

MANAGERS PERCEPTIONS AND MITIGATION STRATEGIES AMIDST COVID-19 PANDEMIC - THE CASE OF A NATURE-BASED TOURISM DESTINATION IN GUNUNG CIREMAI NATIONAL PARK, INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 pandemic has deteriorated nature-based tourism sectors around the world. Indeed, tourism site managers' perceptions of and mitigation strategies to COVID-19 play a significant role in ensuring tourism operationalization and its management amidst pandemics. Using the case of Curug Cipeteuy, a community-based tourism destination in Gunung Ciremai National Park (GCNP), we investigate managers' perceptions on COVID-19 and understand their mitigation strategies amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. A questionnaire survey, depth interviews, and field observation were conducted. We found that while managers' opinion of COVID-19 was relatively low, they hold high agreement in supporting tourism development amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. These could be related to those managers who are proud of tourism and its promising benefits to their area. Furthermore, both structural and non-structural mitigation strategies were done to overcoming pandemic impacts and inviting visitors.

Key words: Curug Cipeteuy, mitigation, COVID-19, community-based tourism, national park

INTRODUCTION

Community-based tourism (CBT) in National Parks (NPs) has become a top priority for Indonesia's government policies in providing a viable livelihood option for locals (Wiratno, 2018). At this point, CBT in Gunung Ciremai National Park (GCNP) in west Java has become a model for CBT development at the utilization zone of Indonesia's NPs (Wiratno, 2018). A bulk of literature suggests that tourism triggers simultaneous economic, socio-cultural, and environmental benefits for adjacent local communities of NPs (Nugroho & Numata, 2020, 2021; Sharpley, 2014). Expressly, CBT in GCNP has provided access for locals to actively engage in tourism management, by which it has generated consequential economic impacts for its neighbouring local communities (Nugroho & Numata, 2020). However, scholars argue that tourism is vulnerable to major shocks (e.g., health), including the COVID-19 pandemic (Sigala, 2020).

Since its first outbreaks in 2019, COVID-19 has vividly impacted all aspects globally (Gössling *et al.*, 2020). Indeed, countries across the globe have released various approaches to managing the pandemic (Djalante *et al.*, 2020). The Indonesian government has enacted a series of policies to overcome the spread of COVID-19, including physical distancing and large-scale people movement (Djalante *et al.*, 2020). Nevertheless, COVID-19 has impacted people's awareness of their health risks (Commodari *et al.*, 2020; Vally, 2020), but it has also changed people's mobility patterns (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020; Gössling *et al.*, 2020; Hara & Yamaguchi, 2021; Sigala, 2020), eventually affecting the number of

visitors to tourism destinations. These circumstances would diminish inherent tourism benefits for locals (Arthi & Parman, 2021; Mofijur *et al.*, 2021). While attracting visitors to revisit tourist destinations is challenging (Sigala, 2020), scholars argue that understanding locals' host awareness of and opinions on COVID-19 and their mitigation strategies would provide a substantial basis for managing tourist destinations during the pandemic (Joo *et al.*, 2021; Kamata, 2021). Indeed, earlier studies demonstrate that locals' awareness of specific issues (e.g., health) would affect their perception, which eventually governs their behaviour (Chien *et al.*, 2017; Huang *et al.*, 2020; Jonas *et al.*, 2011). These may influence their mitigation strategy to cope with potential adverse impacts while optimizing their opportunities to gain benefits (Hardoyo *et al.*, 2011; Mendonca & Gullo, 2020; Schlef *et al.*, 2018). Ultimately, locals' host mitigation strategies overcoming COVID-19 impacts would enhance visitors' confidence to visit tourist destinations (Orindaru *et al.*, 2021).

Given the forecited issues, our study rests on how locals' CBT managers react toward the COVID-19 pandemic and how they mitigate and manage tourism sites amidst pandemic circumstances. Using the case of Curug Cipeteuy, a community-based tourism destination in GCNP, this study will elucidate locals' host perceptions on COVID-19 and understand their mitigation strategies in managing tourist destinations amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. This study will offer a better picture of the struggles amidst pandemics in a CBT destination in a national park of Indonesia, complementing the existing literature.

RESEARCH METHOD

The current study was conducted at Curug Cipeteuy, a nature-based tourism destination in Gunung Ciremai National Park (GCNP), located in the utilization zone of GCNP. Curug Cipeteuy is situated in the Bantaragung village, Majalengka Regency, and it is one of 51 direct adjacent villages of GCNP. Indeed, GCNP has a solid commitment to empowering locals by issuing a license to manage tourism sites in utilization zone directly adjacent to their villages. Subsequently, the number of neighbouring villages which manage tourism has rapidly increased since 2015 (BTNGC, 2018). By surveying 12 neighbouring villages in GCNP, earlier studies indicated that CBT in GCNP provides substantial economic benefits for locals, eventually increasing their support for tourism in their area (Nugroho & Numata, 2020, 2021).

Being nominated in a precious event of the Ministry of Tourism in 2017 make Curug Cipeteuy one of the most visited nature-based destinations both in GCNP and Majalengka regency (Yuanditra & Ekasari, 2020). Curug Cipeteuy is managed by Agung Lestari local cooperative. They operate numerous tourism services business activities include local food and beverages, tourist entrance tickets, parking, camping ground, souvenirs, coffee shops, and homestays.

A questionnaire survey consisted of three sections were constructed to investigate CBT managers perceptions toward the COVID-19 pandemic, mitigation strategies, and demographic characteristics. *The first section* consists of 19 items questions adopted from Joo *et al.* (2021). These inquiries explore manager's perceived health risk (PR), welcoming nature (WN), emotional closeness (EC), sympathetic understanding (SU), and support for tourism development during pandemic (STD). We also inquired about the manager's obedience toward COVID-19 protocols (OB) derived from Amir *et al.*, (2020). Inquiries responses were coded on a five-point Likert scale from 1 meaning "strongly disagree" and 5 "strongly agree". The following section was investigated mitigation strategies (i.e., structural and non-structural) implemented by CBT managers to overcome the risk of tourism activities during the pandemic. The framework and selected items were adapted from Hardoyo *et al.* (2011). They indicate that structural mitigations encompass physical and technological constructions to lessen the possible impacts of a hazard. Non-structural mitigation strategies do not involve physical establishments, such as implementing regulations and policies, promoting public awareness-raising, training, and education. The final section was inquired manager's demographic variables, including age, gender, formal education attainment, jobs, and personal monthly income.

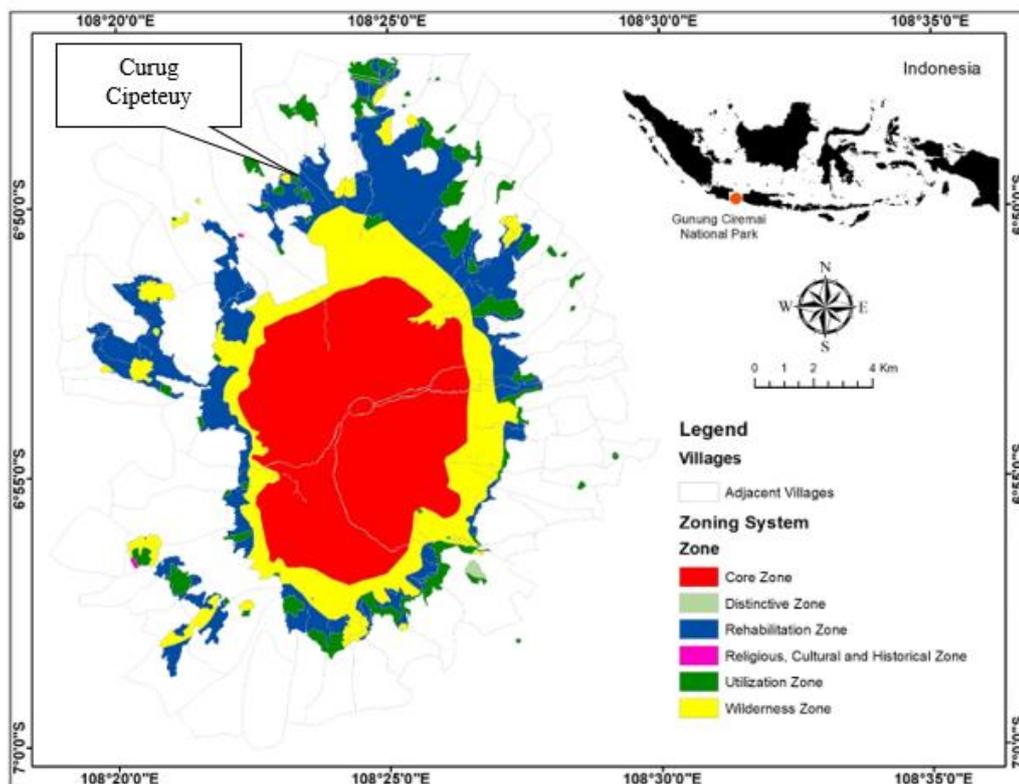


Figure 1 Research site map

As we mentioned earlier, this study focuses on examining Cipeteuy tourism site managers' opinions and how they mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, we determined Cipeteuy tourism site managers as the targeted respondents. In total, 60 were registered as tourism managers. Therefore, we inquired those question items to all the Cipeteuy managers. A direct face-to-face manner was employed to obtain responses from them. Heerwegh & Loosveldt (2008) suggest that direct face-to-face interviews may have a high response rate of respondents. Furthermore, in-depth interviews to elucidate mitigation strategies involved Cipeteuy tourism site managers (i.e., head of tourism site managers and advisors), the COVID-19 task force, and the tourism and culture agency Majalengka regency, and GCNP representative. Finally, series of field observations were conducted to complement data obtained from interviews. Data were collected from April - June 2021.

Descriptive statistics were performed in this study. It was used to outline respondents' demographic characteristics. Next, a radar diagram was employed to

illustrate managers' opinions of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as perceived health risk (PR), welcoming nature (WN), emotional closeness (EC), sympathetic understanding (SU), and support for tourism development during pandemic (STD). Cronbach alpha analysis was performed to evaluate that all the question items are reliable under the designated latent variables. Finally, structural and non-structural mitigation strategies implemented in Curug Cipeteuy are explained descriptively.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Respondent characteristics

In total, 60 completed questionnaires were obtained. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Most of the respondents were male (60%), 32% were between 17 and 25 years old, only 5% were illiterate, and 64% earned less than IDR 1,000,000 - per month.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Characteristics	Attributes	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	36	60%
	Female	24	40%
Age (years)	17-25	19	32%
	26-35	16	27%
	36-45	6	10%
	46-55	8	13%
	56-66	9	15%
	>66	2	3%
Formal education attainment	No formal education	3	5%
	Elementary school	24	40%
	Junior high school	9	15%
	High school	21	35%
	University	3	5%
Personal monthly income (IDR)	<500,000	22	37%
	500,000-1,000,000	16	27%
	1,000,000-1,500,000	11	18%
	1,500,000-2,000,000	1	2%
	2,000,000-2,500,000	1	2%
	2,500,000-3,000,000	0	0%
	3,000,000-3,500,000	1	2%
	3,500,000-4,000,000	8	13%
	>4,000.000	0	0%

2. Perceptions toward COVID-19 pandemic

We found that for the exception of emotional closeness (EC), Cronbach alpha values for all latent variables were more than 0.5, demonstrating a high level of reliability. Furthermore, the overall mean value of perceived health risk (PR), welcoming nature (WN), emotional closeness (EC), sympathetic understanding (SU), support for tourism development during pandemic (STD), and obedience toward COVID-19 protocols (OB) were 2.9; 4.30; 4.21; 4.26; 4.21; and 4.39 respectively. Ultimately, the standard deviations of PR, WN, EC, SU, STD, and OB were 1.22; 0.74; 0.96; 0.97; 0.96; and 0.74, respectively. Figure 1 illustrates web diagram of the mean value of latent variables.

In this study, our analysis indicated that managers perceived health risks of COVID-19 due to tourism were the lowest and varied. Concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, they neither agree nor disagree that tourism activities in Curug Cipeteuy negatively impact locals.

Our finding was inconsistent with Joo *et al.* (2021) findings which indicated that incoming visitors to tourist destinations would increase the chance of being infected by COVID-19 and limiting their outdoor activities. These contradictory results might be related to managers' awareness of COVID-19. Earlier studies concurred that the degree to which those who are aware of COVID-19 could be influenced by their knowledge and access to social media (Cato *et al.*, 2021; Rahmanti *et al.*, 2021; Sharif *et al.*, 2021). The variation of managers' opinions toward COVID-19 might also be led by hoaxes, misinformation, political trust, and propaganda within social media (Forati & Ghose, 2021; Islam *et al.*, 2020; Lee *et al.*, 2021; Su, 2021). Therefore, providing sufficient information on COVID-19 through multiple channels would help lessen COVID-19 knowledge gaps among managers. This will eventually generate solid opinions and mitigation strategies in managing tourist destination amidst pandemic.

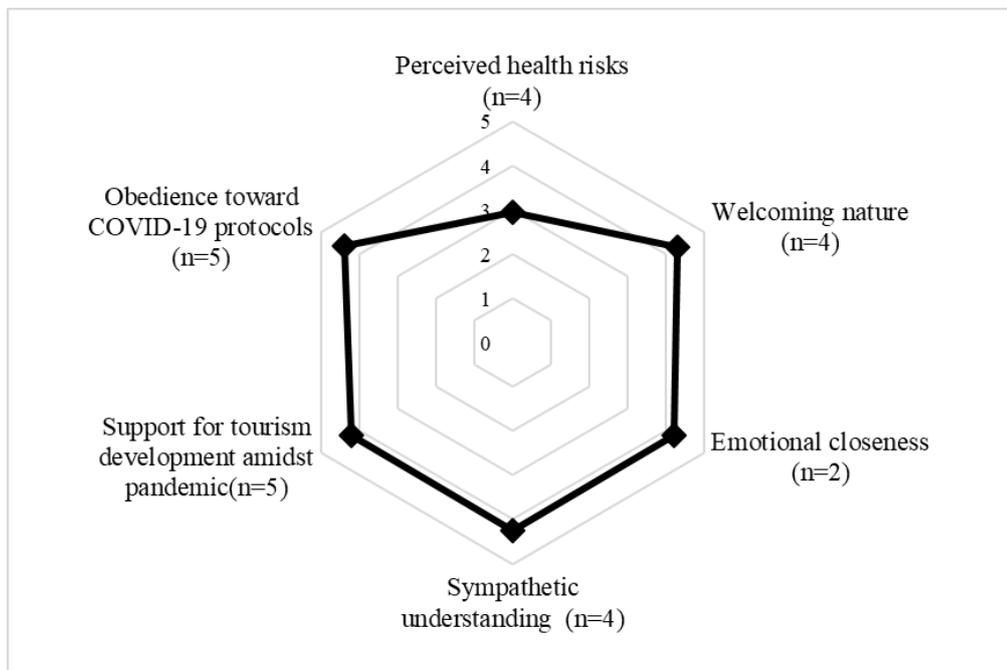


Figure 2 Mean value of latent variables

Table 2. Questionnaire results

Latent variables	Overall value		
	Mean	SD	Cronbach's alpha
Perceived health risk (PR) (n=4)	2.96	1.22	0.68
Welcoming nature (WN) (n=4)	4.30	0.74	0.52
Emotional closeness (EC) (n=2)	4.21	0.96	0.41
Sympathetic understanding (SU) (n=4)	4.26	0.97	0.64
Support for tourism development during pandemic (STD) (n=5)	4.21	0.96	0.72
Obedience toward COVID-19 protocols (OB) (n=5)	4.39	0.74	0.71

SD = Standard Deviation, n = number of questions

However, despite being perplexed about the risk of COVID-19, managers claimed they have complied with COVID-19 protocols. Indeed, the Indonesian government and the national park manager have obligated all public sectors, including tourism, to comply with COVID-19 protocols under pandemic circumstances (Djalante *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, compliance with the COVID-19 protocols is essential for tourist destinations to reopen and welcome visitors. Given these scenarios, obedience toward COVID-19 protocols might be induced by those regulations. Within their studies, Sjöstedt & Linell (2021) asserted that sufficient government regulation capacity in particular circumstances could influence people cooperative behaviour.

Interestingly, the current study found that managers' hold high agreement in supporting tourism development amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. It might be related to their high agreement on WN, EC, and SU variables, which demonstrates that they are proud of tourism and its promising benefits to their area (Joo *et al.*, 2021). Tourism of Curug Cipeteuy has increased job opportunities, local products demand, and local culture exhibitions. These are corroborated by scholars who argued that tourism development would trigger rural development by generating simultaneously economic, socio-cultural, and environmental benefits for locals. These circumstances would potentially bolster their sense of belonging toward their community and local environment. More importantly, acquiring substantial benefits from CBT development in NPs would stimulating locals feeling of obligation to be actively involved in conserving NPs areas (Saarinen, 2010; Sebele, 2010; Sene-Harper *et al.*, 2019).

3. Mitigation strategies in Curug Cipeteuy

We observed that Curug Cipeteuy has a solid commitment to providing clean, healthy, safe, and environmentally friendly tourism, particularly tourism amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. We found that Curug Cipeteuy has implemented structural and non-structural measures to mitigate COVID-19 transmission risks within the tourism site.

4. Structural mitigations

We observed that Curug Cipeteuy had provided hand-wash sinks, a sterilizer chamber, and physical distancing signs. To make sure that visitors are clean and hygienic, they must wash their hands and enter the sterilizer chamber before getting into the tourism site. These measures might be related that needles are believed to be an effective media in transmitting COVID-19 viruses. More importantly, Orindaru *et al.* (2021) suggest that enhancing clean and hygiene conditions would restore visitors' confidence in visiting a tourist destination. Furthermore, physical distancing signs and preventative measures instructions were deployed scattered in the tourism area, warning visitors to wear masks, keep their distance and stay away from the crowd. Moreover, a separate line to enter and exit the tourism site was built to lessen the crowd. More importantly, they also prepare health care services for visitors, including body temperature measurement, disinfectant sprays, and immediate health care in need. Figure 3 shows structural mitigation strategies implemented in Curug Cipeteuy.



Figure 3 Structural mitigation in Curug Cipeteuy, (a) hand-wash sinks, (b) sterilizer chamber, (c) sign route, (d) preventative measures instructions, (e) physical distancing signs, (f) health care services

5. *Non-structural mitigations*

Curug Cipeteuy is in the utilization zone of GCNP and administratively situated in the Majalengka regency. Thus, regulation and policies from the location in which Curug Cipeteuy is located are strongly considered. Curug Cipeteuy has considered and issued a series of rules and guidelines to cope with the dynamic of COVID-19 cases. For instance, Curug Cipeteuy managers limited the number of visitors entering the sites to control the masses. Only 50% maximum capacity of visitors was allowed. Tourism management in Curug Cipeteuy has successfully achieved CHSE (Clean, Health, Safety, and Environmental) accreditation from the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy. By earning

CONCLUSION

The empirical finding suggests that despite managers' opinion of COVID-19 being low, they hold high agreement in supporting tourism development amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Both structural and non-structural mitigation strategies have been implemented to enhance services and public trust to visit Curug Cipeteuy.

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CHSE certifications, proves a solid commitment of Curug Cipeteuy to increase public trust and visitors' confidence that the site has met the designated criteria as well as implement, maintain, and improve health protocols amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. These are not only for visitors, but they also conduct periodic monitoring to ensure site managers and workers comply with the protocols (i.e., wearing the mask, face shields) and get sufficient vaccination doses. Ultimately, promotion to visit Curug Cipeteuy through multiple social media channels (i.e., Instagram, Facebook, and website) was done to deliver adequate information and gain public trust. They actively inform

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