



Coastal Communities' Experiences and Perceptions of Mangrove Ecosystems

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 30-01-2026

Revised 05-03-2026

Accepted 17-03-2026

Keyword:

Mangrove Ecosystems;
Coastal Communities;
Lived Experiences;
Environmental Perception;
Cultural Identity;
Phenomenological
Approach

ABSTRACT

Mangrove ecosystems play a vital role in coastal protection, biodiversity conservation, and local livelihoods. However, existing research has largely focused on the ecological and economic aspects, leaving a gap in understanding the subjective experiences of local communities who interact with these environments. Despite recognition of their importance, little is known about how these communities perceive and engage with mangroves on a personal and cultural level. This study applies a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of coastal communities in relation to mangrove ecosystems, aiming to fill this gap. Through in-depth interviews with 12 participants, this research identifies key themes related to the cultural, emotional, and ecological significance of mangroves. The findings reveal three central dimensions: (1) mangroves as a source of existential security, providing daily subsistence and protection from coastal hazards; (2) mangroves as a cultural landscape embedded in local rituals, intergenerational knowledge, and identity formation; and (3) mangroves as a space of social solidarity that strengthens collective responsibility for environmental stewardship. Participants described mangroves as essential not only for their survival but also as integral to their cultural identity and social cohesion. Importantly, participants emphasized that conservation efforts are more likely to succeed when they recognize local customary rules, incorporate community narratives, and actively involve residents in decision-making processes. The study concludes that a deeper understanding of local experiences and values is crucial for developing effective and culturally sensitive conservation strategies. Practically, these findings suggest that mangrove conservation policies should move beyond purely technical restoration programs toward participatory, culturally grounded strategies—such as integrating traditional ecological knowledge into management plans, strengthening community-based monitoring systems, and designing conservation education that reflects local meanings and values. These findings contribute to the broader field of environmental phenomenology, offering valuable insights into the human-environment relationship and demonstrating that embedding lived experience into policy design can enhance the sustainability and long-term effectiveness of mangrove conservation initiatives.



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INTRODUCTION

The mangrove ecosystem, a unique and vital coastal habitat, plays a critical role in protecting the shoreline, preserving biodiversity, and supporting local economies, especially in coastal communities. These ecosystems are found in tropical and subtropical regions, where they provide numerous environmental, economic, and social benefits (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). Mangrove forests act as natural barriers against coastal erosion, mitigate the impacts of storms and flooding, and provide a habitat for diverse marine and terrestrial species. They are also a significant source of livelihood for local communities, particularly through fishing and the sustainable use of mangrove resources.

In many coastal communities, the mangrove ecosystem holds not only ecological value but also cultural and social significance (Alhamda, 2025). The local population often has deep-rooted connections to the mangrove, which plays an integral part in their daily lives, from economic activities to cultural practices. However, the significance of mangroves is often underappreciated or misunderstood, especially in the face of growing pressures from urbanization, industrialization, and environmental degradation. These pressures have led to widespread mangrove deforestation, putting at risk both the ecological functions and the livelihoods of those who depend on them.

Given the critical role of mangroves in coastal sustainability, understanding the lived experiences of communities that rely on these ecosystems is essential (Bennett et al., 2021). While scientific research has extensively documented the ecological and economic importance of mangroves, there is a gap in the literature regarding the subjective experiences and perceptions of the people who live in close association with these ecosystems (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). The everyday experiences of individuals in coastal communities, their sense of place, and the meanings they attribute to the mangrove are crucial elements that have yet to be explored in depth. These personal and communal experiences provide valuable insights into how people understand their relationship with the mangrove, its role in their lives, and the ways they contribute to its conservation or degradation.

Although prior studies acknowledge the importance of community participation in mangrove conservation, most rely on survey-based measurements, participatory rural appraisal tools, or economic valuation models that operationalize community perspectives into predefined indicators. Methodologically, these approaches tend to frame local knowledge within externally constructed categories, thereby limiting the exploration of how meanings are formed, negotiated, and embodied in everyday life. Consequently, there remains a methodological gap between recognizing community involvement as a variable and deeply understanding community experience as a lived, meaning-making process.

The need for an in-depth exploration of these experiences is central to this study. A phenomenological approach offers a means to capture the essence of individuals' lived experiences, focusing on how they perceive, interpret, and emotionally engage with the mangrove ecosystem. Such an approach emphasizes the subjective dimension of human experience, which is often overlooked in more quantitative, objective studies (Dudi et al., 2025). By examining how individuals experience the mangrove in their daily lives, this research aims to provide a deeper understanding of the human-environment relationship and highlight the broader social and cultural implications of mangrove conservation.

Research on the lived experiences of individuals within specific phenomena has become a crucial area in the field of phenomenology (Richter et al., 2025). Understanding how people perceive and make sense of their environments, particularly in relation to natural ecosystems like mangroves, offers profound insights into human-environment interactions (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023; Mukhlis et al., 2024). This approach has been instrumental in uncovering the nuances of everyday experiences, providing depth and richness to our understanding of how individuals engage with the world around them. Studies in environmental phenomenology have begun to explore the emotional, cultural, and socio-economic dimensions of ecosystems, emphasizing how these factors shape individuals' perceptions and behaviors. In the context of mangrove ecosystems, there is growing recognition of the need to understand how local communities experience and relate to these environments.

However, the exploration of deep, subjective experiences presents several methodological challenges. One of the key limitations of traditional research methods, particularly quantitative approaches, is their inability to capture the full spectrum of subjective experiences. While these methods can provide valuable statistical data, they often fail to explore the rich, nuanced meanings that individuals attach to their environment. In studies related to mangroves, quantitative data may highlight the ecological or economic importance of these ecosystems, but they do not adequately address the complex, personal meanings individuals associate with mangroves. Furthermore, such

approaches tend to generalize experiences, which can overlook the unique, context-specific understandings held by different individuals or communities.

This limitation makes traditional methods less effective for capturing the essence of phenomena like the mangrove ecosystem, where the subjective, cultural, and social dimensions are critical (Amone-Mabuto et al., 2023). By focusing on the lived experiences of individuals, phenomenological research allows for a deeper understanding of these phenomena, revealing the meanings that individuals and communities assign to the mangrove and its role in their lives (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). The ability to explore these dimensions is crucial for addressing conservation and sustainability issues in ways that resonate with the local population and acknowledge their deep-rooted connection to the environment.

While existing research on mangrove ecosystems often employs practical, quantitative approaches to assess their ecological and economic value, these methods fall short in capturing the deeper, subjective experiences of local communities. Common solutions within this context typically involve gathering numerical data on ecosystem services, species diversity, or economic impact, providing valuable insights into the functional aspects of mangroves (Luth et al., 2022). However, these approaches do not delve into the lived experiences of individuals who interact with the ecosystem on a daily basis. As a result, they tend to offer a one-dimensional understanding of mangroves, focusing solely on their tangible benefits, without considering the complex, nuanced meanings that individuals attach to these environments.

This gap in the literature highlights the need for an alternative approach that can provide a richer and more holistic understanding of the mangrove ecosystem. Traditional methodologies are limited in their ability to explore the deeper emotional, cultural, and social connections that individuals have with their environment. By adopting a phenomenological approach, this study seeks to fill this gap by focusing on the lived experiences of coastal communities and exploring the meanings they associate with the mangrove ecosystem (Septanti et al., 2023). Phenomenology allows for an in-depth exploration of these subjective experiences, offering insights into how individuals perceive, relate to, and interpret their interactions with the mangrove. This approach provides a more comprehensive and empathetic understanding of the phenomenon, capturing the essence of individuals' connections with their environment that cannot be fully appreciated through conventional research methods.

Previous research has explored the ecological, economic, and social dimensions of mangrove ecosystems, yet there is a limited focus on the subjective experiences of the communities who live in close proximity to these environments. Studies have primarily concentrated on the role of mangroves in disaster mitigation, biodiversity conservation, and sustainable livelihoods. However, these works often overlook the deeper meanings that local populations attach to mangroves (Parsons et al., 2025). The existing literature highlights the importance of mangroves from a functional perspective, but there remains a significant gap in understanding how individuals perceive and relate to this ecosystem on a personal level. Theoretical frameworks in environmental phenomenology, such as those by Giorgi (2009) and van Manen (1990), have demonstrated the value of exploring lived experiences to capture the richness of human-environment interactions.

To address this gap, a phenomenological approach was chosen to explore the subjective experiences of coastal communities in relation to the mangrove ecosystem. Phenomenology is ideal for this study because it allows for a deep exploration of individuals' lived experiences, focusing on the meanings they derive from their interactions with the environment (Datta & Kairy, 2024). By using a phenomenological approach, this research will uncover the core essence of these experiences, emphasizing the emotional, cultural, and social dimensions that are often overlooked in traditional studies (Mukhlis, 2025b; Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). This method will provide a more nuanced understanding of the mangrove ecosystem, focusing on how local communities perceive its significance in their lives and how they make sense of its role in their daily existence. Through this, the research aims to provide a richer, more holistic perspective that can inform more effective conservation strategies.

The structure of the article is designed to guide readers through a comprehensive understanding of the study. After the introduction, the context of the mangrove ecosystem and its importance to local communities will be explained (Purnomo et al., 2025). The methodological approach, specifically the phenomenological framework, will be detailed, followed by a discussion of the data collection and analysis processes. Data analysis, primarily using thematic analysis, will highlight key themes that emerged from the participants' experiences. Finally, the article will conclude with a discussion of the findings, emphasizing the implications for both the local community and broader environmental conservation efforts.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of the coastal community regarding the mangrove ecosystem. Phenomenology was chosen for its ability to capture and interpret the subjective experiences and meanings that individuals assign to specific phenomena. This design was particularly relevant as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the personal perceptions and connections participants have with the mangrove ecosystem, focusing on how they experience and make sense of their environment (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). The phenomenological approach is well-suited to answer the research questions as it delves into the essence of individual experiences, offering a nuanced understanding that goes beyond surface-level observations.

In this study, a descriptive phenomenology approach was applied to uncover the fundamental structures of participants' experiences. Descriptive phenomenology emphasizes providing a clear and detailed description of participants' lived experiences without interpreting or making assumptions about the underlying meanings. This method enabled the study to gather rich, detailed accounts of how participants experience and perceive the mangrove ecosystem, directly contributing to the research objectives.

Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, targeting individuals from a coastal community whose lives are directly impacted by the presence and management of mangrove ecosystems. Inclusion criteria consisted of adults who have lived in the coastal area for at least five years and are actively involved in activities related to the mangrove, such as fishing, community-based conservation, or local environmental management (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). Purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants had direct, information-rich experiences with mangrove-related livelihoods and governance, enabling the study to capture the depth and variation of meanings attached to the mangrove ecosystem rather than seeking statistical representativeness.

The sample included 12 participants, consisting of 6 males and 6 females, with an average age of 45 years. The participants' diverse roles within the community provided a range of perspectives on the mangrove ecosystem, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study. The target number of participants ($n = 12$) was determined a priori based on phenomenological guidance that prioritizes depth of engagement and intensive case-based analysis; we aimed to recruit enough participants to represent key role-based subgroups in the community (e.g., fishers, community conservation actors, and local environmental managers) while keeping the dataset manageable for detailed phenomenological description.

Exclusion criteria included individuals who were not directly engaged with the mangrove ecosystem or who had recently moved to the area, as their experiences would not provide relevant insights into the study's focus on long-term, lived experiences of the coastal community. The final sample size of 12 participants was deemed sufficient for data saturation, as no new themes emerged after the interviews.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted face-to-face in participants' homes or community centers. Interviews were designed to allow for open-ended exploration of participants' experiences, using a flexible set of questions aimed at eliciting detailed descriptions of their relationships with the mangrove ecosystem. Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes, ensuring ample time for participants to fully express their views and experiences.

To ensure a comfortable environment, interviews were conducted in quiet, familiar settings where participants felt at ease. This helped facilitate open and honest conversations about their personal experiences and perceptions (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). The interview guide was based on a set of broad, guiding questions designed to encourage participants to reflect on their emotional, social, and ecological connections to the mangrove. The interview protocol was adapted from established frameworks in environmental phenomenology but was modified to fit the specific context of mangrove ecosystems.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely used technique in phenomenological research for identifying and interpreting key themes that emerge from participants' experiences. The analysis process involved several steps: first, the interview transcripts were thoroughly read to immerse in the data; second, significant statements related to the research questions were highlighted, and meaning units were identified (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). These meaning units were then grouped into broader categories and themes reflecting the essence of participants' experiences.

Thematic analysis was conducted in a systematic manner, following steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), ensuring rigor and transparency in the process. NVivo software was utilized to assist in organizing the data and supporting the identification of themes. The primary focus was to capture the core meanings embedded in participants' narratives, providing insights into how they perceive and experience the mangrove ecosystem (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). The findings were then reviewed and refined to ensure that the final themes truly represented the essence of the participants' lived experiences.

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant ethics committee, ensuring compliance with international and local ethical standards. All participants provided informed consent, both verbally and in writing, prior to participation. The consent process included clear explanations about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and the voluntary nature of participation. Participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential, with all identifying information anonymized in the final report. Data were securely stored, and only the research team had access to the interview transcripts.

The study adhered to ethical guidelines to protect the well-being and rights of participants, ensuring that their privacy was respected throughout the research process. Additionally, participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

RESULTS

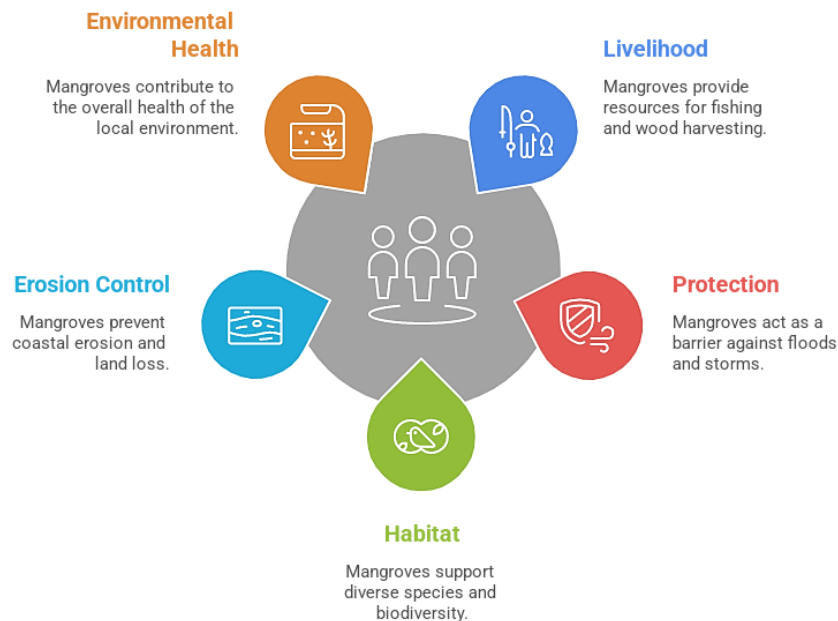
The Community's Perception of Mangrove Ecosystem

The participants expressed a deep and multifaceted connection with the mangrove ecosystem, which they perceive not only as a natural resource but as an essential part of their community's identity and survival. For many, the mangrove is not just a source of livelihood but also a protective shield against environmental disasters. As one respondent shared, "Mangroves are our first line of defense against the floods and strong winds. Without them, we wouldn't survive the storms as we do now."

This theme highlights the community's lived experience of the mangrove's ecological role. Participants noted how the mangrove forest helps in reducing coastal erosion, provides a habitat for various species, and contributes to the overall health of the local environment. Their understanding of the mangrove ecosystem is deeply rooted in both ecological and socio-cultural contexts. "The trees

not only protect our homes but also give us fish and wood; it's a symbiotic relationship," another participant remarked. This sentiment was echoed across multiple interviews, with many describing the mangrove forest as an integral part of their daily lives.

Community's Perception of Mangrove Ecosystem



The Role of Mangrove in Cultural Practices

Beyond ecological value, the mangrove ecosystem also holds significant cultural value for the community. It is intertwined with local traditions, rituals, and the community's collective identity. One participant elaborated, "Every year, we celebrate a harvest festival by the mangrove, where we honor the forest and what it gives us. It's part of who we are." The ritualistic use of mangrove resources for food, medicine, and craftsmanship has been passed down through generations, and many view this tradition as an act of respect toward nature.

Furthermore, the participants shared how they perceive their cultural practices as essential for the conservation of the mangrove. Several respondents emphasized the importance of passing down traditional knowledge about the mangrove ecosystem to younger generations. "The young people need to know how the mangrove protects us, just like we did when we were children. It's our responsibility to keep this tradition alive," one participant stated. This cultural reverence for mangrove conservation is a key factor in maintaining sustainable management practices.

Challenges in Mangrove Conservation

While the community holds a strong connection to the mangrove ecosystem, they face significant challenges in its conservation. One of the major obstacles is the degradation of mangrove forests due to illegal logging and unsustainable development activities. "We see the mangrove disappearing, and it hurts. But what can we do when the outsiders are taking the trees for their own profit?" expressed one participant, highlighting the tension between local conservation efforts and external economic pressures.

Another challenge mentioned by many participants was the lack of support and awareness from governmental authorities. "The government doesn't understand how important the mangrove is for us. They come here, take the resources, and leave. There's no real partnership," said one of the interviewees. Despite these challenges, the community continues to engage in small-scale conservation efforts, such as tree planting and community education, to preserve their vital resource.

The results reveal that the mangrove ecosystem is central to the community's survival, both ecologically and culturally. The participants demonstrated a deep appreciation for the mangrove as a resource and protective barrier, with a strong cultural connection to the forest. However, the ongoing

threats to the mangrove, particularly from external pressures and lack of governmental support, highlight a need for more comprehensive conservation efforts. The community's resilience, based on traditional knowledge and practices, remains a key factor in the continued survival of the mangrove ecosystem.

DISCUSSION

The primary findings of this study reveal the profound and multifaceted relationship between coastal communities and mangrove ecosystems. Participants viewed mangroves not only as a resource for their livelihoods but also as an essential cultural and ecological anchor, providing protection from environmental hazards and supporting traditional practices. These findings align with the central research question regarding how local communities experience and perceive the mangrove ecosystem, highlighting its significance in both functional and symbolic terms.

The study contributes to the existing literature by emphasizing the cultural, emotional, and social dimensions of human-environment interaction, which are often overlooked in traditional ecological studies (Eales et al., 2021). The experiences shared by participants underscore the deep, lived connection that individuals have with the mangrove ecosystem (Nugraha, 2024). This research offers a more holistic understanding of mangrove conservation, suggesting that local communities' perceptions and cultural practices are crucial for sustainable environmental management. The study not only answers the question of how communities perceive mangroves but also introduces new insights into how these perceptions shape conservation efforts, emphasizing the importance of incorporating local knowledge and cultural values into conservation policies.

When compared to previous studies, the findings support and extend existing theories on human-environment relationships, such as those proposed by Cronon (1996) and Ingold (2000), which stress the interconnectedness of people and nature. While earlier research has explored the ecological and economic roles of mangroves, it has often failed to capture the nuanced, subjective meanings that individuals attach to these ecosystems. In contrast, this study aligns with phenomenological perspectives, as articulated by van Manen (1990), that emphasize the importance of lived experience and the interpretation of meaning in human-environment interactions. Furthermore, the research complements earlier work on local ecological knowledge (Lees et al., 2023), showing how this knowledge, tied to cultural practices and social identity, plays a critical role in mangrove conservation. Overall, this study bridges a gap in the literature by integrating the subjective experience of local communities with broader ecological and conservation concerns.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study have significant implications for both the scientific understanding and practical management of mangrove ecosystems (Nussbaum et al., 2025). From a social and cultural perspective, the research highlights the importance of integrating local community experiences into environmental conservation efforts. The deep connection that participants feel toward the mangrove not only provides insights into their environmental values but also underscores the role of cultural practices in fostering sustainable resource management (Banuet-Martinez et al., 2025). The study suggests that acknowledging and preserving traditional knowledge can enhance conservation strategies by ensuring they are culturally appropriate and supported by the communities they aim to protect. Practically, these findings may inform policymakers and conservation practitioners about the need to develop community-driven conservation initiatives that prioritize local perceptions and values, potentially leading to more effective and sustainable outcomes in mangrove management.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of coastal communities, several limitations must be acknowledged (Parthasarathy et al., 2025). First, the sample size of 12

participants, although sufficient for a phenomenological study, may not fully represent the diversity of experiences within the broader community. Furthermore, the study was conducted in a specific geographical context, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other coastal regions with different socio-cultural and environmental conditions (Astuti et al., 2021). Additionally, the research relied solely on interviews, which, while rich in qualitative data, may have introduced biases based on participants' recall or willingness to disclose personal experiences. Future studies could expand the sample size and explore other data sources, such as participant observation or community-based workshops, to deepen the understanding of local experiences.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

The findings from this study provide a foundation for future research that can explore the broader applicability of these insights across different coastal communities (Andaryani & Utomo, 2024). Future studies could investigate how the perceptions of mangroves differ across communities with varying levels of exposure to environmental threats, such as climate change or coastal development (Astina & Susilo, 2021). Additionally, exploring the intersection of socio-economic factors with environmental perceptions could offer deeper insights into how wealth, education, and political engagement influence local attitudes toward conservation (Lukman et al., 2022). Expanding the scope to include other ecosystems, such as coral reefs or coastal wetlands, would allow for a comparative analysis of how different natural environments shape local cultural practices and conservation behaviors. Ultimately, the study's findings offer a starting point for a more holistic understanding of human-environment relationships, which could contribute to the development of more inclusive and adaptive conservation policies in the future.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of coastal communities in relation to mangrove ecosystems, addressing the gap in understanding how these communities perceive and interact with their environment. The findings reveal that participants view mangroves not only as a vital ecological resource but also as a cultural and social cornerstone, offering protection and supporting traditional practices. This research contributes to the literature by providing a deeper, subjective understanding of the mangrove ecosystem, highlighting the importance of local knowledge and cultural values in conservation efforts. Unlike previous studies that focused solely on ecological or economic factors, this study underscores the significance of integrating human experience into environmental management strategies. In practical terms, the findings indicate that effective mangrove conservation should move beyond top-down regulatory approaches and instead adopt community-based co-management models. Policymakers are encouraged to formally integrate local ecological knowledge into coastal zoning regulations, mangrove restoration planning, and monitoring programs. Specifically, conservation strategies should include: (1) participatory mapping of culturally significant mangrove areas to ensure their protection; (2) the development of community-led mangrove nurseries to support sustainable restoration initiatives; and (3) incentive-based schemes, such as payment for ecosystem services (PES), to strengthen local stewardship. Furthermore, local governments should incorporate cultural values and traditional practices into environmental education programs and coastal development policies to prevent ecological degradation driven by external commercial interests. Institutional collaboration between environmental agencies, village authorities, and local customary leaders is essential to ensure policy legitimacy and long-term sustainability. By embedding conservation policies within the socio-cultural fabric of coastal communities, environmental management can become more adaptive, inclusive, and resilient. The results suggest that future research should examine the role of socio-economic factors in shaping environmental perceptions and expand the scope to include other ecosystems for a more comprehensive understanding. Future studies should also evaluate the effectiveness of community-based conservation frameworks in improving mangrove cover, biodiversity resilience, and local economic stability, thereby generating measurable indicators for evidence-based policymaking.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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