tour director is "a person who manages an itinerary on behalf of the tour operator ensuring the programme is carried out as described in the tour operator's literature and sold to the traveller/consumer and who gives local practical information" (The World Federation of Tourist Guide Associations, n.d.).
<b>Volunteer tourism</b>	Volunteer tourism or voluntourism is a sector of tourism in which tourists travel to a destination to participate in projects that benefit local communities (Wearing, 2001).

ment are hampered by a lack of infrastructure and funding (Haan, 2018). Nevertheless, new tourism projects are underway to try to ameliorate the problems and increase and improve tourism in the country (Haan, 2018). One of the Indonesian government's sponsored projects is called "Ten New Balis." It focuses on developing other destinations to rival Bali, and one of those new destinations is Wakatobi, located on the island of Buton in eastern Indonesia (Haan, 2018). Buton and its surrounding islands also happen to be part of one of most diverse ecosystems in the world (Coppenger, 2011; Ross & Wall, 2001).

### *The Bajo People*

The Bajo people have villages throughout the islands of Buton in Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia. Several anthropologists and conservationists have spent time among the Bajo, and numerous tourists want to see how they live (Cole, 2017). The Bajo live over the water, their livelihood comes from the water, and in the past many lived a nomadic lifestyle on boats (Stacey, 2007). In eastern Indonesia there are not

any communities that live entirely on boats today, but they still build their houses over the water and they have limited access to education (Nuraini, 2016) (see Figure 2). Some of these communities are located miles from the nearest land on a sandbar that is below the water during high tide (Medhurst, 1995). The residents of these communities need to row or motor to shore to obtain fresh water if the rain has not provided them with a sufficient amount of water. The Bajo in these villages eat the fish they need, and they sell the rest to other people on nearby islands where they are usually not given fair prices for their fish, but they have nowhere else to sell them. To make ends meet, they salvage what they can from shipwrecks and other things left in the sea and do whatever they can to get as much food from the sea as possible, often at the risk of injury or even death.

The national government and some regional governments are working to combat environmental issues connected to the coastline, primarily related to the destruction of coral reefs and mangrove trees.

**Figure 2**

## A Bajo dwelling\*



*\*photo contributed by the author*

However, the Bajo have not been included in much of the conversation taking place in Southeast Sulawesi about resource conservation (Clifton, 2013). Yet, one of the best ways to make progress in these types of efforts is to involve the local resident stakeholders (Dalimunthe, 2018). Furthermore, in addition to being near coral reefs, many Bajo communities are located close to coastal mangrove forests that guard against coastal erosion and have their own unique ecosystem. Involvement of the Bajo, as stakeholders, regarding these issues could probably help the country to make progress with conservation efforts, but social and economic issues often present obstacles.

When considering the stakeholders involved in these environmental issues, special attention should be paid to the role that they each play. For example, in addition to being residents of the area, by taking tourists to a Bajo village and allowing the tourists to follow the Bajo as they engage in their daily activities, in a sense the Bajo act as volunteer tour guides. Thus, various responsibilities of the tour operator should be considered when teaming up with the Bajo in this way (Lamont, Kennelly, & Weiler, 2018). Additionally, as stakeholders in ecotourism, the intentions of the tourists should be considered as well (Handriana & Ambara, 2016).

### ***An Adventure Tourism Business on Buton***

The tour company that is the focus of this case has been operating on Buton since 2010 and the operators take tourists throughout the islands on cultural tours and eco-tours to experience authentic island life in Indonesia. The tourists stay with residents and explore the natural beauty the islands have to offer, both in the ocean and in the jungle. The company's Indonesian guides try to visit all of the islands on an informal, rotational basis and some of their tours focus on visiting the Bajo, the

cultural group that is most unique among these islands. It is also the group most dependent upon the ocean and probably the one that has the least environmentally sustainable practices because the Bajo are not part of mainstream Indonesian life and are often marginalized from the rest of society (Taufik, 2017; Dethier, 2017). The Bajo struggle to make ends meet, especially those who live in villages separated from the land out on shallow parts of the ocean. Tour operators enjoy taking guests to these villages, but tour companies concerned with sustainability also want to make positive impacts wherever they travel (Steenbergen, 2013). The tour operator specifically mentioned in this case study tries to maintain a healthy balance between cross cultural interaction and respect for one another's culture, for anthropologists encourage limiting the roles of outside influences on local cultures (Cole, 2017). In addition, while it has been shown that ecotourism can have a negative effect on a society and environment (Butarbutar & Soemarno, 2013), it is also possible that it can make these two elements better.

### **The Dilemma**

To explore a site for possible future tours, the manager of an adventure tourism operator, an American named Chase, went by boat with another American, named Scott, to a Bajo village to dive on a shipwreck that had recently been found. They were told, by an Indonesian friend that accompanied them, about a Bajo village that needed help retrieving treasure from a sunken ship that was found in about 90 feet of water just north of the island of Kabaena in the district of Southeast Poleang of the Regency of Bombana. The two tour operators thought that this sounded interesting and therefore, they went to go check it out to see if it would be a good place to take guests and to see what they could learn about the wrecked ship. During a discussion with the Bajo people about plans for the trip to the shipwreck, Chase and Scott discerned that the residents expected that they would be financially compensated in some way during the visit.

After an overnight boat trip, Chase and Scott arrived in the village. Upon arrival, Chase went to several houses in the village searching for a bathroom and all he could find was a premade gap in the boards on the floor in the middle of the kitchen that dropped into the ocean; no privacy walls were in place. Although accommodations were rustic, they spent the night as guests of the Bajo in the village and prepared for the trip.

The next day, Chase and Scott took an hour-long boat ride farther west to scuba dive on the wreck. Four other boats from the Bajo community joined them and each of these boats had an air compressor on board. When they arrived at the site, some of the Bajo men started jumping in the water with little hoses in their mouths after turning on the air compressors. These running air compressors were what they breathed out of as they dove on the wreck that was 90 feet deep. Some of the men immediately came back up and said there were a lot of fish down below and wanted to bomb them. Chase convinced them to at least wait until they

dove on the wreck. While Chase and Scott dove to explore the wrecked ship, Bajo men swam to different parts of the wreck, pulling and prying brass bolts out of wooden parts of the ship. One of the men pointed to the engine as if he wanted Chase and Scott to take it to the surface, but it was too heavy and connected to the frame of the ship.

After everyone had explored the wreck and returned to the boats, the Bajo started dropping homemade fish bombs into the ocean. Fish bombing, or blast fishing as it is often called, has been illegal in Indonesia since 1985, but it is still practiced (Fox, Mous, Pet, Muljadi, & Caldwell, 2005). Although Chase and Scott had spoken out against blast fishing in the past because of its damage to coral reefs, they were not asked for their opinion on the subject. After five bombs exploded, the Bajo men started jumping into the water with baskets as stunned fish started floating to the surface. The Bajo gathered up the fish by the hundreds and filled up the boats. This lasted for about fifteen minutes until the remaining fish regained consciousness and swam away and the boats left the area.

During the hour-long ride back to the Bajo village, the boat Chase and Scott were traveling in stopped by a house on the coast that belonged to a Bugis man (the Bugis comprise another cultural group in Indonesia). The Bugis man said he would only buy the larger fish from the catch and he bought them for a fraction of the price that he would later sell them for at a market. The Bajo said to Chase and Scott that they could do nothing about the low price. The Bajo men knew that they were not getting a fair price, but they noted that they have no other contacts to sell the fish to and can only take the price that he gives them. The Bajo then took the rest of the smaller fish home to their families and others in their village.

After this adventure, the Bajo men presented Chase and Scott with a bill for their experiences, as well as the costs of the boat fuel and the meals for everyone else on the trip, even though the activities were driven by the Bajo men and their fishing and salvaging activities. Although Chase knew that the bill was very high and out of the ordinary for such a trip, Chase paid what they asked, to keep the peace and ensure that they could get a boat back to the mainland as planned. Then the Bajo asked Chase and Scott to come back again and bring guests. Chase and Scott said that they would think about that, for the experience raised several puzzling issues. For example, would the experiences that they went through be repeated when they brought their guests and would these be considered part of an acceptable type of tour with regard to ethical and sustainable tourism? Is it ethical for the tour operators to conduct these tours? Even without the illegal practices that Chase and Scott saw during their visit, would tours to these villages be positive, sustainable, tourism experiences?

## Analysis

The analysis of this case may be broken down into several areas. These could include sustainable and ethical tourism practices, in-

cluding the consideration of sociocultural aspects, the fish bombing practices, the behaviors of the Bajo divers, and the shipwreck.

## *Sustainable Tourism, Culture, Ethics, and Interpretation*

Sustainable tourism focuses on the balance between the economic, socio-cultural, environmental components of tourism and on the ethical ramifications of tourism practices, and all of these come into play in this case study. As far as the economic aspect of tourism, the Bajo are in a difficult situation because they are cut off from mainstream society in many ways. Since they are marginalized, others that live on the mainland often take advantage of them when possible because they know the Bajo will not explore other options very far inland (such as those related to fish prices). This economic stress was visible in the interaction between Chase and the village leaders concerning meal and fuel reimbursement, as well as in the fish bombing and salvaging activities that took place, despite very real physical safety risks for the Bajo men involved. As far as environmental concerns, the fish bombing and possibly some of the salvaging activities of the Bajo are not only very dangerous and potentially harmful to the environment, they are illegal and arguably unethical. However, these behaviors were not just the actions of a few isolated individuals, they are considered part of the way of life among several Bajo communities.

As far as socio-cultural tourism issues are concerned, the Bajo in this village are in a somewhat vulnerable position that might be looked down upon by some people. While there are many fascinating aspects to the way that they live and survive on the ocean, and how their lives are integrated with the sea, they also face many challenges. It is possible that if tourists come to visit their village that the tourists would feel a sense of superiority and look down on the Bajo because of some of the challenges they face, such as a lack of bathrooms. Situations like this, along with other parts of Bajo life, could result in negative reactions from tourists. It is also possible that the presence of tourists that are more affluent than the Bajo could create some unrealistic expectations on the part of the Bajo hosts regarding financial compensation for a visit to their village. In addition, as noted previously, by taking tourists to a Bajo village and allowing the tourists to follow the Bajo as they engage in their activities, in a sense the Bajo could be considered volunteer tour guides. Given the nature of the issues involved in the scenario presented in the case, the functions of the tour operators as mediators and cultural brokers need to be carefully considered.

## *Blast Fishing*

The issue of blast fishing, or fish bombing, throughout the islands of Indonesia is a long standing one; the practice is currently illegal and monitored by local maritime authorities (Fox, et al., 2005). The Bajo have developed a reputation for fish bombing in both Indonesia and Malaysia (Hope, 2001). The three primary reasons the practice is outlawed are because the blast is destructive to coral reefs, the bombs

often kill juvenile fish along with mature fish (which impacts future generations of fish), and there are inherent dangers associated with building and detonating homemade explosives (Fox, et al., 2005).

### ***Diving Practices***

In addition to the fish bombing practices themselves, the diving practices of the Bajo raise concerns. Scuba diving does have some risks associated with it, but when done carefully and in accordance with prevailing dive theory it can be very safe. Dive certification through organizations such as the Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI), the National Association of Underwater Instructors (NAUI), and Scuba Schools International (SSI) focus heavily on education, but also combine practical experience in their certification process. There are several ways to prevent decompression sickness, and most of these were violated by the Bajo when diving on the wreck. There is also the issue of breathing from a running compressor that is not certified for the generation of air to be breathed. Every year some Bajo men are paralyzed and/or die as a result of these practices, which are carried out in a variety of different ways in Indonesia and the Philippines (Hofford, 2018).

### ***The Shipwreck***

The shipwreck in this case study sunk decades ago, so there is probably no one looking for it. The Bajo found it and took the liberty of salvaging metal from it. While many countries, such as the U.S., have laws and regulations concerning shipwreck salvage, remote parts of Indonesia may not be as strictly regulated (Silverstein, n.d.). There have been salvage operations conducted around the port of Baubau in the same province, but this has been done by the owner when the ship has recently sunk.

### ***Ethical and Overall Issues***

The experiences described above were disturbing to Chase and Scott and raised issues about what to do regarding this situation and where to go from there in terms of sustainable and ethical tourism. The situation clearly has implications for cultural tourism and ecotourism. While the experience was an authentic one, several issues arose in the situation described in this case. Identifying the specific problems and considering future actions are important in terms of the tour operators' activities, including mediation and cultural brokering, and the prospects for and opportunities of the Bajo, the implications for the environment, and the connections to tourism.

### ***The Future of the Bajo People***

The Bajo people are found in several countries in Southeast Asia, sometimes known by different names and with different nuances in their culture and with different languages (Stacey, 2007). One entity that brings them together is their life on, and dependence on, the sea. In Malaysia, some of the Bajo have moved to the land and no longer live on the sea. In Indonesia, there have been efforts to move them closer to the land, which have been successful in some cases. In most of these cases,

rocks were gathered from the ocean and stacked until they come out of the water, which eventually creates a community that allows residents to live on rocks in the ocean that are attached to the land. To improve access to the Bajo villages, local governments have replaced small, unstable boards with concrete and more solid wood walkways in several villages, some of which can hold vehicular traffic. Thus, there are efforts underway to make the lives of the Bajo easier by putting them on land in some areas. There are also Bajo living on small islands that will always be separated from larger bodies of land and freshwater. However, the future of the Bajo remains uncertain.

### ***Discussion Points and Questions***

General questions about topics raised in the case:

- What issues related to sustainable tourism does this case raise? Please explain.
- This case provides one example, but in general how should those who operate a sustainable tourism business react when they see what they know to be unsafe practices, illegal practices, or perceive to be unethical practices regarding residents and tourists?
- Does being aware of and/or a part of these activities make the tour operator and tourist complicit in environmentally unsound practices, or is that just part of observing another culture? Why or why not?

### ***Questions specific to the situation in the case:***

- In what ways can the tour operators discourage the continuation of activities, such as fish bombing and salvaging items from deep wrecks, while maintaining a positive relationship with the Bajo community? Please explain.
- Should tours to villages like this be avoided to prevent the commodification of poor people and to avoid the possibility of creating uncomfortable situations on the part of both the hosts and guests? Please explain.
- There are efforts underway to make the lives of the Bajo easier by putting them on land in some areas, but what if there are some communities whose residents still strongly believe that they should live on the sea? How should this issue be handled and why should it be addressed that way?
- There is at least one Bajo community near the one in this case study that has a relationship with a company in Taiwan and provides little minnows for them. Most of the community gathers fish for this business and it provides a livelihood. Do you think that this is a good model? How can the Bajo thrive in the future, not endanger their lives in the process, and be able to overcome marginalization? Please explain.
- What can guests do to help the Bajo dive more safely?
- What are some ways that tourism businesses, fishing businesses, and/or the government can help the Bajo overcome some of their

- economic hurdles? Could volunteer tourism help? Please explain.
- This was about the most authentic Bajo experience that someone could ask for, but would this be a good trip for a cultural tourist or an ecotourist? Why or why not?
- What roles could interpretation play regarding authentic cultural tourism in this case?

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