

Puzzling Confluence of Conservation and Ecotourism in Komodo National Park, Indonesia

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Japan-ASEAN Transdisciplinary Studies Working Paper Series No.10
October 2020

Puzzling Confluence of Conservation and Ecotourism in Komodo National Park, Indonesia

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Abstract

This paper examines the confluence of conservation and tourism development projects in Komodo National Park – the natural home of the renowned Komodo dragon (*Varanus komodoensis*) and the ways local communities deal with its impacts. While the establishment of the park as a nature reserve in 1980 has indeed stirred processes of enclosure, dispossession, and dissolution of the commons of the native population, it still lacked the element of accumulation as the territory was transformed into a new commons —i.e. a new frontier of unique ecological and tourism-economic values. Governed under the conservation regime, locals can still use resources in the park through traditional and non-traditional resource uses such as the tourism economy. The arrival of ecotourism projects in recent years, however, has induced new waves of accumulation by dispossession by state and corporate actors. Interestingly, local communities have been resisting these processes by incorporating conservation and ecotourism paradigms— beside their tribal claim of unique inter-species companionship with the Komodo dragon. These communities defend the old and new commons from private and public investments and secure their access to its use and benefit, both through community-owned tourism business and through conventional fishing livelihood. Based on engaged ethnographic research in the Komodo National Park in Flores, Indonesia, this article contributes to the discussion on the interlinkage between conservation, ecotourism, and community engagements in development.

Keywords: *conservation, ecotourism, development, community, Komodo, Flores*

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Introduction

As part of an effort to boost the tourism industry, the Indonesian government has designated Komodo National Park in the East Nusa Tenggara province as a "super-premium tourist destination." Enclosed as a conservation area (I. *suaka marga satwa*) in 1965 and then a national park (I. Taman Nasional) in 1980, the park is now a conserved natural home of the charismatic animal *Varanus komodoensis*, the largest living lizard on earth. The charm of the ancient lizards, combined with the scenic landscape, fantastic under water life, and enchanting cultures of various ethnic groups of Flores have attracted tourists since a long time ago, yet the central government's massive scale tourism development in recent years creates an unprecedented social and ecological transformation. In addition to a construction of basic infrastructure such as ports and visitors' center, the government has welcomed an influx of large-scale investment, some of which are granted to operate inside the park.

Under the super-premium tourism development program, the government aims to remove the local population of the Komodo island from the park in order to make the island a "super-premium" and "exclusive" tourist destination." This plan was first announced by the governor of East Nusa Tenggara Province, Victor Laiskodat, in December 2018 and reaffirmed by President Joko Widodo during his visit to the park in June 2019. The governor considers the people of Komodo as "wild settlers" (I. *penduduk liar*), ignoring the fact that natives of Komodo, known as Ata Modo, have settled on the island for thousand years (Verheijen 1987: 256, Auffenberg 1981:350). Ignoring the rights of this population, the governor insists that in the national park, "There will be no human rights, only animal rights" (Sunspirit and Floresa 2019). While the designation of this natural habitat of the Komodo dragon as a national park has forcefully denied their agrarian rights, tourism development has put them further in the margins (Erb 2015, 2012; Dale 2013; Gustave and Borchers 2007).

The stories of the last four decades of the Komodo human inhabitants comprise of a series of enforcement of conservation and tourism business schemes of improvements (Li 2007) on one hand, and resistance and adaptation by the communities on the other hand. In the end, the communities adjusted to the reality that they had to let go of their terrestrial and marine territory and engage in tourism as a new form of livelihood. When the current administration introduced the plan to relocate the community from the island for an exclusive ecotourism zone, the communities recalled all the 40 years of exclusion and dispossession. While resisting this new government's scheme of relocation, they propose various forms of active engagement in the tourism economy that will allow communities' participation in conservation and ecotourism in significant ways.

This article aims to elaborate firstly, the history and present state of conservation and ecotourism development promoted by the state, corporations, and conservationists in Komodo national park, and secondly, the ways in which local communities navigate various interventions introduced to the Park. We will begin with the background information on Komodo National Park and the relationship between government, corporations, transnational environmental non-governmental organizations, and local communities in the last 40 years. Then, we will explain the current policy of intensifying nature tourism in the park that has induced intriguing new waves of green and blue grabbing. In the second part of the article, we will narrate local communities' strategic responses to these new waves of dispossession and the ways in which they negotiate alternative policies of/for development. In the final part, we will present some

reflections on the relationship between capital formation, conservation, tourism, and counter-hegemonic development.

This paper draws on long-term research and advocacy engagement with communities and tourism development in Flores. Both authors are from Flores and have played a role in local civil society networks that deal with issues, such as tourism and conservation in Flores. The communities recognize us as researchers and activists with multiple connections to academia, media, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). They also treat us as strategic allies for their agenda. While doing research is our key activity in the field, we also get involved in the advocacy efforts with an exact position to empower local communities in negotiating a more inclusive model of development and local participation in tourism development and conservation. In events or situations presented in this paper, either one or both authors were present. Often, we were asked to offer analyses or formulate or edit community statements that were being delivered to the government or corporate actors. Hence our approach in this paper exhibits what Stuart Kirsch (2016) describes as an engaged ethnography. This unique position has some limitations, for example, in our partial or partisan position. But it also gives us a unique opportunity to conduct meaningful conversations and gain access to local perspectives that are otherwise difficult to achieve.

Conservation and the Emergence of a New Commons

The Komodo National Park (KNP) is the natural home of the Komodo dragon (*Varanus komodoensis*), the world's largest surviving lizard. Located in Manggarai Barat District, Flores, East Nusa Tenggara Province, Eastern Indonesia, the park includes three main islands (Komodo, Rinca and Padar) and numerous smaller islands (islets) that cover an area of 1817 km², consisting of terrestrial and marine ecosystems. Aside from being the habitat of a charismatic species, KNP is also one of the world's richest marine biospheres with unique coral reefs. These factors make the park one of Indonesia's most precious biosphere reserves as well as popular ecotourism sites.

In contrast to the image of a pristine area teeming with wildlife popularized by the Indonesian government, international NGOs, and the media, the park is also home for local communities. They have lived there for centuries (Verheijen 1984, Dale 2013). Official data indicates that in 2019 the total population inside the park is 4,995 (BPS 2020). They live in several kampongs that are administratively organized in three “desa” (villages). These villages are Papagarang, Pasir Panjang/Rinca, and Komodo.

Long before the formation of the national park, local communities have been living side by side with the ancient Komodo dragons (*Varanus komodoensis*) in what anthropologists call an interspecies companionship (Tsing 2012; Harraway 2003; Verheijen 1982; Needham 1986; Forth 1988). Known in vernacular as *Sebae*, meaning “the other half”, the dragon is depicted in the indigenous fable as the twin of the Komodo people's ancestors.¹ This kinship type of human-animal relationship between

¹ The oldest documentation of the fable is written by J.A.J Verheijen who conducted fieldwork in Komodo island in 1977 and 1982 (Verheijen 1984). During our fieldwork, our interlocutors repeatedly refer to the fable when describing their relationship with Komodo dragon. Another vernacular name for the dragon is Ora.

Ata Modo and Komodo is also expressed in everyday life. Our interlocutors told us vivid stories of how in the 1960s and 1970s, when gardening and hunting were not yet forbidden, Ata Modo and the dragons lived side by side, sharing space and food. In Loh Liang, where Ata Modo had a *lingko* gardens,² there were at least 70-100 dragons living. During hunting expeditions, Ata Modo took only several part of the game. They chopped and feed the dragons with the inner parts, bones, head and feed of hog deer.³ This belief system and everyday practices of kinship relations arguably ensure robust practices of animal-human companionship in the region and thus may have contributed to the survival of the dragons for millennia.

While external disruptions to the Komodo ecosystem can be traced back to the Dutch colonial period, especially in 1920-20 (Barnard 2011), it was during the New Order regime of post colonial Indonesia (1967-1998) that those interventions started to radically change the mechanisms of land control and power relations in the region. The Indonesian government designated the area as a conservation area (I. suaka marga satwa) on March 6th1980 through a minister's decree. The decree No.306/Kpts-II/92 by the Ministry of Forestry and Plantations changed the status of a conservation area to a national park on February 29, 1992. This national park covered 40,728 hectares of terrestrial areas in the islands of Komodo, Rinca and Padar. Later on, on June 29, 2000, the decree number 172/Kpts-II/2000 of the Ministry of Forestry and Plantations expanded the territory of the national park to cover both terrestrial and marine areas with the total size of 132,572 hectares. An international recognition soon followed. In 1988, UNESCO designated the park as a World Heritage Site and a Man and Biosphere Reserve. In 2013, the park was inaugurated as one of the 7 World Wonders of Nature.

Since the designation of the area as a national park, the whole territory has been taken over by the state from the local communities. The residents, who previously lived in several rather scattered kampongs and practiced agriculture and fisheries as their main livelihoods on top of hunting and gathering, were forced to relocate to designated enclaves. On the island of Komodo for example, villagers from the higher part of the island and the coastal communities were put together in present day Komodo village. The size of the village is only 17,3 hectares and in 2019 hosted around 1789 people. They also had to leave Loh Liang, one of the main fishing ports and agriculture areas. Today, Loh Liang has become a compound for the field office of the national park, tourist entrance and visitors center in the island. Although the majority of the inhabitants are indigenous and those who are not have already occupied the land before the designation of the area as a national park, their agrarian rights are not recognized by the state, including rights over the land where they now have settled.

With a status as a national park, the whole territory and its population are

² Lingko is an indigenous Manggarai system of distributing and managing land/ agricultural fields/gardens. A large size of land (usually in circular/round) is distributed from a center (like pizza), and each member of the community get a wedge-shaped gardens called moso/moho. The center of the circular field also functioned as ritual center. The system is today known as spider web gardens (For a brief description of Lodok system, see Alerton 2013:99-20, Erb 1999:24-25).

³ Interviews in September 2020.

controlled by the state through the Komodo National Park Authority (KNPA) (I. Balai Taman Nasional Komodo) that operates under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Forestry and Environment. Various regulations and strict control have been devised and implemented to govern this territory. At the core of this governance is the zoning system. The park is divided into 9 zones, with specific purposes and access by specific actors to each zone. Below is the latest zoning system as legalized by the Ministry of Forestry and Environment in 2012 (see map 1).

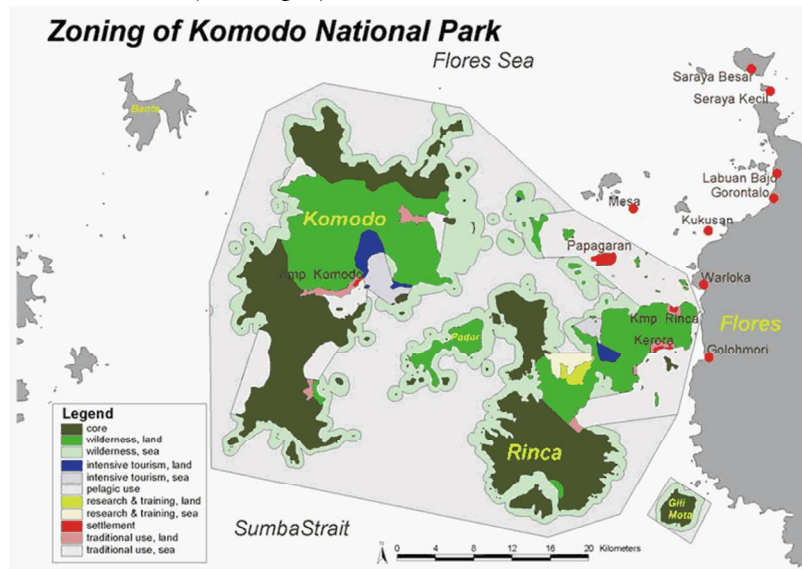


Figure 1 Zoning System in Komodo National Park (BTNK 2012)

Detailed explanations of the zoning of the Komodo National Park:

1. Core Zone. The 34,311-hectare zone is extremely and thoroughly protected. Any change and intervention by human activity is strictly prohibited, except activities pertaining to research.
2. Forest Zone. The zone consists of 66,921.08 hectares where any human activity is prohibited, as mentioned in the explanation about the core zone, except limited tourism activity.
3. Water Protection Zone. The 36,308-hectare zone lies from the shoreline to 500 meters off of the 20 meter isodepth line which surrounds the reef and island borders. Such ruling does not apply to the traditional maritime functioning zone. Any activity involving sea product exploitation is prohibited in the water protection zone. The only allowed activities are those of limited tourism.
4. Land Tourism Utilization Zone. The 824-hectare zone is intensively used for land tourism activities.
5. Water Tourism Utilization Zone. The 1,584-hectare zone is intensively used for water tourism activities.
6. Land Traditional Utilization Zone. The 879-hectare zone is utilized to accommodate the basic needs of the native residents. However, the land utilization in this zone requires a special permit from the head of the Komodo National Park.
7. Nautical Traditional Utilization Zone. The 17,308-hectare zone is provided to accommodate the native residents. Special permits issued by the head of the Komodo National Park are required. Residents are allowed to exploit the sea only if they use eco-friendly technology, such as a fishing rod.
8. Housing Special Zone. The 298-hectare zone is used for settlements for native residents. The ruling is based on the special regulation issued by the Komodo National Park and the local/regional administration.
9. Pelagic Special Zone. In this 59,601-hectare zone in the Komodo National Park, people are free to fish or exploit a variety of sea products in which the exploitation method is not limited only to the usage of eco-friendly technology. The zone is also available for any tourism activities.

Source: SK Ditjen PHKA Number : SK.21/IV-SET/2012

For local communities inside the park, the establishment of the Komodo National Park as a protected area certainly involved an intensive process of enclosure, dispossession, and dissolution of the commons. Although their settlement is somehow recognized as a *desa* (village) similar to other villages in Indonesia, their agrarian rights over the land have never been formally recognized. Under this zoning system, the natives of Komodo have become a “park and parked community,” living in an enclave inside the national park with no legal/agrarian rights and with limited access to land and marine utilization zones for their livelihoods. Moreover, the whole communities have to live under the close surveillance of the park authority. This form of surveillance includes daily patrols

by armed security personnel and officers of the park. Sanctions and fines are imposed on villagers who fish or use areas beyond the designated utilization areas or forests.

Yet at this stage, those interventions have not yet embodied the elements of accumulation and privatization (Marx 1977, Peluso and Lund 2011, Harvey 2005). As a conservation area managed under the authority of the state, the territory is protected from private or corporate land deals and is preserved for environmental, scientific, and limited economic use. As such the park has epitomized the transformation of the Komodo islands from a traditional commons into new commons; i.e. a new frontier of unique ecological and economic values in relation to tourism.⁴ Governed under state authority, this new pool of resources can be shared, at least in theory, not only by the population inside the park but also by the larger population in Flores and beyond. While food gathering, hunting, and farming are no longer allowed, and fishing is only possible in a limited area, the villagers of Komodo are offered, and forcefully encouraged, to change their livelihoods into tourism-related activities (See also Lasso and Dahles 2018, Sunspirit 2017). Today, at least 225 people (from 500 households in the village) live from souvenir trade and culinary activities in several spots inside the park. Youths find jobs, both as rangers in the Park and as independent tour guides or operators.⁵ While remaining critical to their history of dispossession, our interlocutors in the Komodo village recognize the benefits they have enjoyed from tourism that comes with the park. In Labuan Bajo, the main gateway to the park, locals have enjoyed new livelihood opportunities thanks to the growing tourism industry in the region. If the story ended here, it would be a happy ending tale. There is, unfortunately, another process that brings about a tragic change: the arrival of the ecotourism regime.

Nature Tourism, a New Capitalist Formation

Similar to many countries in the Global South, Indonesia has pursued the tourism industry as a way to earn foreign exchange and create jobs. Conservation areas and unique species attached to them are seen in this context as a vital resource for the tourism industry. While conservation is mainly inspired by ecological or environmental imperatives, it is economic imperatives that drive tourism development in nature reserves. Among conservation agencies, there is also a trend towards market-oriented conservation practices. Both tourism and conservation businesses claim that ecotourism is a way of exploiting the economic potentials of preserved nature, which will contribute to sustainable livelihoods for local communities and open new opportunities for investment (Wearing and Neil 2009). Conservation and ecotourism are even claimed as

⁴ While Hardin's unambiguous prediction of the tragedy of the commons (1968) is not applicable in places like Komodo, the formation of a national park for special areas like Komodo has resulted in a new frontier of value that we can call the New Commons (See also McCay 2001)

⁵ By comparison to the communities in other islands of the national park (the village of Rinca and Kerora in the Rinca island and Papagarang) whose livelihood remains predominantly fishing, the village of Komodo has progressively adopted tourism-related activities as their main livelihood.

the most profitable and sustainable way of resource use, as its business model provides an opportunity to finance the protected area as well as to create profit-making opportunities for the tourism industry (Bradon 1996, Spergel 2001).

With the Komodo National Park as its main attraction Flores has long become the target of such tourism development, at least since the last 25 years (Cole 2008, Erb 2009). Yet merging tourism to the already complex governance of conservation areas creates complexity. Komodo National Park, which was previously envisioned as a mainly conservation area, is re-designed as an investment site ready to be exploited for the sake of the state's foreign exchange income. Conservation, in this regard, was simply a process of pre-commodification (Kelly 2011) that serves two strategic purposes: first, to preserve and enclose the territory to become a new frontier of value (with Komodo and its habitat as its main capital) and second, to facilitate a seemingly legitimate process of dispossession and exclusion of local communities from ownership and access to the territory, and to repudiate their interspecies connection to the local bio-diversity. The new regime of ecotourism, built upon the existing conservation regime, pushes a further process in several waves of tragic change.

The first wave of ecotourism intervention in the Komodo islands took place about twenty-five years ago. Under the strong influence of the US-based conservationist business consortium The Nature Conservancy (TNC) with the support of the World Bank, the management of the park was privatized, and its conservation practice was transformed towards market-oriented conservation and tourism. Starting in 1995, TNC assisted the park authority to re-envision its mission. The organization encouraged the expansion of the park to the marine area and promoted eco and dive tourism to increase revenues for the park (Erb 2015). For the management of the park, a collaborative management framework—called the Komodo Collaborative Management (KCMI)—was established in 2004. Under KCMI, the management of the park was taken over by a company, PT Putri Naga Komodo (PT PNK), which, interestingly, is a joint venture between The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and PT Jaytasha Putrindo Utama (PT JPU), a tourist operator (Borchers, 2008; Gustave & Borchers, 2007). The company describes itself as follows:

“Under the World Bank-funded Komodo Collaborative Management Initiative (KCMI), PNK is working with the Komodo National Park Authority to protect the Park's uniquely rich marine and terrestrial biodiversity and develop the Komodo National Park as an eco-tourism destination for the benefit of local communities and future generations.”⁶

One of the key activities of the PNK was, in the words of the company itself, “Various revenue generating mechanisms to achieve financial sustainability” (PNK 2004). On the ground, the company held an exclusive right to collect various fees, which include an entrance fee for general tourists, fees for diving activities, fees for researchers, and fees for documentary activities (video and photography). The company also worked together with the state security apparatus (police and military authorities) for intensified joint patrols to control and ensure that local fishermen and residents obeyed to the park's

⁶ <https://komodonationalpark.org/pnk/index.php>, retrieved 2 April 2020.

zoning system (TNC and BTNK 2004).

The KCMI was applauded (by its inventors) as ‘a groundbreaking policy’ that aimed ‘to ensure the effective long-term management of KNP’ (PT PNK and TNC, 2004:1). Despite of its claims to success, however, the KCMI was subject to criticism and resistance since its inception, including by local communities. The communities strongly opposed the newly instituted rules and regulations of the national park (Erb, 2012, Cochrane 2013), as it was seen as limiting their access and use of the islands’ resources, while at the same time granting access and benefits for the powerful tourism actors. The Komodo National Park Authority (KNPA) which had been supportive to KCMI at the beginning decided to withdraw from the collaboration. Despite of the availability of funds from donor organizations (including the World Bank) and revenues collected from entrance fees, the KCMI failed. PT PNK and TNC ‘disappeared’ from the province in 2010/2011. In other words, only 5 years after its confident start, the seemingly convincing collaborative management ended with an unresolved conflict. The management of the park was taken back by the Komodo National Park Authority (Cochrane 2013, Dale 2013).

The second wave of ecotourism in the Komodo National Park took place more recently along with the new plan of the Indonesian government to turn Labuan Bajo-Flores into one of the so-called “10 New Balis”. Labuan Bajo was even designated as a “super priority tourism destination.” As part of the design, the Indonesian government changed the status of the park and the surrounding area to become the so-called "National Strategic Territory" (I. *Kawasan Strategis Nasional*) to be developed as a “world class eco-tourism destination”.

Under this new scheme, several development plans inside Komodo National Park were instigated. First, the island of Komodo, one of the three big islands inside the park, was designated specifically as a premium or exclusive tourism zone with an entrance fee of US\$ 1,000. The similarly priced safari parks in Africa are often referred to as a model for this exclusive tourism zone. Secondly, the government granted concessions to a number of private companies and state enterprises that cover an area up to 447.17 hectares inside the park under the so-called “nature-tourism business permit” (*izin pengusahaan usaha pariwisata alam*). Those private companies are PT. Komodo Wildlife Ecotourism (Permit No. 796/Menhut/II/2013 for Padar island and Loh Liang Komodo island) and PT Segara Komodo Lestari (permit No.5.557/Menhut/II/2013 for Rinca island), and PT Flobamor (a state enterprise owned by the provincial government of Eastern Nusatenggara) for Rinca, Padar, and Komodo islands (Sunspirit 2019). Thirdly, the government planned to relocate village communities of the Komodo islands in order to, in the government’s words, “rehabilitate Komodo’s habitat” (FDN 2019). The government argues that “it is called the Komodo Island, so it is for the Komodo not for humans” (Henschke and Wijaya 2019).

Ecotourism is commonly believed a sustainable way to explore the economic potentials of biodiversity and nature areas, which will contribute to the sustainable livelihoods for local communities and open new opportunities for investment (UNWTO Declaration 2002; Das and Chatterjee 2015; Wearing and Neil 2009; Brandon 1996; Spergel 2001; Cochrane 2009). Some even argue that ecotourism is a sound conservation

strategy (Gustave and Borchers 2007). The case of the Komodo National Park, however, shows a more complex story (see also Erb 2012, 2015; Cochrane 2013, Dale 2013). In the Komodo National Park, local communities have participated in the conservation agenda and engaged tourism as their new livelihood (Lasso and Heidi 2018), yet the recent introduction of ecotourism development have, once again, marginalized them. While the conservation regime during the New Order deprived the communities of their agrarian rights, the ecotourism scheme by the current regime will radically alter their livelihood and their relationship with their territory for the sake of the world class tourist destination status. The current confluence of neoliberal ecotourism and conservation practices will cause not only enclosure and dispossession of the new commons as has happened in the 1980s and 1990s, but also an accumulation of profit by private companies. While conservation alone has made the territory public under the authority of the state – without the involvement of private companies –, the current ecotourism development gears towards not only the privatization of the national park but also an accumulation by dispossession by private and powerful interests at the expense of the local communities and other powerless tourism actors (Harvey 2004, West 2016, Hall et.al. 2013, Kelly 2011).⁷

While heavily influenced by neoliberal policies prescribed by transnational conservation organizations assisting the Indonesian government in conservation and ecotourism sectors, this new wave of accumulation is arguably also shaped by Indonesia's current power configuration and mode of development. The ruling elites—alliances of elected officials and business interests, often the same persons with double roles⁸-- have considered tourism in conservation areas as a new economic frontier to be exploited after the extractive industries. Using the state budget, they have intensified the infrastructure development for tourism and created new institutions, such as Tourism Authority Board (BOP LBF) to intensify this exploitation while at the same time releasing conservation territories with high economic values of tourism for privatization and mainstream capital accumulation in the hand of their own group. It is thus a form of green and blue grabbing with a strong role of the government to facilitate private accumulation in the name of conservation and ecodevelopment (Fairhead et.al. 2012)

Communities and the Puzzling Confluence

Although under the influence of neoliberal ideology promoted by international agencies such as the World Bank and TNC state and corporate actors seem to be the most influential actors of conservation and ecotourism in the Komodo National Park,

⁷ Hence, the confluence of conservation and ecotourism reflects a process of accumulation by dispossession or just another example of 'primitive accumulation' as described by Marx (1976). In David Harvey's words, as a process, this "entailed taking land, say, enclosing it, and expelling a resident population to create a landless proletariat, and then releasing the land into the privatized mainstream of capital accumulation" (Harvey 2005:145, see also Benjaminsen and Bryceson 2012)

⁸ Known in popular slang as Pengpeng, an acronym of Penguasa (ruler) and pengusaha (business persons).

they are not the only ones. In recent years, local communities both inside the park and in Flores have consolidated themselves and initiated some actions in defense of the new commons, and in pursuing conservation and ecotourism in their own terms. We observe the emergence of various community mobilizations that directly confront the government's new conservation and ecotourism schemes during the period of 2019-2020. Beside a series of demonstrations in Labuan Bajo, the movements also meet and directly negotiate with the central government as we have narrated in the opening vignette of this article. Moreover, there is an emerging agency of the local communities in dealing directly with private business operating in the park.

In response to such passionate resistance to the recent governments plan, in August 2019 the Ministry of Forestry and Environment established the so-called "*Tim Terpadu dalam Rangka Pengkajian Pengelolaan Taman Nasional Komodo sebagai Kawasan Wisata Alam Strategis*" (or Timdu in brief, the integrated team to reassess the management of the Komodo National Park as a strategic nature tourism zone). This Timdu is an ad hoc panel consisting of officials of various ministries, local governments in the provincial and regency levels, developmental NGOs and private companies operating in Komodo with the tasks to (1) communicate the government's plan in Komodo and (2) to discuss the aspiration and demand of the communities (Letter of the Minister of Forestry and Environment, dated 9 August 2019). One week later, the Timdu conducted a field visit to Flores. The encounter between the Timdu and Komodo communities during this visit (which both authors attended) is telling. It illustrates the way the "communities" are engaged with the puzzling confluence of conservation and ecotourism development, and hence, we present here several important events in Komodo.

Komodo Island, 15 August 2019.

This might be one of the biggest days for the life of the Komodo people as a community. Very early in the morning, everyone starts to get busy. A group of young people prepares a big banner and some posters. The banner reads, "Kami menolak dipindahkan" (We are against relocation) and it is displayed at the entrance of the village port. Others set up the sound system. A group of middle aged women walks from one house to another, with sticks in their hands. They knock the wooden poles of the houses (most of the houses in Komodo are stilt houses with wooden poles).

"Come on, everyone should be at the mosque yard at the port at 8 o'clock," they shout. Someone makes the same announcement through the mosque's loudspeakers, adding that the officers are on the way to their village, and everyone should hurry up.

Around 8 am, almost 1,000 people, old and young, men and women, gather in the port. Several young people whom we know as organizers of the previous demonstrations in Labuan Bajo are busy explaining their scenario today. "There will be no dialogue. We will only declare our statement, and then ask them to leave and report to the central and provincial governments of our firm position. We do not talk to thieves."

Not long afterwards, two speedboats approach the port. The crowds chant songs, "Tolak, tolak, tolak penutupan. Tolak penutupan di Pulau Komodo!" ("We refuse, refuse, refuse the closure of the Komodo Islands!"). A large crowd blocks the port. They do not

allow the guests to get off the boats. For about 30 minutes the officers remain in the boats until they are allowed to get off and stand at the edge of the wooden jetty. We notice that the officers are surprised by the large crowds. They try to negotiate with the leaders and propose to have a meeting with the representatives of the communities. But the chants get louder, until Akbar, one of the youth leaders steps forward, calms the crowd and reads a statement that goes as follows:

“We, the people of Komodo, the citizens and the sovereign owner of the land and sea in Komodo, herewith reject the government’s plan to evict and relocate us from our ancestor’s land to a different island. We know conservation better. We have done it long before the arrival of the national park.”

The statement also asks the Ministry of Environment and Forestry and the Ministry of Tourism to recognize and facilitate their active contribution in conservation efforts and tourism development in the islands. It says,

“We demand the *recognition of the Komodo Indigenous Council* as an Advisory Member and/or Steering Committee in the structure of the National Park Authority. We demand the role of the Komodo Indigenous Youth Council as a conservation taskforce (garda konservasi), and not simply as a partner of forest rangers (polisi kehutanan) and park tour guides. *We categorically reject all forms of leisure facilities, such as hotels, resorts, restaurants, and other facilities inside the Komodo National Park. We demand the government not to grant any permit to corporations to erect any physical constructions inside the park*, as it will endanger the natural ecosystem of Komodo and its whole habitat. We demand an exclusive right for the community to run economic activities, such as food provisions and souvenir kiosks in strategic tourist areas such as in Loh Liang” (emphases added).

He then hands over the document to the head of the delegation and asks them to leave the village.

Two months later in October 2019 the government announced that there would be no relocation of Komodo villages, a decision that was celebrated gratefully by the communities. The government, however, still continues with the other components of the plan, i.e. the development of Komodo as an exclusive safari park where private companies will be able to establish their eco-tourism resorts.

Labuan Bajo, February 2020

Another wave of mobilization took place in Labuan Bajo in February 2020. It was triggered by a meeting at the Ministry of Forestry and Environment on January 30th which was attended by officials from several ministries and the provincial government and which decided that ecotourism development plans in the Komodo National Park will be executed in 2020. It includes the plot to enclose Komodo Islands and the surrounding marine area as a “premium nature tourism site” with an entrance fee of 1000 USD and the construction of a new visitors center on Rinca Island. Moreover, the meeting also provided final approval for the corporations who had secured permits to start the construction of their facilities inside the park.

Leaders of various tourism-related associations in Labuan Bajo and Garda Pemuda Komodo organized an assembly on February 4th. They decided to consolidate themselves in a forum called Gabungan Masyarakat Peduli Konservasi dan Pariwisata (GMPKP) (the Association of Concerned Communities for Conservation and Tourism). The founding members of the collective are ASITA, ASKAWI, HPI, FORMAPP, P3Kom, DOCK, AWSTAR, Garda Pemuda Komodo, Kompas Rinca and Sunspirit for Justice and Peace.⁹ One of the immediate actions of this collective was the organization of a mass demonstration in Labuan Bajo on February 12th, involving more than 1000 participants (arguably one of the largest demonstrations in the history of this town). Apart from local regional offices (regency and local parliaments), the protesters marched to the office of the Komodo National Park Authority (BTNK) and Badan Otorita Pariwisata Labuan Bajo Flores (BOP-LBF).

A closer look at their manifestation will help us understand not only their agenda, but also their position in the complex web of power relations in Komodo. It says, “We demand the immediate annulment of permits for three private companies to operate on the islands of Komodo, Rinca and Padar, and the cancellation of the plan to grant PT Flobamor and its associates to operate inside the Komodo National Park”. They argue that the development of resorts, villas, restaurants, and all supporting facilities inside the conservation territory is fundamentally contradictory to the conservation principles that they have supported (GMPKP Statement, February 2020).

They also criticize the policy to make Komodo islands an exclusive and super-premium site with USD 1000 entrance fee collected by PT Flobamor and its associates; a policy that involves the relocation of the local communities. “Such policy,” they argue in the manifestation, “is a form of business monopoly, a practice that is certainly harmful for local communities in Komodo and all other tourism stakeholders in Labuan Bajo.” In other parts of their statement, they criticize the plan to privatize the islets of Bero and Muang to become part of a Special Economic Zone (KEK) and demand the government to officially abandon the plan to evict Komodo villagers in the name of conservation.

Komodo and Padar Islands, September-October 2020

In September 2020, we visited Komodo village again; this time to film the testimonies of “older generations” who were the eyewitnesses of the formation of the National Park in the 1970-1980. Among our key interlocutors were Bapa Magu (60) and Bapa Arsad (Haji Amin) (66). Magu’s father worked with Auffenberg during his extended fieldwork in Komodo between 1960-1980. Hence, he has a vivid memory of the one of the extended studies about the dragon. Arsad was an assistant to Dutch anthropologist J.A.J Verheijen whose book is the only monograph written on Ata Modo, their land, and language (1987). They recalled the formation of the national park as “a violent and inhuman process.” They describe living under the national park authority as “living under colonialism.”

⁹ ASITA (Association of Indonesian Tour and Travel Agencies) Manggarai Barat branch, ASKAWI (Association of Tourist Boats), HPI (Indonesian Tour Guide Association) Labuan Bajo branch, FORMAPP (Community Forum on Tourism), P3Kom (Association of Professional Divers of Komodo), DOCK (Dive Operators Community), AWSTAR (Association of Land Tourism Transport), Garda Pemuda Komodo (Komodo Youth Association), Kompas Rinca (Rinca Community Based Tourism Initiative) and NGO Sunspirit for Justice and Peace.

Bapa Magu guided us to important sites in Loh Liang, showing us the location of the *lodok* of their *Lingko*, the living fences of their garden, and the old graves of their relatives in the area that is now claimed as the National Park. Bapa Arshad, who remains a fisherman until today, told us his personal stories of conflict with the National Park's patrol force. "Now and then, they approach me on my boat, saying 'don't fish here, you will destroy the corals'." In response to them, he said, "Look, it is not the coral that is afraid of my fishing net; it is my fishing net that is afraid of the coral. The fishing net costs 5 million rupiahs." He added that it is in the interest of traditional fishing communities to take care of the coral, and hence fishing should not be forbidden.

When we asked Magu and Arshad whether they have heard of PT KWE, which has been granted a concession to open a resort in their village, both said yes. They were invited to the consultation, and they have given their consent. "Look, my generation will soon be gone. We have suffered a lot. If the company is better than the national park, let them open a hotel here. My children and grandchildren can work there," said Magu. Magu and Arshad also noted that the company promised to open a senior high school, give some portions of the revenue to the village, and ensure that Komodo's youth will work there. During our stay in the village, we run into a field team of PT KWE who was preparing the community for a kick start event for their project in Padar island.

In Loh Liang, after touring their former *lodok*, we showed Magu PT KWE's concession map, which overlaps with their former *lodok*. Surprised, he said, "They never show us this map. We do not know that they give this location to the company." Some members of Garda Komodo and Pokdarwis, who accompanied us during the visit to Loh Liang told him, "We need to talk more about this," which he replied with "Yes, if the company brings us another bad thing, we have to refuse it."

Two weeks after, on October 9, we heard that PT KWE conducted a so-called "prosesi adat dan doa meminta restu leluhur Ata Modo" (an adat procession and prayers to ask the consent of the Ata Modo ancestors) as an important step before starting their construction. Local authorities (district head, police, and military officers) attended the procession.¹⁰ From the communities' side, two groups with different agendas attended: one to participate and support the ritual and the other to protest. Not surprisingly, or should we say surprisingly, Magu and Amin were among the rituals' supporters. Akbar and other youths from Garda Komodo who protested asked the company to "come to the village and do another consultation process that involves everyone." In their written statement, Garda demands that the central government "recognizes and facilitates active role of the Komodo community in conservation and tourism efforts."¹¹

This wide array of mobilization on one hand and an inclination to collaborate with the corporation on the other shows four significant dynamics. *Firstly*, against the state's privatization schemes, international conservation businesses, and corporate actors, local communities strive to defend their access and benefit to the park as new commons. In addition to indigenous claims over the terrestrial and marine territory, they uphold their active participation in the communities-owned tourism endeavors and gain benefits from investments. *Secondly*, using conservation and sustainable development as their

¹⁰ <https://hariansiber.com/pt-kwe-menggelar-porosisi-adat-dan-doa-bersama-di-pulau-padar/>, retrieved 18 October 2020.

¹¹ Written Statement, Garda Komodo, 9 October 2020.

framework— a paradigm that they adopted from the conservationists to revive their intimate and non-capitalist connection to the territory and the ecosystem, including the komodo— these local actors refashion themselves as the guardians of Komodo dragons and its ecosystem. Under this framework, they demand active participation both in conservation and tourism endeavors.

Thirdly, local communities perceive the state and corporate actors with their neoliberal land-use paradigm as predatory and enemies of conservation and community tourism. Such a strategy serves to de-legitimize the state and corporate actors, on the one hand, and consolidate their agency as true champions of conservation and sustainable tourism. *Fourthly*, as illustrated in the current controversy over PT KWE in Padar, actors in the Komodo community deploy different strategies for engaging and disengaging with private interests. While some actors refuse to collaborate with corporations, others see collaboration as a way to get the benefit of ecotourism. On a deeper level, there is a consensus among these divergent groups that their agrarian rights and their benefits from ecotourism should be enhanced. All these dynamics show that local communities have developed their own vision and paradigm of conservation and ecotourism to protect the park as a new commons, to claim access to and benefit from tourism business, and to prevent new waves of accumulation in the name of conservation and nature tourism development.

Conclusion

The confluence of tourism and conservation in the Komodo National Park have resulted in puzzling waves of environmental and social transformation in the islands of Flores. The creation of the national park in 1980 had put an end to traditional commons for the native population through enclosure, dispossession, and dissolution of the traditional commons. Under the authority of the state (still without involvement of private companies), this process has transformed the area into a new type of commons with new ecological and economic values (through conservation and tourism), although limited. Here, we see that conservation has generated a new social formation and new livelihood opportunity for the native population in the tourism sector. The recent ecotourism development, however, has induced new waves of dispossession, enclosure, and dissolution of the new commons. Introduced through the language of ecotourism, these development projects epitomize exclusionary practices of accumulation by dispossession and displacement. Ecotourism, thus, triggers new waves of green and blue grabbing. Most importantly, however, the Indonesian government together with its private partners introduces a capitalist accumulation that benefits powerful tourism players at the expense of the communities and less powerful actors. The underlying dynamics at play, we argue, is fundamentally a power struggle for control over Komodo National Park, not only as a territory/land and its traditional use, but also as new commons; i.e. as a territory of new ecological and economic values, especially its tourism values.

In response to these new waves, interestingly, local communities have not only evoked their tribal rights as the primary owners and guardians of the ecosystems. But also, they have strategically appropriated the discourse of conservation and ecotourism, and used it to fight privatization and dispossession and to defend the park as a new

commons. Right at the center of the contestation is the issue of ownership, access, and benefit, both of the resources (the conservation area and its biodiversity) and its industrialization and capitalization (ecotourism business in the conservation area). While local communities are clearly to be put in a marginalized position by the state and corporate actors, they assert their political agency to strengthen their claim and halt capital expansion in the conservation frontiers. They also negotiate better terms and an alternative conservation and ecotourism practice that will benefit them and serve a multi-species survival in the islands of Flores.

Both in the hands of the state and their corporate associates and the local communities, the puzzling confluence of conservation and ecotourism in the islands of Flores produces a contingent process that will continue to define social and environmental power dynamics in the islands of Flores in the years to come.

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