

ADAPTIVE GOVERNANCE IN POVERTY ALLEVIATION EFFORTS THROUGH ECOTOURISM AT NGERONG CAVE IN RENGEL VILLAGE

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses poverty alleviation efforts through ecotourism in Rengel Village, Rengel District, Tuban Regency. This study aims to analyse the application of adaptive governance in poverty alleviation efforts through Ngerong Cave Ecotourism in Rengel Village. This research method used a descriptive qualitative approach and data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. Based on the adaptive governance theory from Sharma-Wallace (2018), the study results lie on the eight indicator: collaboration, coordination, social capital development, community empowerment and involvement, capacity building, connecting knowledge and decision-making through data collection, improving leadership capacity, and utilizing or creating governance opportunities. The findings reveal that efforts to alleviate poverty through Ngerong Cave Ecotourism have not shown significant improvement in poverty caused by lack of collaboration among various parties, the lack of community empowerment and involvement, and the absence of proactive measures to create governance opportunities. On the other hand, managers have coordinated professionally, built substantial social capital, increased capacity, and made decisions in accordance with the adaptive governance approach. This study contributes to expanding the literature on adaptive governance used in rural ecotourism as an effort to reduce poverty.

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INTRODUCTION

Poverty is a social problem faced by developing countries (Alamsyah et al., 2025; Zulyanto, 2022) such as Indonesia, a developing country, with a poverty rate of 8.47% or 23.85 million people (BPS Indonesia, 2025). The Indonesian government has sought to alleviate poverty by making poverty reduction a priority in the National Long-Term Development Plan (RPJPN) for 2005-2025. Nevertheless, poverty persists in Indonesia at both provincial and district levels. East Java is one of the provinces with the highest poverty rates, with 9.09% of the population living in poverty, or 3,875,880 people (BPS Jawa Timur, 2025). In addition, the highest poverty rate also occurred in one of the districts in East Java Province, namely Tuban District, with a poor population of 14.13% or 168,860 people (BPS Kabupaten Tuban, 2025). The data report released by the Indonesian Central Statistics Agency shows that the percentage of poor people in villages reached 11.03%, higher than the 6.73% in cities (BPS Indonesia, 2025).

Rengel Village is one of the villages in Tuban Regency that experiences poverty among 1,118 households out of a total of 2,906 households in the village. Poverty is a serious problem because its impact touches various aspects of life, including limited access to adequate health care, limited access to education due to financial constraints, and the potential to trigger crime and cause distrust of the government (Khairiroh, 2025). To minimize the impact of poverty, poverty alleviation requires effective strategies and more supportive governance. Ecotourism is one of the strategies to reduce poverty rates and has successfully reduced poverty rates (Nasution, 2022). Ecotourism is a nature-based tourism activity grounded in responsibility, integrating elements of cultural education and understanding, and supported by efforts to conserve natural resources that can improve the welfare of local communities through empowerment (Faruq et al., 2024; Sausan et al., 2023). Through ecotourism, communities can actively participate in productive economic activities that can increase their income and quality of life (Desnyarti & Zulkarnaini, 2025).

Rengel Village, Rengel Subdistrict, Tuban Regency, has an ecotourism site, Ngerong Cave, which has been managed by the Mandiri Sejahtera Rengel Village-Owned Enterprise since 2023. Ngerong Cave Ecotourism was officially inaugurated as a village tourism site in 1990 and has significant growth potential. The appeal of Ngerong Cave ecotourism lies in the natural beauty of the cave walls, which are covered with numerous bats, and in the river flowing beneath it, which is home to various fish. Tourists can use these types of fish for the treatment of various skin diseases, such as fungal infections and scabies. The goal of managing Ngerong Cave Ecotourism is not only to increase the number of tourists, but also to preserve natural resources, increase village income, and empower the local community economically. Based on observations, the presence of Ngerong Cave Ecotourism has helped increase the income of several communities that have been involved in this activity for a long time.

With its various potential, Ngerong Cave Ecotourism should serve as an instrument for poverty alleviation. However, based on early observations by researchers, it appears that the ecotourism potential of Ngerong Cave has not yet fully benefited the local community in terms of poverty alleviation. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate poverty alleviation through Ngerong Cave ecotourism using adaptive governance theory as its analytical framework (Sharma-Wallace et al., 2018). Furthermore, adaptive governance is designed to solve complex problems and achieve desired socioeconomic conditions more responsively and flexibly in response to environmental changes and uncertainties, as well as to socioeconomic dynamics within society (Sharma-Wallace et al., 2018). This can be achieved through collaboration with various sectors, effective coordination among stakeholders, strong social capital development, community empowerment and involvement, needs-based capacity building, knowledge- and data-driven decision making, and enhancing adaptive leadership capacity and proactively utilizing or creating governance opportunities (Sharma-Wallace et al., 2018).

The success of adaptive governance practices has been demonstrated by the Sekapuk Village-Owned Enterprise, which has leveraged the potential of natural resources and empowered the community to generate profits and earn the nickname "billionaire village" (Fanani & Nawangsari, 2024). Studies on adaptive governance have been conducted extensively by previous researchers in the context of environmental and natural resource management (Agustin & As'ari, 2022; Engkus et al., 2020; Fanani & Nawangsari, 2024; Hidayati et al., 2024; López Alberola et

Volume 15 Nomor 1 Maret 2026

<https://ejournal.unibabwi.ac.id/index.php/sosioedukasi/index>

al., 2025; Yulianto et al., 2025). Second, adaptive governance studies are also widely discussed in the context of disaster management (Dewi & Hijri, 2022; Haris & Sumardi, 2025; Rahmanto et al., 2024a; Zaenuri et al., 2025). Previously, this location had been studied only in the context of ecotourism management (Ramadhan et al., 2025) and in feasibility testing for cave exploration (Setiyawan & Sutedjo, 2017).

No previous studies have examined this locus using an adaptive governance perspective in the context of poverty alleviation through ecotourism potential. Thus, this study aims to fill the gaps in previous research. The novelty of this study lies in the use of the adaptive governance theory from (Sharma-Wallace et al., 2018), which has rarely been used in previous studies as a tool for analysis based on eight indicators, including collaboration, coordination, social capital development, community empowerment and involvement, capacity building, connecting knowledge and decision-making through data collection, improving leadership capacity, and utilizing or creating governance opportunities.

METHOD

The research method used is qualitative with a descriptive design. A qualitative approach is used to investigate and understand the phenomenon being studied in depth (Creswell, 2009). This research was conducted in Rengel Village, Rengel Subdistrict, Tuban Regency. The researcher chose this location because it had never been used as a research object with the same research focus as this study, making it an interesting topic for the researcher to study. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, which involves selecting those considered to have relevant information on the study's topic and focus (Abdussamad, 2021). This study involved seven informants: two Rengel Village Government officials, the director and manager of the Rengel Independent Prosperous Village-Owned Enterprise, one worker at Ngerong Cave Ecotourism, two traders at Ngerong Cave Ecotourism, and members of the surrounding community.

Data were gathered through observation, interviews, and documentation studies (Naamy, 2019). Observations are conducted to assess the actual situation and to obtain information and supporting data. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and via WhatsApp, using a semi-structured format with open-ended questions, so that informants were free to explain based on their knowledge. Documentation studies were conducted by accessing relevant documents, such as the Articles of Association and Bylaws (AD/ART) of the Rengel Independent Prosperous Village-Owned Enterprise, reports from the central statistics agency, and literature, to supplement data obtained through observation and interview techniques and ensure greater validity. Data analysis techniques using the interactive analysis model developed by Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldana include data reduction, selecting important data from observation results and interview transcripts, and then focusing on research topics to facilitate analysis. The second stage of data presentation used narrative text to facilitate the conclusion. The final stage is the conclusion of the process to produce research findings that answer the research questions (Matthew B. Miles, 2014).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Collaboration Between Various Parties

Collaboration between parties involves stakeholders combining their abilities and skills to achieve a goal effectively and efficiently. In managing Ngerong Cave Ecotourism, the Rengel Independent Prosperous Village-Owned Enterprise, as the lead tourism manager, collaborates only with the Rengel Village government. This statement was further reinforced by the director of the Rengel Independent Prosperous Village-Owned Enterprise Agency, who revealed that the management of Ngerong Cave Ecotourism has not yet fully collaborated with various parties. Only in specific events does the management collaborate with external parties, such as the tourism office, nature-lover organisations (Mapala Tuban), and the Jejak Lestari Rengel Community. However, the manager and director of the Mandiri Sejahtera Rengel Village-Owned Enterprise (BUMDes), as the manager of Ngerong Cave

Volume 15 Nomor 1 Maret 2026

<https://ejournal.unibabwi.ac.id/index.php/sosioedukasi/index>

Ecotourism, revealed that they plan to collaborate with various parties, including investors, to support the development for Ngerong Cave Ecotourism. The management has made a very appropriate plan, because collaborating with various parties will help achieve goals effectively and efficiently by obtaining additional resources to address limitations.

Effective collaboration between various parties is essential to support the success of sustainable ecotourism management. Effective collaboration is a bond of cooperation among various parties, with a clear division of roles, tasks, and responsibilities to avoid overlapping assignments. Although the management of Ngerong Cave Ecotourism only involves cooperation with the village government, there is a clear division of roles and responsibilities. The village government acts as a regulator, issuing regulations governing business management to ensure that businesses operate in accordance with the objectives of village development, as required by law. The Rengel Village Government issued Village Regulation (Perdes) No. 11 of 2024 concerning the establishment of the village-owned enterprise "Mandiri Sejahtera Rengel," to manage village businesses, develop investment and productivity, provide services, and engage in other types of businesses for the welfare of the people of Rengel Village. The Rengel Village Government has also issued basic household regulations (AD/ART) as a reference for managing operational activities and membership in a clear, structured manner. The regulations issued by the Rengel Village government serve as the basis for the management of businesses in Rengel Village, including the village tourism business unit.

In managing village tourism, managers are responsible for developing tourism development plans to improve tourism quality and competitiveness, ensuring it remains competitive among the many existing tourist attractions. Tourism development can also create jobs and business opportunities for the local community, thereby supporting economic growth and alleviating poverty. However, the development of tourism has not been implemented due to a lack of collaboration with various parties, so the objective has not been achieved. These findings do not align with previous study of (Hidayati et al., 2024), who explain that the Surabaya Mangrove Botanical Garden Development collaborated with various stakeholders, including several Surabaya Regional Apparatus and several private parties and communities. This collaboration has had a positive impact on the successful development of the Surabaya Mangrove Botanical Gardens and the economic empowerment of the community, thereby improving the quality of life and welfare of the surrounding community. Therefore, collaboration with various parties is crucial to improve tourism management and development, thereby positively impacting the environment and sustainable economic growth of the community, thereby improving the quality of life and reducing poverty rates. This is also emphasized in the theory of adaptive governance according to (Sharma-Wallace et al., 2018), which reveals the importance of establishing cooperation with many parties in order to achieve inclusive socio-ecological goals.

Effective Coordination Among Stakeholders

Coordination is an effort to organize and harmonize various elements within an organization so that it can carry out operational activities smoothly and achieve its predetermined goals. In the management of Ngerong Cave Ecotourism, coordination is carried out vertically or in stages. Vertical coordination is a type of coordination carried out from the lowest position to the highest position and vice versa. In vertical coordination, the manager of Ngerong Cave Ecotourism formed the Ngerong Cave Tourism Park association to organize and address minor field issues involving workers and traders at Ngerong Cave Ecotourism. The manager's efforts to establish a community as a coordination hub are beneficial for ensuring the smooth running of field operations. The existence of Ngerong Cave Ecotourism has excellent potential for development and community economic empowerment, but this must be supported by adequate and regular coordination to ensure maximum performance by the management.

Effective coordination is not only carried out with one party but also with various parties to support successful management. Based on interviews with informants, it was found that the managers of Ngerong Cave Ecotourism routinely coordinate internally within the organization. The Director of the Mandiri Sejahtera Rengel Village-Owned Enterprise (BUMDes) stated that he regularly holds coordination meetings once a week, either face-to-face or through social media, depending on the situation and conditions. The Director of the Mandiri Sejahtera Rengel

Volume 15 Nomor 1 Maret 2026

<https://ejournal.unibabwi.ac.id/index.php/sosioedukasi/index>

Village-Owned Enterprise (BUMDes) regularly holds coordination meetings with managers and workers to harmonize, direct, and organize task assignments and clarify responsibilities to avoid overlap. In addition, the purpose of coordination is to monitor the extent to which performance in achieving common goals is carried out effectively and efficiently.

Based on research, it can be seen that the managers of Ngerong Cave Ecotourism have carried out professional vertical coordination with various parties in line with coordination in adaptive governance theory, according to (Sharma-Wallace et al., 2018), which states the need to carry out coordination activities with stakeholders in a professional and structured manner to avoid failure. This finding aligns with former research by (Hidayati et al., 2024) indicating that coordination is structured and formal in the development of the Surabaya Mangrove Botanical Garden, with managers coordinating with various parties through meetings, regular meetings, and official letters. This coordination has ensured the smooth development of the Surabaya Mangrove Botanical Garden and has contributed to the community's economic empowerment. These findings also reinforce (Rahmanto et al., 2024) statement that it is essential to strengthen coordination among stakeholders to avoid miscommunication and errors in disaster management.

Building Social Capital

Social capital is the process of forming social networks and social norms by building trust to facilitate coordination and collaboration in achieving a goal. The Mandiri Sejahtera Rengel Village-Owned Enterprise (BUMDes), as the manager of village tourism, plays a vital role in building social capital with both internal and external parties. In building social capital, the Mandiri Sejahtera Rengel Village-Owned Enterprise (BUMDes) established an open communication forum with the surrounding community, workers, and traders to convey their aspirations, suggestions, and ideas regarding the management and development plans for Ngerong Cave Ecotourism. The purpose of establishing this forum is to strengthen social relations and foster a sense of ownership among the community, workers, and traders, so that they will support the management and development of tourism.

In addition, management often holds informal forums, such as mutual assistance and community service activities, in the Ngerong Cave Ecotourism area. This is reinforced by statements from traders and ticket counter employees within the ecotourism site who reveal that they often carry out community service activities at the Ngerong Cave Ecotourism site to clean up the environment and make visitors comfortable. These community service and cooperation activities are routinely carried out ahead of major holidays and national holidays, such as school holidays, Christmas, and New Year holidays. In addition, cooperation activities are held during cultural parades at the Ngerong Cave Ecotourism site. These mutual assistance and community service activities can strengthen relationships between people and foster a sense of togetherness and solidarity, thereby strengthening the social capital that supports the management of Ngerong Cave Ecotourism.

Strong social relationships and trust will underpin the formation of social capital. Trust is one of the basic assets for building social capital. Building trust cannot be done instantly; it requires a long, consistent process. In an effort to build trust, managers routinely report tourism revenue to the village government and traders at each annual meeting. As a form of accountability, the Rengel Village Government has ensured transparency by including the village's tourism revenue in an infographic displayed at the Rengel Village Hall office, making it easily accessible to the public. This transparency fosters public trust in the managers of Ngerong Cave ecotourism, thereby creating substantial social capital. With substantial social capital, the effectiveness of tourism performance and management can be increased through the combination of a strong social network and mutual trust. The results of this study reinforce (Fathy, 2019) argument that building social capital by encouraging community participation and accessibility supports successful cooperation and contributes to inclusive, sustainable development goals.

Community Empowerment and Engagement

Community empowerment is a process of improving communities' skills and abilities to become more independent and able to control their own lives, across social, political, cultural, environmental, and development sectors. Community empowerment can be a strategic approach to poverty alleviation by improving the quality of

Volume 15 Nomor 1 Maret 2026

<https://ejournal.unibabwi.ac.id/index.php/sosioedukasi/index>

human resources, strengthening institutions, increasing access to information and open communication, strengthening community participation, and expanding and strengthening networks or partnerships (Jamaluddin et al., 2019). Based on research, it can be seen that community empowerment has been carried out by the Mandiri Sejahtera Rengel Village-Owned Enterprise (BUMDes) in collaboration with the Rengel Village Government through training.

The training provided relates to Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises to support and develop local community businesses, including community businesses in Ngerong Cave Ecotourism. Through community empowerment, it is hoped that skills can be improved and existing opportunities can be leveraged by starting businesses to increase income and enhance welfare, ultimately lifting them out of poverty. However, community empowerment through training and human resource development has not been carried out optimally and sustainably. The empowerment of disadvantaged communities has led to a lack of skills and abilities among them to participate (Dian & Ma'ruf, 2019). Weak empowerment also hinders communities from taking advantage of existing opportunities and prevents them from innovating to create independent businesses.

In addition to community empowerment, community involvement is also an essential element in adaptive governance that can support the successful management and development of Ngerong Cave Ecotourism. The community's involvement in Ngerong Cave Ecotourism includes selling food and souvenirs, renting out tourist equipment, and working as ticket booth attendants, security guards, and cleaners. In this case, the management also involves several community leaders in village deliberations, where the community is free to express their aspirations and ideas for the development of village tourism and construction. However, community involvement in village deliberations and the management of Ngerong Cave Ecotourism remains minimal. This lack of community empowerment and involvement hinders the success of adaptive governance.

Capacity Development

Capacity building is an effort to improve managers' abilities and skills so they can adapt to dynamic changes and fulfil their duties and responsibilities to the fullest. Based on interviews with the Rengel Village Government, it is known that, in developing its capacity, the Mandiri Sejahtera Rengel Village-Owned Enterprise (BUMDes) has participated in several training sessions organised by relevant agencies. The managers have received training on managing tourism, welcoming tourists, and promoting tourism through social media. In addition to attending training, the manager of Ngerong Cave Ecotourism also participates in mentoring to improve his capacity. During the mentoring session, participants were taught how to record digital finances via Badan Usaha Milik Desa.co and to use the PARI and Seteroberi cashier applications to introduce financial innovations that improve transparency and efficiency. The assistance provided by BRI aims to improve performance and develop managers' skills.

On the other hand, the manager of Ngerong Cave ecotourism also stated that capacity-building was carried out through experience-sharing activities with tourism managers in Tuban Regency. Through sharing activities with tourism managers, participants will gain information, knowledge, and ideas related to tourism management that can be emulated and applied to improve tourism management and quality. These findings indicate that capacity-building efforts can be carried out not only through training but also through sharing with peers in the same profession. The capacity-building efforts by the managers of Ngerong Cave Ecotourism are the right step to support improvements in their performance in creating positive change. Without development or capacity building, the managers' capacity is limited, and there is no progress or improvement. Of course, this will negatively impact the effectiveness of Ngerong Cave ecotourism's performance and management.

Based on statements from several informants, it is evident that the managers of Ngerong Cave ecotourism have developed their capacity through participation in various training and mentoring programs and through experience-sharing activities with other tourism managers. This finding aligns with research by (Norman et al., 2020), which states that one way to achieve successful adaptive governance is to develop human resource capacity by improving the quality of education and providing training tailored to needs. This capacity building aligns with adaptive governance theory, which holds that capacity building through training and mentoring, as well as

Volume 15 Nomor 1 Maret 2026

<https://ejournal.unibabwi.ac.id/index.php/sosioedukasi/index>

knowledge sharing among stakeholders, is crucial for addressing environmental uncertainty by encouraging change to support the success of adaptive governance (Sharma-Wallace et al., 2018).

Connecting Knowledge and Data-Based Decision Making and Monitoring

The knowledge possessed, along with the collected data sets and monitoring results, is essential for decision-making analysis. Adaptive governance theory suggests that data-driven decision-making can improve decision accuracy. Based on an interview with one of the Rengel Village Government officials, it was revealed that before making a decision, the managers of Goa Ngerong Ecotourism reviewed data and monitoring results on past tourism development. Because data plays a vital role in decision-making, data availability can help make plans and decisions more focused and accurate. Monitoring results and ticket sales revenue for Ngerong Cave Ecotourism show that this year has seen a drastic decline in visitors compared to last year. To follow up on this condition, the Manager of the Village-Owned Enterprise (BUMDes) Mandiri Sejahtera Rengel unit Ngerong Cave Ecotourism is planning to develop Ekowisata Goa Ngerong to attract more visitors.

The manager of Ngerong Cave Ecotourism also explained that, before developing tourism, discussions on the plan's feasibility will first be held in village meetings to obtain reviews and approval from various stakeholders. In this case, it can be seen that, in solving problems in Ngerong Cave ecotourism, the village-owned enterprise (Bumdes), as the manager, still needs stakeholder support. Of course, this is done to obtain constructive advice and recommendations that can inform the right decisions. Although the Mandiri Sejahtera Rengel Village-Owned Enterprise (BUMDes) is the lead tourism manager, decision-making is still coordinated with various stakeholders. And the final decision remains in the hands of the Head of Rengel Village. This decision-making process aligns with the adaptive governance approach (Sharma-Wallace et al., 2018), which holds that a data-driven process involving multiple stakeholders can yield more accurate decisions than decision-making alone.

Leadership Capacity Building

The managers of Ngerong Cave Ecotourism are improving their leadership skills through training. Leadership capacity-building training has been conducted, covering the fundamentals of leadership and the differences between leadership and management. The manager also participated in training on participatory and collaborative leadership, encouraging community participation in the planning and evaluation of tourism business unit management, and teaching techniques for establishing cooperation with various parties to support success and achieve objectives. Essentially, improving leadership capacity is very important and must be done by leaders and their staff to improve their skills and competence. Leaders who possess strong leadership skills will undoubtedly have an impact by leading, directing their members, and driving change in accordance with the organisation's needs and the times. Of course, participating in training to improve leadership capacity will also positively impact the effectiveness of their performance and that of their members.

Managers also attend training on adaptive leadership. Adaptive leadership involves adapting to changing times and dealing with crises by striving to create innovations that improve the quality and value of an organization or business unit. This adaptive leadership training is beneficial for navigating the dynamics of various areas of life marked by environmental uncertainty and for addressing global challenges. The success of adaptive leadership is greatly influenced by practical cooperation between teams, strong coordination, and appropriate human resource management to support its achievement (Amnah et al., 2025). The managers of Ngerong Cave Ecotourism also participated in training related to human resource management and team development. Human resource management is the process of managing workers in an organization to support its smooth operation and effective, efficient achievement of organizational goals. The training carried out by management is an effort to develop competencies to improve the management of Ngerong Cave ecotourism.

Utilizing or Creating Governance Opportunities

Volume 15 Nomor 1 Maret 2026

<https://ejournal.unibabwi.ac.id/index.php/sosioedukasi/index>

Creating opportunities for adaptive governance in poverty alleviation efforts through Ngerong Cave Ecotourism is not easy. It requires serious effort and proactive action. Proactive measures help prepare for change or crisis. Based on research, it can be seen that the managers of Ngerong Cave Ecotourism acted reactively, developing tourism plans only after declining visitor numbers became apparent. This is not in line with the adaptive governance approach, which emphasizes proactive action before a crisis occurs. Currently, tourism development has not been implemented due to constraints on capital resources. The lack of collaboration with various parties, including investors, has hindered the utilization of capital opportunities from external parties. Thus, the problem of declining visitor numbers remains unresolved, thereby hindering the creation of job opportunities and businesses for the community.

On the other hand, managers have shown flexibility in responding to market changes by proactively creating opportunities for innovation in cave exploration activities to increase visitor appeal. However, these proactive efforts have not had a significant impact on the community due to insufficient community empowerment, which has hampered the community's ability to take advantage of existing opportunities by innovating and creating independent businesses. Thus, it can be concluded that the managers of Goa Ngerong Ecotourism tend to be reactive in taking advantage of opportunities rather than proactive in creating management opportunities.

CONCLUSION

Based on the study's results, it can be concluded that adaptive governance in poverty alleviation efforts through Ngerong Cave Ecotourism has been running well but remains suboptimal, and thus has not alleviated poverty in Rengel Village. This suboptimality proves that Ngerong Cave Ecotourism can only increase the income of a few local communities who have been involved in it for a long time. The lack of collaboration with various parties, the lack of empowerment and sustainable community involvement, and the tendency of managers to act reactively when creating governance opportunities are factors that hinder tourism development and expand employment opportunities. On the other hand, other adaptive governance indicators have been successfully implemented through training and mentoring to improve capacity, make data-driven decisions, build substantial social capital, and coordinate professionally.

Thus, this study suggests that managers collaborate with various parties to support tourism management and development, and sustainably empower communities to improve their abilities and skills in utilizing opportunities. It is recommended to involve the community in the management of Ngerong Cave Ecotourism and take proactive measures to prepare for changes or crises. Theoretically, this study extends adaptive governance literature by applying its analytical framework to village-based ecotourism for poverty alleviation. Practically, it highlights the need for proactive, collaborative, and community-centered governance to ensure tourism contributes to inclusive development. The limitation of this qualitative study is that it focuses more on the process than the results, so it does not include numerical data on the decline in poverty rates. Therefore, the researchers recommend that future researchers conduct research from the outset of the tourism project using a mixed-method approach to measure its impact on poverty alleviation, so that the results can be presented numerically and provide a more comprehensive understanding.

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Volume 15 Nomor 1 Maret 2026

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