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"This Place is the Source of Our Identity": The Case of the Indigenous People of Atoni Pah Meto with the Mutis Timau National Park in Indonesia

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Abstract

Identity is always intertwined with collective identity and the surrounding natural environment, and it is the fundamental foundation that defines who they are to the surrounding nature. In the context of decision-making, Mutis Timau National Park shows that a lack of voice in Indigenous peoples is accommodated and a lack of identity recognition, but only involves specific individuals selectively. This paper is based on an explanatory case study, and the findings of this study reveal the importance of space for better environmental policy design, especially those guided by collaborative action in environmental decisions by accommodating the voices of indigenous leaders or community leaders from various clans fairly. Environmental communication with respect for culture and identity recognition will enhance collaboration and support the effectiveness of nature conservation and socio-cultural sustainability. The theoretical contribution of this research corroborates a significant contribution to the environmental communication literature and offers a practical framework contribution to be applied to inclusive communication strategies in a global context.

Keywords: Environmental Communication, Cultural Identity, Environmental Identity, Indigenous People, National Park

1. Introduction

National parks are a globally accepted concept as a conservation way to protect the integrity of ecosystems, education, research, and community well-being. In addition, it significantly contributes to the effective conservation of biodiversity by protecting various species and their habitats (Jiao et al., 2022). They also serve as a sanctuary for endemic and rare flora and fauna, help maintain ecological balance, and prevent species extinction (Dahal, 2021). National parks in different regions have provided essential ecosystem services, including water resource protection, climate regulation, and soil conservation(Javeed et al., 2023). In addition to offering ecosystem services, national parks also develop tourism tourism, which is very important for the economy of local communities(He & Guo, 2021; Silva et al., 2023). As such, national parks are invaluable for scientific research

and long-term ecological monitoring, providing insights into natural processes and human impacts on ecosystems (Heurich et al., 2010; Javeed et al., 2023).

Conservation is essential to balance ecology, biodiversity, and wildlife sanctuaries. Biodiversity is essential for the stability and functioning of ecosystems. Of course, this strongly supports ecosystem services beneficial for human society, such as clean water, air, and fertile soil(Durmaz et al., 2024; Mestanza-Ramón et al., 2020). Effective conservation strategies include establishing protected areas, sustainable use of resources, and ecosystem restoration, helping preserve and ensure long-term ecological sustainability (Durmaz et al., 2024). Sustainable resource use requires the implementation of practices that support a balance between human needs and environmental sustainability.

National parks are used as a tool of state control over natural resources to be protected as a form of state protection of their territory. As such, governments build national parks to conserve natural resources, often implementing strict regulations that limit local communities' access to and use of these resources (Bonye et al., 2023; Kariyawasam et al., 2020; Siburian et al., 2024). In some cases, national parks are used as state interventions over critical natural resources that require state protection, such as coal, water, and timber, which often leads to conflicts with local communities that depend on these resources for their livelihoods (Bonye et al., 2023).

National parks are managed based on zoning and regulatory principles that protect landscapes without completely separating the land from its ownership or use but instead adapting it to conservation needs. This approach presents challenges in ensuring optimal resource conservation and offers essential advantages in encouraging local community participation. This approach not only increases people's sense of belonging and commitment to conservation efforts but also supports the sustainability of ecosystems and biodiversity in the long term. The involvement of local communities in decision-making and management, various studies have shown positive results, namely that they can produce more sustainable and harmonious results (Siburian et al., 2024).

Efforts to conserve biodiversity must ensure the sustainability of ecosystems, which is why national parks are an essential instrument that combines environmental protection with socioeconomic benefits. Therefore, the establishment and management of national parks are often guided by national policies and legal frameworks that aim to balance conservation goals with the needs of local communities (Javeed et al., 2023; Li & Li, 2022). In some regions, there is a push toward co-management strategies that engage local stakeholders and provide alternative opportunities to generate revenue to offset restrictions imposed by national parks (Chowdhury et al., 2009). The co-management approach is designed to empower local communities as active partners in conservation, ensuring that they not only comply with the restrictions in place but also experience the direct benefits of the existence of national parks.

Unfortunately, in nature conservation efforts, it is not easy for policymakers to integrate traditional cultural values around the region to support conservation that aligns with local communities' beliefs. Conservation policies enacted with uniformity at the national or international level often fail to incorporate local cultural values. For example, the EU's conservation policy does not provide enough alternatives to integrate local values, which can create local conflicts and undermine diverse cultural values (Michaelidou & Decker, 2005). In North America, conceptual and practical challenges often arise in integrating local cultural values with natural resource management in landscape-based conservation planning (Brown & Murtha, 2019). Indigenous peoples or local communities prioritize their territory differently than international conservation organizations. In Melanesia, local communities attach more importance to cultural heritage sites than other ecosystem resources, so conservation policies need to be aligned with these values (Brown & Murtha, 2019). For example, traditional local beliefs have been marginalized in Uganda due to increased extra-cultural religiosity, creating challenges in adopting a cultural values approach to conservation (Infield & Mugisha, 2018).

Differences in how different cultures treat and view nature are due to various interrelated factors, including history, religious and spiritual beliefs, economic relationships, and local ecological conditions. These differences affect how different cultures identify and appreciate nature, and these differences affect the ecological relationship between humans and nature, which is a complex study (Fox & Xu, 2017). The world's diverse cultures

conceptualize human-nature relationships in various ways, such as kinship, partnership, or rational management (Novo et al., 2024).   The socio-ecological system framework cannot accommodate the dynamic interaction between values, attitudes, and people's understanding of human-nature relationships. Therefore, a model is needed to integrate these socio-cultural concepts to influence environmental governance and behavior (Muhar et al., 2018). The concept of relational values, which includes justice, reciprocity, care, and responsibility for nature today, is entirely developed, but it needs further refinement (Calcagni et al., 2022; Campbell & Gurney, 2024) The integration of conservation and culture has been recognized but has not been fully understood by the global community, primarily Indigenous peoples' concepts and strategies in ecosystem protection (Caillon et al., 2017; Cocks, 2006).

The separation of Indigenous peoples from mythical narratives, histories, worldviews, and their relationship to their place of residence and view of a particular space is a very complex and complex problem. The obscuration of the history of places and the indigenous history of indigenous peoples often changes when shaped by colonial narratives, which portray places as relics of the past or as stereotypes of the present (Fish & Counts, 2021; Iseke-Barnes & Danard, 2006). Colonialism and subsequent industrial exploitation disrupted nature and cultural practices associated with Indigenous peoples, leading to a loss of ecological integrity and cultural health (Wathl thla et al., 2022). The perspective of separation between nature and culture often impacts natural heritage sites and separates those places from their social and cultural contexts. Ultimately, it often removes the stories and meanings important to indigenous peoples (Vannini & Vannini, 2020). Indigenous peoples' views that emphasize traditional knowledge systems refer to interconnectedness and reciprocity with nature with respect, and this context is often ignored in favor of the Western scientific paradigm (Dovchin et al., 2024; Sherwood, 2016). Indigenous peoples often refer to oral traditions, including their relationship with the land. The perspective of Western narratives has led to a decline in the transmission of oral traditions and myths, which is crucial for maintaining a worldview and cultural identity (Frey, 2007).

Indigenous peoples' participation and integration of traditional knowledge are essential in nature conservation, sustainable development, and natural resource management. Indigenous peoples, in general, have a deep connection to their environment, and knowledge about how to preserve nature has been passed down from generation to generation. Participation in environmental decision-making is essential but does not adequately accommodate Indigenous peoples' knowledge and the right to self-determination (Black & McBean, 2016; Brock et al., 2023; Latulippe & Klenk, 2020). Knowledge of traditional values in treating nature is often considered as data and not a tool of governance, thus weakening the sovereignty of existing communities (Latulippe & Klenk, 2020). Systemic and technical barriers inhibit Indigenous people's involvement in decision-making processes due to a lack of mutual respect, ineffective communication, and inadequate social and economic inclusion (Brock et al., 2023). Conflicts arise when indigenous peoples apply traditional knowledge, which often becomes unbalanced. Applying methods from outside their culture often causes resistance from local communities (De La Cruz Nassar et al., 2020).

Dialectical environmental communication, which involves the exchange of different perspectives and knowledge systems, often creates tensions between policymakers and indigenous peoples. Lack of understanding of how to improve collaborative communication to make conservation policy an obstacle to transparent and open dialogue. Effective communication can navigate the system of meanings that become environmental conflicts and often cause dialectical tension (Rice, 2022). Integrating traditional local knowledge into environmental evaluation is still problematic due to knowledge mismatches due to colonization and failure to implement best practices (Eckert et al., 2020). Indigenous peoples often receive neglect from key decision-making centers, resulting in procedural injustices. This neglect makes it challenging to dialogue and communicate the traditional local knowledge and perspectives they have (Solorio et al., 2023)

This research is necessary because it aims to understand the dynamics of environmental conflicts between Indigenous peoples and the government regarding the change in the status of the Nature Reserve to Mutis Timau National Park in order to gain recognition of the identity inherent in their living space and carry out environmental communication strategies that prioritize cultural empathy. Indigenous peoples' struggle for recognition is closely linked to their cultural identity and territorial rights. Establishing national parks often disrupts traditional

governance and livelihood structures (Batiran et al., 2023). An effective environmental communication strategy should prioritize cultural empathy for traditional local cultural identities and beliefs and involve collaborative governance (De Pourcq et al., 2017). Integrating Indigenous peoples' knowledge systems with a scientific approach can lead to new insights and effective conservation outcomes. Strong collaboration and support from governments and international bodies are urgently needed (Niigaaniin & MacNeill, 2022).

This research is focused on the respect of indigenous communities for their identity and worldview regarding sacred territories. However, they are rarely involved in research or invited for dialogue by the government in environmental decision-making.

2. Method

2.1. Study Design

This research design uses a qualitative method of case studies with a constructivist paradigm. Qualitative research in the constructivist paradigm is focused on understanding how individuals construct meaning from their experiences. This study takes from the narrative perspective of the Atoni Pah Meto traditional leader, which is sifted through a single case and focuses on only one phenomenon. The main focus of this study is directly at the core of the problem.

Using various data sources, case studies explore in-depth cases in a specific reality (Ko, 2020). The constructivist paradigm emphasizes the subjective nature of reality and the construction of shared knowledge between researchers and participants. Constructivist research refers to the belief that reality is subjective and is built through social interaction and experience (Burns et al., 2022; McLeod, 2017). In construction research, co-construction is built in the interaction between the researcher and the researched object and builds collaboration as shared knowledge (Bogdanovic et al., 2012)

Explanatory case studies are used in this study to explain a relationship between two or more variables, where there is a relationship between one variable and another. Explanatory case studies aim to identify and explain causal relationships between variables, which involves understanding which causes produce which effects in a given context (Martinson & O'Brien, 2015). Rigorous data collection and analysis methods to ensure the validity and reliability of findings often require various methods and levels of analysis to obtain the complexity of the phenomenon being studied (Barrett & Sutrisna, 2009; Cepeda & Martin, 2005).

2.2. Participant

The key informants involved in the study were selected using a purposive sampling technique, where participants were selected based on their ability to provide in-depth and relevant information per the research objectives and questions. The key informants were selected from indigenous stakeholders from various clans in North Central Timor, especially in the Mount Mutis area, which is the Mutis Timau National Park area. Indigenous stakeholders not involved in environmental decisions are essential data resources, such as people with expertise, experience, or roles relevant to the topic and the research objectives and questions. The selection of participants was carried out very carefully, and local cultural ethics were strictly followed when collecting data. This research also ensures ethical practices in selecting participants to maintain the integrity and validity of the research. The key informant in question can be seen in the following table:

Table 1: List of Informant

Key Informant	Age	Status
Informant-1	76	Custom Leader
Informant-2	76	Custom Leader
Informant-3	71	Custom Leader
Informant-4	72	Custom Leader
Informant-5	70	Custom Leader

2.3. Data collection and analysis

The data collection technique in this study is carried out through in-depth interviews and observational observations to collect complete and detailed information. These methods effectively explore complex phenomena in the field, understand participant perspectives, and generate deep insights. Although the research interview uses a structured element guide, the flexibility to adjust according to the context or response of the respondents is more important, mainly so that the key informants feel comfortable during the interview so that they can explore sensitive issues where participants find it difficult to divide them into groups. Interviewing key informants takes enough time and skills (Williamson, 2018). However, in-depth interviews have an advantage, allowing for exploring individual experiences and perspectives (Marvasti, 2009).

Meanwhile, researchers conduct direct observation, directly observing phenomena, behaviors, or scenarios in the field to understand them in detail. Direct observation allows researchers to understand behavior and events according to reality. In addition, live observation offers rich data (McKenzie & Van Der Mars, 2015). Direct observation can reveal unique, taboo, and rare phenomena that other methods may miss (Fix et al., 2022). Data triangulation is carried out in this study by using various data sources, methods, or theories to increase the credibility and validity of research findings. Data triangulation is the main characteristic of case study research, so the study is credible by providing a thick, rich, and contextual description (Smith, 2018). Triangulation helps validate findings by comparing different types of data analysis

3. Results

For centuries, indigenous peoples around the Mount Mutis area depended on nature for their livelihoods, and they identified themselves as the guardians of the Mount Mutis area and preserved the spring water sources. High respect for nature implies the enactment of a period of taboos and prohibitions in certain months after going through rituals led by traditional stakeholders so that people do not cut down trees, cut down branches and uproot reeds as a form of empathy for nature to rest from human disturbances and let nature recover itself. Trees that have been cut down or where the land is considered critical will immediately carry out reforestation. For large trees and certain trees in the felling process, they first perform sacred rituals as a tribute to the spirits that reside. The livestock grazed in the forests, and the Mount Mutis area is not disturbed. Forest honey is seen as communal property. Poaching is prohibited in customary law so violations will receive social and customary sanctions. Indigenous peoples reject the change of the function of the Mutis Timau Nature Reserve to a National Park, affirming the meaning of Mutis Timau as a source of their identity through sacred rituals, rejection of the national park and peaceful demonstrations to the government, and direct rejection in the socialization of the Decree of the Ministry of Environment and Forestry which is considered to have uprooted their identity and cultural roots from the Mutis Timau Area.

3.1. Place as a source of identity

The existence of clans in this area is inseparable from the story of an oral tradition passed down from generation to generation about the massive migration of the Atoni Pah Meto tribe from Belu, West Timor, brought by Emperor Sonba'i. The government system is based on the traditional royal system. During colonial rule, the royal system was still accommodated as an extension of power, with a system of districts and sub-districts led by the royal family and a hereditary brotherly relationship. This government based on the feudalism system is highly respected by people with the status of ordinary people. Every change of tribe will establish a ritual place as a marker of identity and become the forerunner of the birth of a village. By creating ritual sites, migrating communities build new settlements that reflect the cultural heritage instilled by their ancestors in order to provide a sense of belonging and identity (Domínguez, 2020).

> *"Our ancestors established a ritual place as a source of identity so that we do not lose our identity, become our reliance on knowing the history of our clan so that we remain connected to the place of our ancestors, who established the village where we live in the Mount Mutis area" (Informant -4).*

The existence of sacred ritual places of various clans in Mutis is seen by informants integrated with the area and building a sense of place with the community. The informant's statement conveys ecological, historical, cultural, and spiritual values that are important to them regarding the musical area. Indigenous peoples often connect spiritually with their environment and consider themselves protectors who need protection to defend their cultural values and traditions (Thaker, 2021). Therefore, indigenous stakeholders who feel uninvolved in environmental decisions feel separated from their identity when the place is transformed into a national park. Although a zoning system is offered for spiritual and cultural spaces, for the informant of the customary stakeholders, the entire area is seen as sacred and inseparable. Sacred forests and sacred sites with cultural value are closely related to the identity and worldview of indigenous peoples, and culturally meaningful communication is important (Dutta, 2020). Ensuring equitable involvement in the design of environmental messaging is essential for communication to align with the purpose in which the community is placed as the center of intervention (Boyd & Furgal, 2019). (Shiferaw et al., 2023)(Shiferaw et al., 2023)

3.2. Access Restrictions

Restrictions on entry into the Mount Mutis area are restricted to respect and maintain the sanctity of the mountain they consider to be the "mother" — a symbol of life, a source of livelihood, and a deep connection to their cultural and spiritual identity. Informant-3 is one of the key players in entering this area from the North Central Timor region through Noepesu Village, which is trusted by the local community and is traditionally legitimized to lead traditional rituals first. The restrictions also aim to protect sacred ritual sites from external disturbances or activities that can desacralize cultural practices important to those who blend nature conservation, worldview, identity cultural defense, and spiritual values.

> *"I do not want anyone to get hurt in the Mutis area, so we have to do a ritual first. It is not allowed to enter this area carelessly. The customs of manners enter the sacred area" (Informant -3)*

Access restrictions allow traditional stakeholders and local communities to maintain the depth of spiritual and cultural meaning regarding the Mount Mutis area. They will warn visitors to obey customary restrictions not to damage or disturb trees and animals. Visitors are also prohibited from committing moral violations, including being polite to nature and sesame. Sacred areas are often seen as natural centers for spiritual and psychological fulfillment. Therefore, these places must always be closely guarded (Allison, 2015; Nyangila, 2012; Samakov & Berkes, 2016). In addition, local communities provide access restrictions, especially when applying customary laws to protect spiritual practices and identities. Thus, the sanctity of the place will always be maintained, and they can continue their spiritual practice without interruption (Allison, 2015; Chami, 2021; Ormsby, 2013). In Sagarmatha National Park, Nepal, the influx of immigrants or tourists entering the sacred area led to a severance of their connection with the worldview and ritual practices due to the growth of tourism (Mu et al., 2019).

3.3. Emotional connectivity with nature

Indigenous peoples build emotional bonds with nature and integrate their lives with the surrounding environment, mainly because in Mount Mutis and the National Park area, many ritual places are markers of identity and places of clan establishment. The informant said that their history and identity will be blurred if it becomes a national park or a natural tourism park. Mainly, it is about their worldview and identity that has become integrated with the region. The emotional bond with nature is mainly because the elements in nature are part of their inseparable identity (Pandey & Kumari, 2024).

A sense of connection with nature implies a deep appreciation of the nature they inhabit that they protect and protect. They see Mutis Timau as an extension of the community's identity and as a unit in life. Mini-style protection practices are carried out by them selflessly and are carried out as sacred worship to the Ancestors, Nature, and the Creator. For the Atoni Pah Meto tribe, destroying nature is seen as a great sin because it destroys His creation, which has been entrusted to humans to take care of it. The local community sees Rituals in sacred places in the Mutis Timau area as a way to connect a sense of unity with nature and strengthen a sense of identity.

In addition, rituals in nature can strengthen people's bonds with their land to find spiritual meaning(Cogos et al., 2017).

3.4. Kinship and Nature Networks

Identity is never singular but is always intertwined with the collective identity and the surrounding natural environment. In the context of collective identity, relationships between individuals in society are built through a complex network of kinship systems. The kinship system in the Atoni Pah Meto society forms a social structure and is the fundamental foundation that defines who they are, how they interact with others, and their surrounding nature. Kinship is essential in bringing communities together and providing a system for social interaction as well as building a sense of identity (McConvell et al., 2013). The identity of the clans in the Atoni Pah Meto community is one of the elements that connect the collective identity. Identity and clan markers and collective identities are marked through sacred sites owned by each clan and given a clan name. These sacred sites function not only as clan symbols but also as historical markers, spiritual values adhered to, and the relationship of each clan with its ancestors. Sacred sites in the Mutis Timau area illustrate the close connection between people, culture, and the natural environment with an irreplaceable spirit, history, and value. The kinship dimension has integrated spiritual and ecological values.

> *"Our identity has always been one with nature; through marriage, we become a society and unite the sacred sites in Mutis that we maintain together" (Informant-2)*

In the context of the kinship of the Atoni Pah Meto community, the informant's statement shows that kinship has a significant influence on the preservation of the Mutis Timor area. In the context of kinship relations with nature, in some Indigenous peoples, kinship networks play a role in the management of their natural resources (Ziker, 2006)

3.5. Struggle through identity narratives

The sacred ritual is a way for the traditional leaders of various clans to affirm their rejection of the Indonesian government's decision to inaugurate Mutis Timau as a national park. They believe communication with nature through rituals in the Mount Mutis area expresses sadness and disappointment separated from the source of their identity and worldview. The community carried out demonstrations and was supported by various elements of student organizations and non-governmental organizations. Traditional leaders continue to call for a peaceful path while giving open speeches about the urgency of Mutis Timau as a garden of spiritual and cultural identity, and they reject the global concept imposed on the region.

Indigenous peoples' resistance to using identity narratives is a way of using communication to express, protect, and fight for their rights, which is different from the general approach to communication because meta-communication events often appear in it. Indigenous narratives often reveal contradictions in traditional understandings of identity and are often contrary to narratives imposed from outside cultures (Guntarik, 2009). Cultural and epistemological differences are problems faced by Indigenous stakeholders in particular and Indigenous peoples in general, so the global concept of national parks is difficult to understand and is seen as uprooting from the roots of their identity that have been embedded since their ancestors. Indigenous peoples have a holistic approach to their territory that is integrated with life where mutual relationships are carried out with respect and have become their cultural identity and traditions (Brondízio et al., 2021; Menzies et al., 2024)

With ecological care practices based on indigenous knowledge, all informants said that their ways of protecting the Mutis Timau area have maintained their sustainability over time. This context shows that community ecological knowledge includes nature conservation and encourages ecological regeneration resilience (Akalibey et al., 2024; Huambachano & Cooper, 2021). The practices of customary knowledge with traditional rituals and local wisdom in treating nature have been done by imitating what their ancestors have done, and the informant said that there will be ancestral punishment and natural punishment if they destroy the nature that has been inherited, including the loss of water sources and plants they will fail. These practices are at odds with the human-

centered Western approach, where nature is separate from humans and embraced by the global environment (Akalibey et al., 2024; Huambachano & Cooper, 2021)

4. Discussion

In the context of conservation and planning of National Parks, communication can be implemented by applying cultural sensitivity by environmental policy stakeholders. Ethics guides environmental communication as an operational framework where there is respect for the worldview and cultural identity of the local community. Researchers should adopt ethical practices that respect the opinions of Indigenous peoples and ensure accurate representation in environmental communication (Banerjee & Sowards, 2022).

Involving Indigenous stakeholders and communities in the research, planning, and decision-making stages is a way to accommodate voices previously not understood by the government. Through transparent communication, environmental decisions are more likely to gain the support of indigenous peoples. Accommodating local spiritual values, traditions, and cultures will be easier to get community support and participation (Ma et al., 2023; Queiros, 2023; Siburian et al., 2024) As a case comparison, a model of ways to engage indigenous peoples through good environmental communication strategies can be seen in the Cordillera Azul National Park, Peru, where local communities actively participate despite previously limiting community involvement in decision-making (Rodríguez-Izquierdo et al., 2010). However, ethical, environmental communication and transparent decision-making are foundations for building trust and cooperation. (Benetti & Langemeyer, 2021; Moswete et al., 2012).

Dealing with indigenous peoples requires cultural sensitivity and understanding of the worldview of the environment from which their identity is sourced, and this must be done with care. Local narratives must be accommodated to harmonize the relevance between conservation programs and local culture with conservation messages. This is important, especially in overcoming cultural barriers and negative perceptions; thus, conservation is about things that can be cooperated and not clash. The case of Khao Yai National Park in Thailand, where local traditions and cultures reinforce each other with national parks and local culture is a reference (Yng & Kaoteera, 2021). Justice is needed to accommodate local and global perspectives that often clash and cause conflicts, as in the Mutis Timau National Park case. Policies that include various local cultural values are more hopeful for the community to be accepted and increase participation in conservation (Infield & Mugisha, 2018; Michaelidou & Decker, 2005).

Involving Indigenous leaders and local community leaders from various clans equally becomes a data resource in environmental research and decision-making, ensuring inclusivity in the decision-making process. Accommodating all voices within Indigenous communities, rather than selectively involving specific individuals, promotes justice and transparency (Bonatti et al., 2023; Mistry et al., 2023). Their active participation strengthens community trust and commitment to the success of conservation initiatives, thereby creating a solid foundation for sustainable outcomes that are in harmony with cultural values. Effective communication with Indigenous leaders and community leaders strengthens understanding and harmonious collaboration. Through open dialogue and an inclusive communication approach, the goals and benefits of the program are conveyed transparently while listening to the community's aspirations, concerns, and suspicions. Developing a communication strategy that involves all parties can increase social equity and align with local priorities (Rice, 2022). Therefore, for national park policymakers, it is essential to create a space for open dialogue with indigenous leaders in the Mutis Timau area on an equal footing and with equitable information by not only selecting certain people to be involved in environmental decision-making. This approach allows both parties to listen to each other, understand each other's perspectives, and find solutions together. Regular meetings and transparent communication will help reduce tension. Learning from previous cases, various studies have shown that Indigenous people-led conservation can improve conservation outcomes (Emini et al., 2023; Ma et al., 2023; Moola et al., 2024; Ungar & Strand, 2012; von der Porten et al., 2019).

This research highlights that the Mutis Timau area is a source of identity that contains the worldview and local spiritual beliefs of the Atoni Pah Meto, indigenous people and was then decided to become a national park by the government. The findings of this study reveal the importance of space for better design of environmental policies,

mainly guided by collaborative action in environmental decisions by accommodating the voices of Indigenous leaders or community leaders from various clans fairly. Environmental communication with respect for culture and identity recognition will increase collaboration and support the effectiveness of nature conservation and socio-cultural sustainability. Meanwhile, this contribution supports the importance of inclusion-based communication and collaboration in managing national parks, which integrate indigenous values as an integral part of the sustainability strategy.

The theoretical implications of this research make an important contribution in the context of communication science, especially in the study of environmental communication. This research emphasizes that the management of conservation areas, especially the establishment of national parks, must be community-based and integrate local cultural identities through inclusive, fair, ethical, and culturally sensitive communication. Meanwhile, the practical implications of this study provide guidelines for national park area managers and environmental policymakers to actively involve Indigenous stakeholders from various clans and layers in natural resource management and ensure that cultural and environmental preservation will occur justly. A collaboration-based approach and transparent dialogue can be applied in more inclusive and adaptive regional management policies.

This study involves informants from traditional leaders in the Mutis Timau area of North Central Timor Regency and so has not provided another complete picture of the traditional leaders of South Central Timor Regency.

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