



Exploring the Lived Experiences of Coastal Communities' Climate Change Adaptation for Sustainable Development

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 28-10-2025

Revised 22-11-2025

Accepted 17-12-2025

Keyword:

Climate Change
Adaptation; Coastal
Communities; Lived
Experience; Sustainable
Development;
Environmental Identity;
Human Meaning

ABSTRACT

Environmental change has become a defining challenge for sustainable development, profoundly reshaping human–nature relationships across coastal regions. Within this context, understanding how individuals experience and interpret these changes has become central to sustainability studies, yet current research remains dominated by economic and ecological assessments. What remains insufficiently understood is how coastal communities make sense of climate change as a lived experience that affects identity, belonging, and meaning. In response to this gap, this study clearly aims to examine how coastal communities interpret and internalize climate change as part of their daily lived reality. To achieve this objective, the study employs an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), using semi-structured, in-depth interviews with participants whose livelihoods depend on the sea. The data were analyzed through hermeneutic interpretation, allowing a systematic segmentation of experiential meanings into core analytical themes. The analysis revealed five interrelated themes—identity, resilience, emotional struggle, cultural continuity, and redefined sustainability—illustrating that adaptation is both a social and existential process. These findings highlight that adaptation extends beyond technical or ecological responses and instead represents a deeply embedded meaning-making process shaped by emotional, cultural, and relational dimensions. Overall, this study strengthens multidisciplinary comprehension by presenting its objectives, methods, and findings in an explicitly structured manner. It demonstrates that sustainability is not merely a policy framework but a lived moral relationship shaped by empathy, interdependence, and emotional endurance. The study contributes a phenomenological lens that encourages future research to integrate lived experience into the development of empathetic, culturally grounded sustainability strategies..



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INTRODUCTION

Climate change has become one of the defining challenges of the twenty-first century, reshaping environmental systems and human livelihoods across the globe (Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023; Mukhlis, 2025b). Nowhere is this transformation more visible than in coastal regions, where rising sea levels, shifting weather patterns, and ecological degradation disrupt both natural ecosystems and social structures (Molina-Barzola et al., 2025). Coastal communities whose cultural identities and economies are deeply intertwined with the sea are facing profound transformations that extend beyond physical vulnerability (Fytopoulou et al., 2021). Their experiences reflect not only environmental loss but also existential disruptions in the way they understand place, belonging, and continuity of life.

Within the field of Environment and Sustainable Development, recent discourse has shifted from focusing solely on the biophysical impacts of climate change toward recognizing its human and experiential dimensions (Hidayah et al., 2023). Scholars argue that sustainability cannot be achieved through technological or economic solutions alone but requires an understanding of how people feel, interpret, and live through environmental transformations (Triasari, 2024). The human experience of

environmental change is a critical, yet often overlooked, dimension of adaptation. It involves a spectrum of emotions fear, loss, hope, and resilience that shape how individuals and communities engage with sustainability practices and perceive their relationship with the environment. However, despite this growing recognition, much of the literature remains dominated by ecological and economic assessments, leaving the experiential and meaning-making aspects insufficiently explored.

In many coastal societies, the sea is more than a source of livelihood; it represents identity, spirituality, and intergenerational connection. When climate change alters the sea, it also alters the meaning structures that sustain human life within these communities (Rahayu et al., 2025). As Pelling (Ssenooba et al., 2022) highlight, adaptation is not merely an external adjustment but a lived process rooted in memory, emotion, and collective meaning-making (Tran, 2025). This experiential perspective reveals the need to move beyond quantitative assessments of vulnerability toward qualitative explorations of how individuals internalize and respond to ecological uncertainty.

Consequently, a phenomenological approach becomes vital to uncovering the lived meanings behind adaptation and sustainability (Andrade-Suárez & Caamaño-Franco, 2020). Phenomenology allows researchers to engage with human experience as it is lived prior to conceptualization or theorization thus providing insight into the ways individuals interpret their realities amidst environmental transformation (Wisudayati et al., 2025). Through this lens, the study of coastal communities' experiences offers not only an ecological narrative but also a human story of resilience, identity, and transformation (Anser et al., 2025). Understanding these subjective dimensions contributes to a more holistic conception of sustainability one that recognizes the interplay between environmental systems and human consciousness.

In recent years, research exploring human experiences within environmental change has emerged as a critical field within sustainability and climate adaptation studies. Scholars increasingly recognize that understanding the subjective dimensions of climate impact how individuals perceive, interpret, and emotionally respond to environmental disruption is essential for developing sustainable and context-sensitive interventions (Jain et al., 2023). Within this context, phenomenological inquiry has gained prominence as a methodological and philosophical approach capable of revealing the lived meanings behind human-environment interactions. By focusing on the essence of experience rather than its measurable outcomes, phenomenology enables a deeper appreciation of how individuals internalize and construct meaning from their changing ecological realities.

However, despite its growing relevance, methodological challenges persist in examining lived experience within sustainability research (Hidayat et al., 2024). Much of the existing literature relies on quantitative indicators such as vulnerability indices or livelihood assessments that, while valuable, fail to capture the depth of personal narratives, cultural identity, and emotional resilience (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). Quantitative frameworks often reduce complex human experiences to numerical variables, overlooking how environmental change is felt and understood by those directly affected (Macdonald et al., 2024). Even qualitative studies that employ thematic or grounded approaches frequently focus on behavioral or structural adaptation rather than the existential meaning of adaptation itself. This methodological gap leaves much of the human dimension of sustainability underexplored, particularly in communities whose relationship with nature is intertwined with identity and spirituality.

Consequently, current methodological traditions have proven insufficient to grasp the full essence of human-environment experience (Febrian et al., 2025). The subjective realm encompassing emotion, memory, and moral connection to place remains marginal within conventional sustainability discourses. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), as proposed by Smith et al. (2009), offers a pathway to address this limitation by bridging hermeneutic interpretation and experiential inquiry (Hossain et al., 2024). It provides a systematic yet flexible framework for exploring how individuals make sense of their lived experiences in complex environmental contexts. Within the study of coastal communities affected by climate change, this approach facilitates an understanding of adaptation not as a technical adjustment but as a process of meaning-making shaped by culture, emotion, and human agency.

Although numerous studies have examined coastal adaptation and sustainability in the context of climate change, the majority have relied on practical and policy-oriented frameworks emphasizing economic resilience, infrastructural innovation, and environmental management (Bouhazzama & Guenaoui, 2020). These approaches have contributed significantly to identifying measurable outcomes and designing adaptive strategies, yet they often treat human experience as a secondary consideration (Vandeskog & Buts, 2025). By privileging external indicators such as income diversification, resource use efficiency, or institutional capacity these frameworks risk overlooking the inner world of individuals and communities who live through environmental transformation.

What remains underexplored is the experiential and meaning-making dimension of adaptation how coastal people feel, interpret, and construct significance from the ecological changes that disrupt their ways of life (Nwaila et al., 2022). Quantitative and technocratic perspectives fail to grasp the existential implications of losing not only livelihoods but also identity, belonging, and relational ties to nature (Boonstra, 2023; Pelling, 2022). Consequently, adaptation is too often conceptualized as a behavioral adjustment rather than an emotional, cultural, and ontological process rooted in human experience. The absence of this experiential understanding leads to incomplete or reductionist representations of sustainability, obscuring how individuals make sense of their struggles, hopes, and transformations amid environmental instability.

Therefore, the methodological and conceptual gap lies in the limited capacity of conventional research paradigms to capture the essence of lived experiences within the context of environmental change. Existing frameworks lack the depth to reveal how individuals engage in the process of meaning-making that shapes their adaptation and resilience (Jahanger et al., 2022). To address this gap, a phenomenological approach particularly interpretative hermeneutic phenomenology offers a valuable alternative (Song, 2025). This approach seeks to uncover the underlying meanings that individuals ascribe to their experiences, exploring not only what happens but how it is experienced. Through this lens, the present study aims to move beyond descriptive or instrumental models of adaptation toward a holistic understanding of sustainability as lived experience, integrating emotional, cultural, and existential dimensions into the discourse on environmental resilience.

Previous studies on coastal adaptation have primarily examined environmental and socioeconomic dimensions, emphasizing vulnerability assessment, livelihood transformation, and resilience building. However, only a limited number of investigations have addressed the subjective and experiential dimensions of how individuals internalize environmental change. Research by (Laila et al., 2023) suggests that people's lived experiences shape their responses to ecological uncertainty, yet these works stop short of exploring the existential meanings underlying such adaptation. This absence leaves a gap in understanding how individuals perceive, interpret, and emotionally engage with sustainability within their daily lives. Addressing this requires a deeper, human-centered exploration that prioritizes meaning over measurement.

To respond to this limitation, the present study employs interpretative hermeneutic phenomenology as its guiding approach. This method allows for a nuanced exploration of how members of coastal communities experience and make sense of climate-related transformations in their environments (Mukhlis et al., 2024; Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). The phenomenological lens focuses not only on what happens externally but also on how individuals experience and assign meaning to these changes. Through this approach, the study seeks to illuminate the emotional, cultural, and spiritual layers of adaptation that remain invisible in conventional sustainability frameworks. Ultimately, this research aims to answer the central question: What is the lived meaning of climate change adaptation among coastal communities within the context of sustainable development?

The article is structured to ensure logical coherence and analytical depth. The Introduction situates the study within the broader discourse on environment and sustainable development while identifying the experiential gap addressed by this research. The Method section outlines the phenomenological framework, data collection through semi-structured interviews, and interpretative analytical procedures. The Results section presents emergent themes derived from participants' narratives, followed by a Discussion that situates these findings within theoretical and empirical

contexts. Finally, the Conclusion offers reflections on the study's implications for sustainability research and policy grounded in human experience.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This research adopted a phenomenological approach, specifically the interpretative hermeneutic phenomenology as articulated by Heidegger (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). This design was selected to explore the lived experiences and subjective meanings constructed by coastal communities in response to the impacts of climate change on their livelihoods. Phenomenology, as a qualitative framework, centers on understanding how individuals perceive, interpret, and make sense of their life-world (*Lebenswelt*) within specific contexts.

The interpretative variant of phenomenology emphasizes the co-construction of meaning between the participant and the researcher, allowing for a deeper engagement with the existential and emotional dimensions of human adaptation. This approach was deemed particularly relevant to the study's objective of uncovering the essence of human experience regarding environmental transformation and sustainable living. In addition, the phenomenological design was selected because it aligns with the study's aim to produce credible and trustworthy accounts of lived experience by foregrounding participants' voices and reflexive interpretation.

Participants

Participants consisted of members of coastal communities directly affected by climate change-related phenomena such as sea-level rise, reduced fish stocks, and changing weather patterns (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). The selection process followed a purposive sampling strategy, ensuring that only individuals with rich, first-hand experiences relevant to the phenomenon were included. Inclusion criteria encompassed adults aged between 25 and 60 years who had lived in the same coastal area for at least ten years and whose primary livelihoods were tied to marine resources (e.g., fishers, boat makers, and seaweed farmers).

Individuals not permanently residing in the area or lacking direct engagement with marine-based occupations were excluded. The sample comprised 15 participants (9 males and 6 females), with an average age of 43 years. Demographic diversity across gender and occupation provided contextual variation necessary for understanding collective yet individualized meanings of sustainability and adaptation.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews guided by open-ended prompts designed to elicit rich, reflective narratives about participants' experiences with environmental change (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted in locations familiar and comfortable to participants typically their homes or community meeting spaces near the coast. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and audio-recorded with prior consent.

An interview protocol ensured consistency across sessions while allowing flexibility to explore emerging insights. The questions focused on participants' emotional responses, adaptive practices, and perceptions of sustainability. All data were transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis. Field notes were maintained to document contextual observations and non-verbal expressions that enriched interpretive depth.

Confidentiality was preserved throughout data handling, and all identifiable details were anonymized at the transcription stage.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), consistent with the study's philosophical foundation (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). The analytical process began with repeated reading of each transcript to achieve immersion in the data, followed by the identification of significant statements or meaning units. These units were clustered into preliminary themes through open coding, capturing essential patterns of meaning across individual accounts.

Subsequent steps involved thematic reduction and hermeneutic interpretation connecting individual meanings to broader existential structures within the collective experience (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). The analytic progression moved iteratively between parts (individual statements) and the whole (the shared narrative), ensuring coherence with hermeneutic phenomenology's "double hermeneutic" principle, wherein meanings are interpreted within context.

Qualitative data management software (NVivo) was used to organize and code transcripts efficiently; however, interpretive insights were derived primarily through manual reflection and cross-case comparison. The analysis culminated in the articulation of essential themes that represented the lived meaning of sustainability, adaptation, and ecological identity.

RESULTS

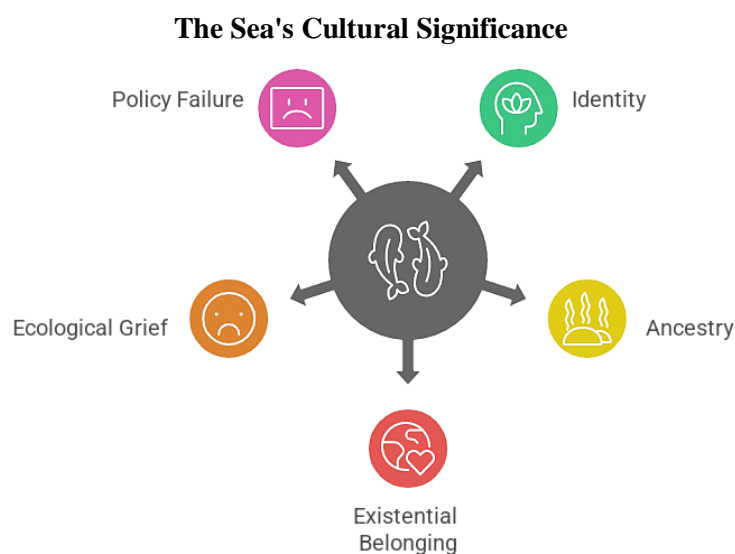
The Sea as Identity and Existence

For most participants, the sea transcended its role as a source of income it symbolized identity, ancestry, and existential belonging. The environmental changes they face, particularly rising sea levels and unpredictable weather patterns, were not merely physical threats but disruptions to their sense of self and cultural continuity.

One fisherman expressed this poignantly:

"The sea is not just where I work; it is where my life belongs. When the tides change and the fish disappear, it feels like part of me is fading too."

This theme highlights how ecological degradation generates existential loss a phenomenon sometimes described as ecological grief. The findings reveal that sustainability policies often fail to consider this emotional dimension of environmental change, treating communities as economic actors rather than cultural beings deeply tied to their ecosystems.



Resilience through Cultural and Social Bonds

Despite hardship, the participants demonstrated resilience rooted in collective action and traditional ecological knowledge. Community cooperation and inherited wisdom played a crucial role in coping with environmental stressors.

A female community leader shared:

“When storms destroy our boats, we rebuild them together. That is how we survive not just by fishing, but by helping each other rise again.”

The narratives showed that adaptation is not merely an individual process but a communal phenomenon. Social networks provided psychological comfort, material aid, and moral encouragement. This theme underscores the social sustainability dimension how shared identity and cooperation become adaptive mechanisms against environmental vulnerability.

Transforming Livelihoods and Reimagining Sustainability

Participants actively sought new strategies to sustain their families, demonstrating creative transitions such as seaweed cultivation, ecotourism initiatives, and green entrepreneurship. However, these transitions were not purely economic choices they represented acts of agency and hope in reclaiming control over uncertain futures.

As one participant described:

“We no longer fish as before, but now we teach visitors about the sea. It’s a new way to keep the ocean alive and still feed our families.”

The narratives revealed that sustainable adaptation involves both external innovation and internal transformation. The community’s capacity to reinterpret sustainability through lived experience reflects a shift from resilience toward transformative adaptation a crucial insight for sustainable development frameworks that integrate human experience as a core element of policy design.

Emotional Struggles and Ecological Anxiety

Participants frequently expressed feelings of anxiety, loss, and uncertainty. These emotions were not isolated but shared collectively, reflecting a psychosocial dimension of climate change seldom captured in quantitative studies.

A fisherman in his late fifties said:

“Sometimes I sit by the shore and just watch. I remember how calm it used to be. Now, the waves seem angry, and I feel that anger inside me too.”

This emotional burden illustrates the human cost of climate change beyond material losses. It calls for integrating eco-psychological approaches into sustainable policy frameworks, acknowledging that adaptation requires mental and emotional resilience alongside technical solutions.

Redefining the Meaning of Sustainability

Across the narratives, sustainability emerged not as an abstract environmental goal but as a moral and spiritual commitment to the sea. Participants interpreted sustainability as living in respect with nature a relational ethic that transcends modern policy language.

As one elder emphasized:

“To live sustainably is to listen to the sea. It tells us when to take and when to stop.”

This theme reveals that the community’s understanding of sustainability aligns with phenomenological principles of being-in-the-world (Heidegger), where meaning arises through relational existence rather than instrumental use. It suggests that local ecological wisdom is an essential foundation for sustainable development that honors both nature and human dignity.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that the experience of climate change among coastal communities is not solely environmental or economic but profoundly existential and relational (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). Participants' narratives illuminate a deep intertwining between identity, emotion, and sustainability, suggesting that adaptation is experienced as both a loss and a transformation of meaning. These insights directly address the central research question concerning how coastal people live through and make sense of climate-related changes in their daily lives.

The results demonstrate that adaptation extends beyond physical survival or livelihood strategies it encompasses the reconstruction of self, community, and moral connection to the sea. By uncovering themes such as the sea as identity, resilience through social bonds, and emotional struggle amid ecological change, this study shows that adaptation is an ongoing process of meaning-making. Participants' reflections reveal that sustainability is understood not in abstract policy terms but as a lived moral relationship a form of "being-in-the-world" shaped by care, respect, and responsibility toward nature. Thus, the study contributes a phenomenological understanding of adaptation as a subjective act of coexistence rather than a technical adjustment, addressing a critical gap left by prior empirical approaches that focused narrowly on economic or behavioral outcomes.

In relation to existing literature, these findings both affirm and extend previous theoretical discussions in environmental psychology and sustainability studies. Adger (2020) and Pelling (2022) have highlighted the social and emotional dimensions of adaptation, yet their frameworks remain largely conceptual. The present study enriches this discourse by providing empirical evidence of how these dimensions are experienced in the everyday lives of affected individuals. The results align with Hinkel's (2019) notion of human vulnerability as lived reality, where environmental change disrupts ontological security and self-identity. At the same time, they advance Boonstra's (2023) idea of ecological grief by demonstrating that grief and resilience coexist in dynamic tension, fostering new forms of agency rooted in cultural belonging and emotional endurance.

This interpretative synthesis reinforces phenomenology's central premise that meaning precedes measurement. Understanding sustainability through human experience exposes the inadequacy of frameworks that prioritize policy metrics over lived realities. By situating adaptation within the moral and emotional lifeworld of coastal communities, the study expands the theoretical boundaries of sustainable development offering a model of adaptation grounded in empathy, identity, and relational ethics rather than instrumental utility.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study hold significant social, cultural, and practical implications for both sustainability research and policy development. On a social level, the results highlight that adaptation to climate change is not merely an environmental management process but an existential negotiation of meaning and belonging. Understanding how individuals interpret ecological disruption allows policymakers and practitioners to design adaptation strategies that respect local knowledge, emotional realities, and cultural identities. From a cultural perspective, the findings illustrate that traditional ecological wisdom rooted in respect for the sea and communal solidarity serves as a foundation for sustainable transformation. Recognizing these lived values may inspire more inclusive frameworks for coastal resilience, where sustainability is redefined through empathy and interconnection rather than technocratic control. In professional and academic contexts, this research underscores the necessity for phenomenologically informed environmental policies that integrate human experience as a core element of climate governance and education.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides deep insight into the lived experiences of coastal communities, several limitations must be acknowledged (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). The phenomenological design, by nature, prioritizes depth over breadth, focusing on the richness of individual narratives rather than statistical generalization. Therefore, the findings represent contextual truths rather than universal principles. The study was also confined to a single geographical and cultural setting, which may limit its transferability to different coastal or environmental contexts.

Additionally, reliance on self-reported experiences introduces the potential for selective memory or subjective bias. Nevertheless, these limitations are consistent with the epistemological stance of phenomenology, which values contextual understanding and meaning construction over objectivity and replicability. Future research can build upon these findings by applying comparative or longitudinal approaches to explore the continuity of meaning-making processes across time and space.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

Future research should aim to expand the phenomenological exploration of human–environment relationships across diverse ecological and cultural settings. Comparative studies between coastal, agrarian, and urban populations could reveal how place-based identities shape perceptions of sustainability and adaptation. Moreover, integrating phenomenological insights with participatory and narrative-based policy design could strengthen the human dimension of environmental decision-making. Interdisciplinary collaborations between social scientists, environmental planners, and local communities may help translate lived experiences into more empathetic and context-sensitive sustainability frameworks. Finally, future inquiries might explore how intergenerational perspectives influence the transmission of ecological meaning illuminating how communities sustain moral and emotional continuity amid ongoing environmental transformation. Such directions would continue to advance the phenomenological understanding of sustainability, bridging the gap between existential meaning and practical environmental action.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of coastal communities confronting the impacts of climate change through an interpretative phenomenological lens, addressing the need to understand adaptation as a process of meaning-making rather than mere survival. The findings revealed that adaptation embodies emotional, cultural, and existential dimensions that redefine the relationship between humans and their environment. By emphasizing themes such as identity, resilience, and ecological belonging, the research filled a critical gap left by previous quantitative and policy-oriented studies that overlooked subjective realities. The results contribute to sustainability discourse by positioning human experience at the center of adaptation and demonstrating that sustainability is lived through empathy, interdependence, and moral responsibility toward nature. These insights provide a valuable foundation for developing environmental policies that are both contextually grounded and human-centered. Future studies could expand this phenomenological inquiry to diverse ecological settings, exploring intergenerational and cross-cultural meanings of sustainability to deepen global understanding of human adaptation and environmental ethics.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All funding sources have been transparently acknowledged in the Acknowledgement section, and no financial or personal relationships have influenced the conduct or reporting of this research.

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