



Guardians of the Sacred Forest: Indigenous Experiences of Conservation in the Face of Modernization

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous environmental knowledge has increasingly been recognized as essential to global sustainability efforts, yet the subjective experiences behind such practices remain understudied. While many studies focus on traditional ecological knowledge, few examine how indigenous communities emotionally and spiritually engage with forest conservation under the pressure of modernization. This study seeks to answer the central research question: How do indigenous communities interpret the existential and cultural meaning of forest conservation in the face of modernization? What remains unclear is how these communities interpret the existential and cultural meaning of preserving their natural environment amid ecological and socio-political disruption. This study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of indigenous forest custodians in a tropical region of Southeast Asia. Using in-depth semi-structured interviews with nine participants selected through purposive sampling, the study reveals that the forest is experienced not as a resource, but as a living relative, deeply entwined with spiritual identity, intergenerational responsibility, and cultural resilience. Thematic analysis uncovered key experiential themes, including sacred kinship with the forest, ritual resistance to external threats, and the emotional burden of cultural displacement. These findings demonstrate that indigenous conservation ethics are driven by relational and spiritual worldviews, not only ecological knowledge. This insight enhances our understanding of how conservation policies might more effectively integrate indigenous perspectives by acknowledging their lived realities and cultural values.



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INTRODUCTION

The global discourse on environmental sustainability has increasingly recognized the vital role of indigenous communities in preserving ecological systems, particularly tropical forests. These communities are often situated at the frontlines of environmental stewardship, drawing on centuries-old traditions and relational practices that intertwine spiritual, ecological, and cultural dimensions (Wenang dkk., 2022). In many tropical regions, indigenous forest dwellers engage in conservation not through formalized policies or technical interventions, but through embedded rituals, oral traditions, and collective memory that guide their interactions with the natural world.

Despite their marginalization within mainstream environmental governance, these communities contribute significantly to biodiversity protection and ecological balance. The forests they inhabit are not merely physical landscapes but are deeply woven into their identities, worldviews, and cosmologies. In this context, the forest is not perceived as a passive resource, but as a living entity with whom they share reciprocal relationships of care, reverence, and responsibility. These perceptions and practices stand in contrast to dominant developmental paradigms that often prioritize resource extraction, infrastructural expansion, or market-driven conservation mechanisms.

Given the intensifying pressures of modernization, including land commodification, extractive industries, and state-led development programs, the lifeways of indigenous forest guardians are increasingly under threat (Widayanti dkk., 2020). This dissonance raises critical questions about how such communities experience and respond to ecological disruption, not merely in terms of loss of habitat, but as existential challenges to their cultural identity and spiritual belonging. To explore this, the present study investigates how indigenous individuals interpret conservation as a lived, culturally embedded response to environmental change.

This inquiry emphasizes the need to understand the inner dimensions of conservation—the meanings, emotions, and narratives through which individuals relate to their environment. While prior research has documented indigenous ecological knowledge, few studies have accessed the experiential aspects that shape ethical and spiritual connections to nature. Addressing this gap, the study employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to foreground how people make sense of their conservation roles within a context of rapid transformation.

Recent literature in environmental humanities and indigenous studies supports the growing interest in experiential perspectives. Scholars have underscored the importance of how communities perceive and narrate their relationships with ecosystems (Yamada dkk., 2020). However, research methods often lag behind, with many studies still favoring measurable indicators over interpretive depth. Surveys and statistical tools provide useful policy data but risk overlooking the symbolic and affective dimensions that inform indigenous conservation ethics.

Such methodological imbalances may misrepresent the full spectrum of indigenous experience. While descriptive accounts of environmental practice are valuable, they seldom illuminate how people emotionally and spiritually navigate ecological threats and cultural displacement (Zid dkk., 2020). To move beyond observable actions, this study seeks to access meaning-making processes as they unfold in specific cultural settings.

Existing conservation programs in indigenous territories often rely on community-based frameworks. While operationally beneficial, these approaches may not fully capture the lived realities of the communities they aim to serve. Quantitative models tend to emphasize forest coverage, participation rates, or compliance, yet may fail to account for the ethical and emotional foundations of indigenous stewardship (Adjei dkk., 2023).

This study addresses a key gap: how indigenous forest guardians experience and embody conservation as both a cultural practice and spiritual obligation. By privileging subjective narratives, it aims to offer a more human-centered account of environmental engagement. The goal is not only to inform scholarship but also to support more culturally attuned conservation efforts.

Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, this research explores the lived experiences of forest custodians in a Southeast Asian tropical region. It focuses on how participants construct meaning in response to modernization, and how these interpretations influence their sense of identity, responsibility, and resilience.

The article proceeds as follows: the introduction provides conceptual grounding and situates the study within existing debates. The methods section outlines participant selection, interview procedures, and analytical steps. The results highlight key experiential themes supported by participants' narratives. The discussion connects these findings to broader theoretical and practical contexts, while the conclusion reflects on implications and future research directions.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of indigenous communities in preserving tropical forests amidst the pressures of modernization (Hanna, 2005). Interpretative phenomenology, rooted in the philosophical foundations of Heidegger, focuses on how individuals make sense of their experiences within their socio-cultural contexts. The design was deemed appropriate due to its ability to uncover deep, subjective meanings

and nuanced interpretations of participants' spiritual, emotional, and ecological engagement with the forest. Rather than seeking generalizability, the approach prioritized rich, contextualized understanding of the phenomenon as experienced by those directly involved.

Participants

Participants were members of an indigenous community located in a tropical forest region of Southeast Asia, recognized for their active role in forest stewardship and customary ecological practices. Selection followed a purposive sampling strategy to ensure that individuals had firsthand experience and sustained engagement with forest conservation. Inclusion criteria required participants to be adults (aged 30 and above), recognized within their community as traditional knowledge holders, ritual practitioners, or forest custodians. Individuals without direct involvement in forest preservation or those who had permanently migrated to urban areas were excluded (Jadeja dkk., 2018). A total of nine participants (5 males and 4 females) were included, with ages ranging from 34 to 67 years. Their roles included farmers, herbalists, cultural leaders, and spiritual custodians, offering diverse perspectives grounded in indigenous environmental relationships.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in person within the participants' local environment. Interviews were guided by an open-ended protocol designed to elicit reflections on participants' relationship with the forest, their ecological knowledge, and their responses to external pressures. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted in a setting chosen by the participant to ensure comfort and authenticity. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim (Levidow, 2013). Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal expressions and environmental contexts. When necessary, a community liaison assisted with translation and cultural interpretation to maintain the integrity of participants' expressions.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework, which involved a multi-stage process of immersion, coding, theme development, and interpretative synthesis. Transcripts were first read multiple times to develop familiarity and identify significant meaning units. These units were then coded, clustered, and refined into emergent themes through iterative comparison (Misra, 1998). NVivo software was used to support the organization and retrieval of data segments, though thematic interpretation remained grounded in manual engagement with the texts. Special attention was given to contextualizing meanings within participants' cultural and ecological frameworks, leading to the identification of essential structures of the lived phenomenon.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics review board. Written informed consent was secured from all participants prior to data collection. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained by using pseudonyms and omitting identifying details from transcripts and reports. The study adhered to the ethical standards outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and complied with local protocols respecting indigenous knowledge systems and cultural sensitivities.

RESULTS

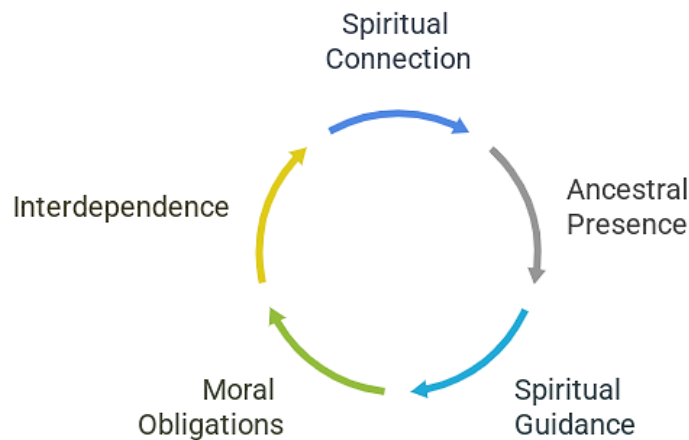
The Forest as a Spiritual Entity and Kin

Participants consistently described the forest not merely as a resource, but as an extension of their spiritual and familial identity. This relational ontology positioned the forest as a sacred space—imbued with ancestral presence, spiritual guidance, and moral obligations.

"The forest is our mother. She gives us food, heals our sickness, and punishes us if we forget our ways." (Participant 3, male elder, 62 years old)

Such expressions reflected a deeply embedded cosmology wherein nature is animate, and humans are custodians within an interdependent spiritual ecology. The forest was viewed not as an economic asset, but as a living relative whose preservation was a moral imperative.

The Forest as a Spiritual Entity



Intergenerational Responsibility and Ecological Identity

Another dominant theme was the transmission of ecological values and responsibilities across generations. Many participants voiced anxiety over the younger generation's weakening ties to the forest, often attributed to formal education systems and urban migration.

"My grandfather taught me how to listen to the trees. I now try to teach my grandson, but he says it is old stuff—his world is concrete and internet." (Participant 6, female herbalist, 54 years old)

This decline in cultural continuity raised concerns about the sustainability of indigenous conservation practices, especially as modernity introduced alternative identities detached from ancestral land.

Ritual, Resistance, and Preservation under Pressure

Participants also narrated the integration of ritual into conservation acts. Annual ceremonies, offerings to the spirits of the forest, and customary laws (*adat*) were used as mechanisms for ecological balance and resistance to external threats, such as mining companies or illegal logging.

"We dance and sing to ask permission before entering sacred zones. This is not just culture—it is how we protect the land from greedy hands." (Participant 1, cultural leader, 48 years old)

These rituals were not merely symbolic but acted as socio-political statements of land ownership and ecological governance rooted in spiritual authority. However, several participants reported that their rituals were increasingly marginalized by state and commercial actors.

The Burden of Modernization and Cultural Displacement

A pervasive sense of marginalization emerged when participants discussed encounters with modern governance and economic development. State-driven reforestation projects, corporate expansion, and infrastructure development were often imposed without community consent, resulting in feelings of disempowerment and cultural dislocation.

"They come with papers and bulldozers. They say it's for development, but for us, it is death—death of the forest, and death of who we are." (Participant 7, male farmer, 41 years old)

The dissonance between traditional ecological knowledge and modern environmental frameworks created cognitive and emotional burdens, as participants struggled to navigate the disjuncture between imposed progress and inherited values.

The essence of participants' lived experience reveals that for indigenous communities, the forest is not a commodity but a sentient, sacred entity intricately tied to identity, memory, and survival. Their ecological practices are deeply spiritual, communally governed, and threatened by the imposition of external modern systems. This tension underscores the urgent need for inclusive conservation paradigms that honor indigenous epistemologies.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that indigenous forest custodians experience the forest as a spiritual and familial entity, deeply embedded in their identity and worldview. This understanding directly responds to the research question by illuminating how modernization challenges are interpreted not only as environmental degradation but as existential and cultural dislocation.

These insights contribute significantly to answering the central question posed in the introduction—namely, how indigenous communities make sense of their relationship with the forest amidst modernization. The study demonstrates that for these communities, conservation is not merely a technical or economic act but a moral and spiritual obligation (Mrdjenovic, 2023). Their ecological commitment emerges from relational values transmitted across generations, embodied in rituals, and sustained through lived resistance. This phenomenological lens uncovers layers of meaning often overlooked in mainstream environmental discourses, offering a more comprehensive understanding of what forest preservation signifies to those most intimately connected to it.

The results align with previous phenomenological studies that emphasize the role of meaning-making in environmental experience (Mudzeni dkk., 2021). They also extend existing literature on indigenous ecological knowledge by grounding it in the interior life of participants. For instance, Rahman (2020) identified local wisdom in forest practices, but this study deepens that insight by revealing the emotional and spiritual dimensions of such wisdom. Moreover, the study affirms Heideggerian perspectives on being-in-the-world, where place and identity are co-constitutive. The findings challenge reductionist conservation models by emphasizing the ontological significance of place, thus supporting a shift toward culturally attuned environmental policies.

The implications of these findings are both scholarly and practical. From a scholarly perspective, the study provides a deeper understanding of how indigenous ecological ethics are shaped not only by tradition, but by lived, embodied experiences grounded in place and ancestry. These insights emphasize the necessity of integrating spiritual and cultural dimensions into environmental frameworks, particularly in regions where conservation intersects with indigenous sovereignty. Practically, the findings advocate for participatory conservation models that respect and center indigenous voices—not merely as stakeholders but as epistemic authorities. Such integration has the potential to enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of sustainability policies in culturally diverse contexts.

Despite its strengths, the study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The phenomenological approach, while rich in depth, limits the generalizability of findings to broader populations or different cultural settings. Additionally, the study relied on a relatively small number of participants from a single community, which may not capture the full diversity of indigenous experiences across regions. Language barriers and cultural translation, though carefully managed, may also have shaped the interpretation of some meanings (Singh dkk., 2001). These limitations are intrinsic to qualitative inquiry but should guide caution in applying the findings beyond their specific context.

Future research may build on these findings by exploring how similar experiential structures emerge in other indigenous or marginalized groups facing environmental transformation. Comparative phenomenological studies across different ecological and cultural landscapes could uncover shared patterns or unique divergences in the meaning of place-based conservation. Moreover, interdisciplinary integration with policy studies, education, or environmental psychology could deepen the impact of such research, fostering more inclusive and holistic sustainability paradigms

(Smyth & Vanclay, 2017). These avenues highlight the continuing need to engage with experience as a legitimate and valuable source of ecological knowledge.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how indigenous forest custodians experience and interpret their relationship with tropical forests amid the pressures of modernization. Through an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research uncovered that the forest is not merely a resource but a spiritual and familial entity essential to indigenous identity and cultural continuity. The findings highlight emotional, spiritual, and intergenerational meanings often overlooked by policy-driven conservation models. By revealing the existential dimensions of ecological engagement, this study addresses significant gaps in previous research that lacked attention to subjective experiences. These insights provide valuable guidance for culturally inclusive conservation efforts that honor indigenous lifeworlds. Future research could expand this approach across different communities to examine the universality and diversity of ecological meaning-making.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest. This research was conducted independently, and no commercial or financial relationships were involved that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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