

## **TOURIST PERCEPTION OF THE TOURISM PRODUCTS IN MERANGIN GEOPARK, JAMBI, INDONESIA**

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### ***Abstract***

*Merangin Geopark, Jambi, Indonesia is one of Indonesian National Geoparks which is on the way of being the member of Global Geopark Network (GGN). In doing so, Merangin Geopark has been being developed as a tourist destination considering that one of the important aspects of Geopark is the tourism development. Therefore, this study was aimed to analyze the tourists' perception of the Geopark's tourism products. By using a qualitative approach, this study collected data from 80 respondents (as sample) through questionnaires, coupled with interviews and observation.*

*The analysis results show that out of 4 aspects of tourism products, only attraction which gets the highest positive perception percentage (82%) meaning that the attractions are interesting enough and deserved to satisfy the visitors. Tourist organizations/managers get positive perception of 58%, which indicates that visitors are quite satisfied, but they need some improvement. Meanwhile, amenities and accessibility have more negative perception which indicates that the government should pay more attention on these two aspects.*

**Keywords:** *Geopark, tourist perception, tourism product, GGN, Merangin, Jambi*

### **Introduction**

Indonesia as the second largest mega-biodiversity country in the world after Brazil has many natural resources such as flora, fauna and natural beauty. Such a phenomenon makes Indonesia very potential for attracting tourists, especially adventurers, who want to enjoy the natural beauty and to know more about Indonesian biodiversity. This potential should be responded with a strategy of regional development as a tourist destination that can provide economic value to the national income and local community with regard to the sustainability of the ecosystem (Fandeli, 2000:3).

Not only rich in the variety of geological and biological diversities, Indonesia is also rich in the variety of cultures. It can be seen from many tribes/ethnic groups living in Indonesia, so that the existing culture is a valuable asset when it is able to be empowered in such a way for the community welfare. Therefore, the existence of these nature and culture should continue to be preserved.

One of the potential efforts that can be done to preserve the culture and nature in the tourism frame is by creating a Geopark. The concept of Geopark serves as a tourist destination that can accommodate tourism phenomena which are oriented towards natural beauty and diversity of culture. This is in line with Dewi (2011) who states, "With the benefit of Indonesian tourism branding which is based on nature and culture, the development of sustainable destinations become a strategic choice to build tourism in Indonesia as well as respond to the trend of eco-tourists which are getting stronger."

Currently, Indonesia continues to build Geopark and has managed to get two of its Geoparks to be recognized by UNESCO, i.e. Mount Batur Geopark (Bali) and Gunung Sewu Geopark (Yogyakarta, Pacitan, and Wonogiri). The success of Mount Batur Bali listed as the member of Global Geopark Network (GGN) cannot be separated from the cooperation of various parties including research. As well as the Provincial Government of Bali, Jambi Province is also determined to make its Geopark, i.e. Merangin Geopark, to be the member of GGN. As released by the Geological Agency of the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources, Merangin Geopark has been designated as a National Geopark. In addition, there are 6 other Geoparks including Merangin which are being processed; 2 geoparks have been proposed (Rinjani and Pacitan) and 4 geoparks are just proposed (Merangin Jambi, Raja Ampat, West Java and Toba Caldera).

Indeed, all three forming factors of Geopark including geodiversity, biodiversity, and cultural-diversity have been studied and inventoried as part of an effort to get Merangin Geopark listed as a GGN member. However, the emphasis of that government's effort is still in the field study of Geopark itself meaning there has been no assessment of the tourists who visit the Geopark. In fact, one of the important aspects of tourism is tourist or visitor. The presence of tourists in a tourism attraction is an integral element since one of the indicators of tourism success is the high number of visiting tourists. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the tourists' perception of the tourism products of Merangin Geopark considering that perception will determine whether the tourists are willing to visit or not.

### **Literature Review**

Initially, Geopark is an idea of two European geologists, Guy Martini from France and Zouros Nicholas from Greece, who took the initiative to develop the concept of geological heritage (geoheritage) in the form of sustainable use of the earth's diversity (geodiversity) to support economic empowerment. Furthermore, this concept is used by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Culture Organization (UNESCO) and used as a method to promote the improvement of the function of geoscience in nature conservation, as well as empower communities around the location of geological heritage, throughout the world.

The definition of Geopark can be understood through its meaning, function and implementation as a component related to the nature and life on earth. The concept of Geopark has three basic notions, which are: 1) an area that has meaning as a geological heritage (so it needs to be preserved), and as a place to apply sustainable economic development strategies undertaken through good and realistic management structure. 2) Geopark provides opportunities for job creation for the local community in terms of real economic gains. 3) Within the framework

of Geopark, geological heritage objects and geological knowledge are shared with the general public. The existing geological elements and landscape are related to aspects natural and cultural environments.

### ***Tourism Products***

Several theories from experts coupled with those from the Directorate General of Tourism, Republic of Indonesia conclude that the components of the tourism products include: **1) attractions**, i.e. site attractions: historical places, places with a good climate, beautiful scenery) and event attractions: incident or events such as congresses, exhibitions, or other events. **2) Amenities** include a lodging, restaurants, local transport which allows tourists to travel, communication tools. **3) Accessibility** is a place not too far away, transportation available to the location, cheap, safe, and comfortable. **4) Tourism organization** is to draw up a framework of tourism development, regulate and promote the tourism industry so that it is known by many people.

Based on the opinion of experts and an institution above, the components of the tourism products can be simplified as follows:

**Table 1**  
**Tourism Product Components**

Experts	Attractions	Facilities	Accessibility	Institutions
Middleton	✓	✓	✓	
Directorate General of Tourism	✓	✓	✓	✓
Peter Mason	✓	✓	✓	

*Source: Middleton, Directorate General of Tourism, Peter Mason*

### ***Perception***

Perception is a process of sensory cues and relevant past experience which is organized to give us a structured and meaningful description of a particular situation. Perception is the view, someone's capture about something that is influenced by the received information and its interpretation to such information. Perception of alternative entertainment and a variety of tourism destinations is conditioned by three important elements, including personal experiences, preferences, and other people's stories (Wahyono, 2006).

Before traveling, tourists always study the areas or attractions that will be their destination by considering a variety of existing alternatives in accordance with the criteria and motivation so that they can make the right decision. In an effort to recognize a tourist area or a tourist attraction that will serve as the destination, tourists learn the information obtained either from advertisement or friends or relatives. Such information will be tailored to the goals and desires in their holiday so that if these things have not been in accordance with their wishes, they will look for other alternatives. From the results of studying such information, perception of tourist areas or tourist attraction is then formed. Kotler said that this is a process someone passes through in selecting, organizing and interpreting information to make a meaningful picture, or in other words, it can be

said that perception assist individuals in selecting and interpreting the information into something meaningful (Poerwanto, 2004).

### Methodology

This study used a qualitative-quantitative research method. This study was conducted in Merangin Geopark located in Jambi Province by focusing on Merangin District.

To collect the data, this study used questionnaires with closed questions, coupled with interviews, and observation. Meanwhile, the population of tourists was taken from the number of visiting tourists in 2012 (15,000 tourists). From that number of tourists (population), 85 ones were taken as samples (respondents). Meanwhile, the determination of the respondents was conducted using a random sampling technique.

The list of questions was made from a number of indicators derived from a number of variables compiled in this study (see Table 2).

**Table 2**  
**Research Concepts, Parameters, Variables and Indicators**

Concept	Parameters	Variables	Indicators
Development of tourism products	Attractions	1. Geodiversity - Flora Fossil (main icon of Merangin Geopark) and shell fossils	- Uniqueness of the object - Display - Condition of object
		2. Biodiversity - Richness of flora-fauna - Bird watching - Wild life Hunting	- Scarcity of animals - Uniqueness - Number of wild animals - Availability of facilities and guides
		- River	- Beauty of river - Stream / rapids
		Scenery / landscape	- Beauty of natural landscape - Coolness of tourist sites
		3. Cultural diversity - Local people	- Uniqueness of community activities - Hospitality of local residents - Local Products
		Accessibility	1. Location
	2. Distance		- Distance from the airport / terminal
	3. Connection		- Road to the location - Signposts to the location
	4. Transportation		- Ease of getting transportation to the location
	Amenities	1. Accommodation/ Lodging	- Room rates - Comfort of Room
		2. Parking	- Ease of parking vehicles

			- Area of parking lot
		3. The walkways	- Ease of passing through the trail
		4. Places of worship	- Capacity and hygiene - Comfort
		5. Souvenirs shop	- Price - Variation
		6. Restaurants / cafes	- Existence of restaurant to cater for tourists at the tourism site
		7. Toilet	- Cleanliness - Availability of water
		8. Health Care Service	- Availability of health services around location such as clinics or hospitals.
		9. Telecommunication system	- Availability of telephone network
		10. Souvenir shops	- Availability of souvenir shops selling local production
	Tourism Organization/management	1. Promotion.	- Promotion through the media
		2. Cleanliness.	- Free waste and liquid waste
		3. Security.	- The existence of local security officers or police
		4. Information for tourists.	- Information center - Access to information center
		5. Staff service	- Service and hospitality - Ability to handle complaints - Willingness to help tourists - Ability to convey information - Willingness to greet

This study employed a statistical analysis technique using Microsoft Excel. The instrument (questionnaire) format uses a Likert scale with four answer stages (very bad, bad, good, very good). If the percentage of 'bad' + 'very bad' responses is higher than that of 'good' + 'very good' responses, the tourist perception is then considered as **negative**. Conversely, if the percentage of 'bad' + 'very bad' responses is lower than that of 'good' + 'very good' responses, the tourist perception is then considered as **potitive**.

### Results and Discussion

The tourists' perception of the tourism product components in Merangin Geopark can be seen in Figure 1 below.

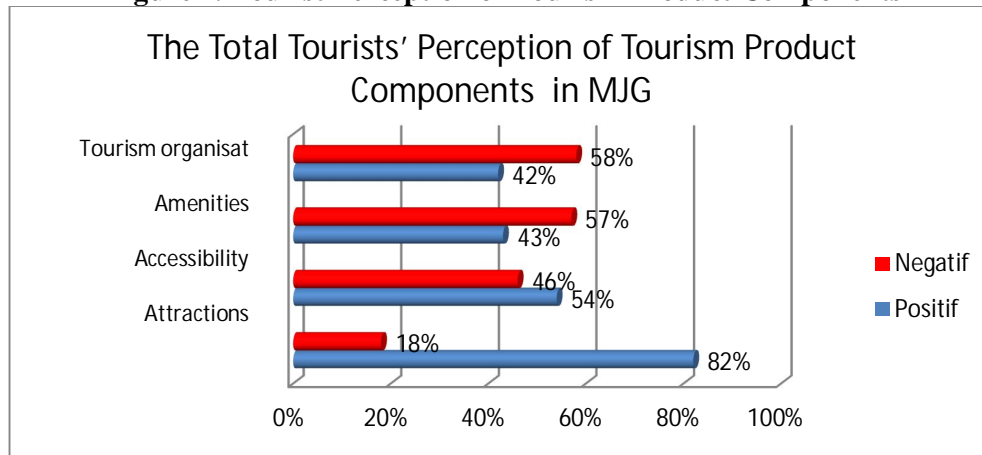
**Figure 1. Tourist Perception of Tourism Product Components**

Figure 1 shows that the components of attractions get the highest positive perceptions. This is because Merangin Geopark does have high potential of geodiversity, biodiversity and cultural diversity. Meanwhile, the negative perception of the components of the attractions is caused by its less hunted wild animals and the absence of cultural diversity products available to bring home by tourists.

In case of accessibility a component, the negative perception gets 46% which is caused by few signposts to tourism site, and the availability of good public transport from the airport or bus terminal. In case of amenities component, tourists generally have a more negative perception than positive perception. The details of the tourists' perception of amenities are: the highest negative tourists' perception is 70% reflected in 3 factors: availability of mobile phone network, availability of souvenir shops (local products), and food stalls around tourism site. In addition, negative perception is also reflected in other factors such as the availability of lodging/inn, toilets, and place of worship. In order to improve the quality of homestay in terms of convenience, price, and facilities, it is necessary to create a standardization and training for villagers who are interested in making their homes as homestays.

The tourists' perception of tourism organization/management in Merangin Geopark is dominated by positive perception. The details of the positive perception in the tourism organization/management are as follows: the security system gets the highest positive perception, followed by the staffs' hospitality and their ability to convey information. The negative perception of tourists in tourism organization in Merangin Geopark is reflected in: the existence of tourist information centers, promotion through various media, the cleanliness of tourism site, access to tourist information center, and the way the staffs handle tourists' complaints.

#### ***Tourist Perception of Attractions***

The details of the tourist perception of tourist attractions in Merangin Geopark can be seen in Table 3.

**Table 3**  
**Tourist Perception of the Tourist Attractions in Merangin Geopark**

<b>1. Geodiversity</b>	Very Bad	Bad	Good	Very Good	<b>Perception</b>
Uniqueness	1%	14%	58%	27%	<b>Positive</b>
Display	27%	39%	19%	15%	<b>Negative</b>
Physical condition	12%	19%	28%	41%	<b>Positive</b>
<b>2. Biodiversity</b>	Very Bad	Bad	Good	Very Good	<b>Perception</b>
Scarceness	1%	18%	39%	42%	<b>Positive</b>
Beauty of view	2%	14%	42%	41%	<b>Positive</b>
Coolness of location	12%	19%	28%	41%	<b>Positive</b>
Diversity of animals	2%	5%	53%	40%	<b>Positive</b>
Number of wild animals	41%	24%	21%	14%	<b>Negative</b>
River (beauty and stream)	1%	6%	47%	46%	<b>Positive</b>
<b>3. Cultural Diversity</b>	Very Bad	Bad	Good	Very Good	<b>Perception</b>
Daily lives of local community	5%	20%	36%	39%	<b>Positive</b>
Arts	1%	35%	35%	28%	<b>Positive</b>
Typical food	12%	19%	28%	41%	<b>Positive</b>
Local products / souvenirs	50%	44%	4%	2%	<b>Negative</b>

- **Geodiversity**

Table 3 shows that the physical condition of the flora fossils and uniqueness is perceived positive by tourists. It is because along the geological path, there are a lot of obvious fossils, ranging from plant fossils dating back millions of years to coral and sea shell fossils.

In the case of display, the tourists perceive it as negative (66%). It is reasonable since there is no museum or exhibition in the location. There are still an information board about the Geopark found in the information center in Air Batu Village and a display of shell and plant fossils at the main entrance, but the condition is less attractive and seems to be poorly set. Therefore, there should be special rules for the display of fossils that deserve a high-valued geodiversity.

- **Biodiversity**

The tourists perceive the scarcity of flora and fauna that exist in Merangin Geopark Jambi as positive (81%). The Guguk Traditional Forest (Hutan Adat) which covers an area of 690 ha has a lot of wild and rare animals live in the forest, such as Sumatran tigers (endangered), deer, forest chickens, tapir, honey bear, moose, and kuau birds. In case the diversity of flora, although trees on the Guguk Forest are also used to build houses by the locals, but they are obliged to plant trees as a substitute. Therefore, the diversity of plant species in this forest is still preserved. In addition, if people cut trees in Guguk forest without permission of the village officials, then they will be subject to fines.

Coolness of location is also perceived positive since the main zone of Merangin Geopark is exactly located in the middle of a dense forest. In addition, rubber plantations owned by villagers do not reduce its coolness. Diversity of animals is perceived positive by tourists because most of the locations are in Bukit Dua Belas National Park, Kerinci Seblat National Park and a Traditional Forest guarded by indigenous peoples of Guguk Village. In this Guguk Forest, visitors

can see directly the diverse rare animals living in the wild with a night trip package run by the locals. The beauty and rapids of river that divides the dense forests and plantations is also considered positive. Even, the rapids in the river are categorized as grade 4.

The most negative perception is in the number of animals. Until now, boar is the only animal that may be hunted in the region, although there are many types of animals, In addition, this animal can be easily found in Merangin Geopark.

- **Cultural diversity**

Based on Table 3, daily activities of locals, arts/traditions, typical food in Air Batu Village and areas around the core zone of Merangin Geopark are perceived positive by respondents. This reasonable because when tourists enter the village, they will immediately see women, including children aged 6 to the elderly, wearing sarong cloth as everyday clothing. This is a tradition of ancient Malay which is very rarely found elsewhere in the Province of Jambi. It is attractive for tourists, even for tourists from Jambi, considering that the Malay villages along Batang Hari River no longer wear sarong as daily clothing. In addition, the traditional practices are seen from houses made of stilts, cooking with firewood, gathering herbal medicines from medicinal plants grown by women and diverse tasty and diverse foods. In terms of art and cultural activities, the locals often display art performances like village festivals and major events that bring in more tourists.

Different from the previous point, local products/souvenirs are perceived negative by tourists. Actually, there are a lot interesting things to be packed as souvenirs from Air Batu Village such as typical food and the unique and efficacious kepayang oil but no one produces them as souvenir.

### *Tourist Perception of Amenities*

The details of the tourist perception of amenities in Merangin Geopark can be seen in Table 4.

**Table 4**  
**Tourist Perception of Amenities in Merangin Geopark**

Amenities	Very Bad	Bad	Good	Very Good	Perception
Availability of inn/lodging	30%	44%	26%	1%	Negative
Room rate	11%	33%	33%	23%	Positive
Convenience of inn/lodging	13%	27%	48%	12%	Positive
Toilet	31%	44%	18%	7%	Negative
Parking lot	15%	22%	44%	19%	Positive
Availability of fresh water	5%	9%	54%	32%	Positive
Place of worship (mosque)	45%	32%	16%	7%	Negative
Restaurant around the location	36%	40%	20%	4%	Negative
Availability of cellphone network	43%	42%	15%		Negative
Souvenir stalls	46%	43%	10%	1%	Negative

From all points of amenities in Table 4, there are six points perceived negative by tourists. In case of availability of lodging, in Air Batu village, which



is far from the district capital, there is no homestay prepared for tourists. There are only about five houses that can be rented for a place to stay with makeshift facilities. If there are nationwide events such as rafting championship held every the end of year, most of the tourists will return to the city of Bangko (city of Merangin regency) with a mileage of less than 1 hour, and some set up a tent in Air Batu Village due to the limited number of homestay. In case of Places of Worship, there is a historic village mosque, but the cleanliness and facilities are poor.

There are four points perceived positive. In case of room rate, 56% of respondents perceive it as positive, because homestay in Air Batu village have not had a standard rate and standard facilities for tourists, so the prices are set by the locals and are perceived inexpensive by tourists. In case of convenience of inn/lodging, 60% of respondents perceive it as positive. Parking (63%) is also perceived positive due to a very broad parking lot and it is very easy to find.

#### ***Tourist Perception of Accessibility***

The details of the tourist perception of accessibility in Merangin Geopark can be seen in Table 5.

**Table 5**  
**Tourist Perception of Accessibility in Merangin Geopark**

Accessibility	Very Bad	Bad	Good	Very Good	Perception
Ease to reach the location	32%	44%	23%	1%	Negative
Distance from the airport / terminal	32%	47%	19%	2%	Negative
Transportation to the location	37%	46%	15%	2%	Negative
Signposts to the location	42%	45%	12%	1%	Negative
Roads to the location	29%	31%	26%	14%	Negative

From Table 5, it can be seen that the whole points of accessibility are perceived negative by respondents. There are several reasons for this. The location is far away from the district town (50 km). It takes approximately one hour to reach the core zone in Air Batu Village because the roads are not all paved. Lack of public transport to reach the core zone is the main cause of negative perception. It is quite troublesome for travelers with a limited budget. The Sultan Taha Airport as the main gateway into the Province of Jambi has a considerable distance to Merangin regency, which is about 256 km with a travel time for five to six hours. In addition, there is single signpost showing travelers to reach the core zone in Air Batu Village. If not accompanied by guides of the Tourism Office, tourists would have trouble finding this location.

#### ***Tourist Perception of Accessibility***

The details of the tourist perception of tourism organization (management) in Merangin Geopark can be seen in Table 6.

**Table 6**  
**Tourist Perception of Tourism Organization (Management) in Merangin Geopark**

Tourism Organization (Management)	Very Bad	Bad	Good	Very Good	Perception
Promotion through the media	28%	44%	24%	4%	Negative
Cleanliness	30%	43%	23%	4%	Negative
Security system	8%	9%	47%	36%	Positive
Information center	35%	45%	14%	6%	Negative
Access to information center	33%	36%	16%	15%	Negative
Service and hospitality	18%	19%	33%	30%	Positive
Handling tourist complaints	26%	42%	16%	16%	Negative
Ability to convey information	6%	28%	38%	28%	Positive

From Table 6, it can be seen that almost all the points of tourist organization/ management get a negative perception. Nevertheless, some points get positive perception, including: safety system, service and hospitality, and the ability of staffs to convey information. This is because the guides have received training in guiding, in addition to locals' awareness of maintaining security/safety of the tourists.

### Conclusions

From all aspects, the overall tourists' perception of attractions that exist in Merangin Geopark is 57% (positive) and 43% (negative). Meanwhile, from the four aspects of tourism products, only attractions get the most positive perception (82%) which means that the attractions are good and able to satisfy the visiting tourists. Tourism organization has a positive perception as much as 58%, which indicates that tourists are quite satisfied, but it still needs some improvement. Lastly, amenities and accessibility have more negative perception which indicates that these two aspects need a lot of improvement.

### Recommendations

Regardless of the limitations of this research, i.e. this research was only conducted in the core area (Renah Pembarap Sub-District) and its analysis was only based on the tourists' perception, this study still can be used as a basis to propose the following recommendations:

- a. In order to obtain better results, it is expected that subsequent studies with similar topics are conducted by using a deeper analysis, for example by SPSS, covering a wider study site (not only in the core zone), formulating more detailed variables of tourism products and employing a greater number of respondents.
- b. Merangin Geopark which is rich in potential, biodiversity and cultural diversity geodiversity should be able to minimize the negative tourists' perception through a proper development of the existing tourism products. This requires cross-sector support in the geotourism development including relevant agencies and stakeholders such as NGOs, professional scientific organizations, local government and local community.

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