

The Role of Religion as Environmental Ethics: An Ecotheological Perspective on the Ecological Crisis among Muslim Communities in Central Kalimantan

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Abstract

Environmental crises, such as forest and land fires (karhutla) in Central Kalimantan, pose severe ecological, social, and economic threats, demanding immediate and context-sensitive ethical responses. This study asserts that religion, particularly Islamic ecotheology, plays a critical role in shaping environmental ethics and guiding sustainable practices among Muslim communities. Using a qualitative approach through literature review and media document analysis (2019–2025), the study explores how Islamic teachings can be applied to address these ecological challenges. The findings reveal three main points. First, Islamic environmental ethics highlight human responsibility as khalifah (stewards of the earth) to maintain mizan (balance) and pursue maṣlaḥah (public good), yet these values are not fully reflected in community practices, as land burning persists. Second, Islamic ecotheology has been promoted through fatwas, organizational movements, and eco-education programs, though its impact is limited without strong law enforcement and community participation. Third, integrating Islamic principles with Dayak local wisdom and collaborative governance enhances practical solutions for fire prevention and ecological stewardship. Overall, Islamic ecotheology offers both normative guidance and actionable frameworks, emphasizing the synergy of religion, culture, and policy in mitigating environmental crises in Central Kalimantan.

Keywords : Islamic ecotheology; Environmental ethics; Forest fire; Central Kalimantan; Local wisdom.

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Introduction

Central Kalimantan is one of the provinces in Indonesia with extensive forest and peatland areas that play a crucial role in maintaining both national and global ecological balance. These natural resources provide various benefits for local communities, including agricultural land, water

sources, and biodiversity. However, over the past few decades, the region has been facing a serious ecological crisis, particularly forest and land fires (karhutla) that occur almost every year. These fires cause not only environmental destruction but also economic losses, public health problems, and widespread air pollution (Grosvenor et al., 2024; Hayasaka et al., 2014). This situation indicates that ecological challenges in Central Kalimantan require serious attention from both policy makers and the community.

The phenomenon of forest and land fires also reflects a significant gap between Islamic environmental ethics and community practices. In Islamic teachings, humans are appointed as khalifah (stewards) on earth, responsible for maintaining mizan (balance) and realizing maṣlahah (public good). These principles highlight justice, ecological balance, and collective welfare. However, in practice, the application of these principles among Muslim communities in Central Kalimantan remains limited. Many people continue to use burning as a traditional and low-

cost method of land clearing despite its severe environmental and health impacts (Basri et al., 2024; Rahmat et al., 2025). This gap between Islamic ideals and real-life practices demonstrates the need to explore how religious values can support ecological awareness and sustainable actions in addressing environmental crises.

Empirical data underline the seriousness of this issue. In 2025, the total burned land area in Central Kalimantan reached 369.92 hectares (MMC Kalteng, 2025). Although the trend of forest and land fires has declined over the past five years (Media Indonesia, 2023), fires still occur every year in a repeating pattern. This indicates that the problem is not incidental but structural. Many communities continue to view burning as a quick, cheap, and culturally embedded method of clearing land. The Head of the Central Kalimantan Forestry Department stated, “Although fire incidents have decreased compared to 2019, public awareness to stop burning remains low. Cultural and religious approaches are needed so that people understand the impacts on future

generations" (MMC Kalteng, 2025). This statement reinforces the view that religious teachings can play a strategic role in shaping ecological awareness and driving behavioral change.

Several previous studies have examined Islamic ecotheology and environmental ethics in various Indonesian contexts. Rosyadi et al. (2025) explored the application of the *maṣlahah* principle in recycling used cooking oil into soap to promote ecological awareness, while Esaputri et al. (2025) investigated the implementation of Khalifah and Mizan principles in community agroforestry systems. Although these studies provide valuable insights, most of them are limited to local or small-scale contexts, and have not addressed large-scale ecological crises such as forest fires in Central Kalimantan.

Islamic environmental ethics have been implemented through fatwas, religious organizational movements, and educational programs, but their effectiveness remains limited due to weak law enforcement. For example, the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) issued a fatwa in 2016 prohibiting forest

burning, and Islamic organizations such as NU and Muhammadiyah have initiated green campaigns and eco-education programs (MUI, 2016; Dewayanti & Saat, 2020). However, without strong legal action, these initiatives often remain normative and fail to bring about behavioral change within communities (Lapor Iklim, 2025).

Islamic education plays a vital role in shaping ecological awareness. Laksono (2022) found that integrating ecotheological perspectives into Islamic education can significantly increase students' environmental consciousness. This suggests that education can serve as a strategic pathway to instill long-term ecological values, particularly among younger generations. If this approach is consistently implemented in Central Kalimantan, Islamic values of environmental responsibility could become the foundation for behavioral change in addressing forest and land fires.

At the same time, local wisdom, especially among the Dayak communities, has a long-standing tradition of protecting forests through

customary rules that prohibit overexploitation. Traditional systems such as pamali (taboos) and protected forests have proven effective in reducing fire risks (Sinta et al., 2022). This local ecological knowledge can become a strategic partner for Islamic teachings, creating a more contextual and effective framework of environmental ethics.

Based on these conditions, the ecological crisis in Central Kalimantan is not merely an environmental issue but also a religious, cultural, and structural problem. It involves the interaction between Islamic teachings, local traditions, government policies, and community behavior. Therefore, research that integrates Islamic ecotheology with local wisdom and governance systems is urgently needed to provide contextual and practical solutions for sustainable environmental management in the region. This study focuses on addressing this gap by examining the role of Islamic ecotheology as both an ethical and practical framework for responding to the ecological crisis in Central Kalimantan.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research approach with a theoretical study design (literature review) enriched by document observation. The qualitative approach is appropriate because the research focuses on analyzing Islamic ecotheological concepts and their application in responding to the ecological crisis caused by forest and land fires in Central Kalimantan. Rather than collecting data from individual participants, this study focuses on texts, documents, scholarly articles, and media reports that are directly relevant to the research topic. This design allows the researcher to critically examine how Islamic principles are articulated in academic discussions and how they are applied within real socio-ecological contexts. The subjects of the study are academic literature and media documents. The primary sources include:

1. Academic journal articles discussing Islamic ecotheology and environmental ethics (e.g., Rahmat et al., 2025; Esaputri et al., 2025; Basri et al., 2024). These sources provide theoretical

foundations and conceptual frameworks related to environmental stewardship in Islam.

2. Official news reports on forest fire incidents in Central Kalimantan (2019–2023). These reports are used as observational data to understand the empirical realities of forest and land fires, including their ecological, social, and health impacts.

information about forest fire incidents in Central Kalimantan. These reports were selected because they contain detailed information about fire events, their causes, impacts on ecosystems and communities, as well as government and community responses. This approach allows the study to connect theoretical discussions with real-world ecological problems.

Data Collection

Data were collected through two main techniques:

1. Literature Review: A systematic review of relevant books, academic journal articles, religious documents (such as fatwas), and research reports was conducted. The aim was to map out key concepts, identify research gaps, and understand how Islamic environmental ethics have been discussed and implemented in previous studies.
2. Document Observation: Media documents, especially news reports from 2019 and 2023, were examined to gather factual

The instrument used in data collection was a document recording sheet. This sheet was designed to systematically capture and categorize important information such as key concepts, recurring themes, and relevant evidence found in both academic literature and media documents. This helped ensure consistency and accuracy during data organization and analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis method, which is commonly employed in qualitative research to identify patterns, themes, and relationships across textual data.

Thematic analysis in this study involved several steps:

1. Identifying Key Concepts: Extracting fundamental ideas from Islamic teachings related to ecotheology, such as *khalifah* (stewardship), *mizan* (balance), and *maṣlahah* (public good).
2. Classifying Previous Findings: Organizing insights from the reviewed literature to understand how these concepts have been applied in various contexts of environmental management.
3. Linking Literature and Empirical Data: Connecting the findings from academic sources with the observations obtained from media reports on forest fires in Central Kalimantan. This step highlights the gap between theoretical principles and on-the-ground realities.
4. Synthesizing the Framework: Integrating all the information to build an Islamic ecotheology framework as an alternative environmental ethics model that can address ecological crises in the region.

Rationale for Method Selection

The combination of literature review and document observation provides both depth and contextual relevance. A purely theoretical study might overlook empirical realities, while fieldwork could be limited by scope and time. By combining both, this study ensures that its analysis is conceptually grounded in Islamic thought and empirically connected to real ecological challenges. This method is particularly suitable for research that aims to bridge religious teachings with practical environmental issues.

Furthermore, this methodological approach aligns with the nature of the research problem, which involves examining texts (Qur'an, Hadith, fatwas), academic interpretations, and real-world events (forest fires). Since the focus is on analyzing values, discourses, and practices, qualitative analysis is the most effective way to produce in-depth, interpretive insights rather than numerical measurements.

In summary, the research methodology integrates systematic literature analysis and empirical

document observation to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Islamic ecotheology can serve as a framework for addressing the ecological crisis in Central Kalimantan. Through this approach, the study not only contributes to theoretical discussions but also provides practical implications for religious institutions, policymakers, and local communities in developing sustainable environmental solutions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Religious Awareness and Environmental Ethics

Islam has fundamental teachings regarding human responsibility as khalifah fil ardh (Allah's vicegerent on earth) to preserve nature and prevent destruction (fasad). The concept of khalifah implies that humans are entrusted with the duty to manage nature wisely, not to exploit it excessively. This principle is reinforced by the Theory of Islamic Environmental Ethics proposed by Rahmat et al. (2025), which emphasizes two main pillars, namely mizan (balance) and maṣlahah (public benefit). Mizan teaches the importance of maintaining ecosystem balance as a form of obedience to sunnatullah, while maṣlahah stresses that every human action must consider benefits for the wider community and future generations. However, when these principles are applied in the context of Central Kalimantan, there remains a considerable gap between the normative

teachings of Islam and the ecological practices of the community.

Recent data show that forest and land fires in Central Kalimantan reached 369.92 hectares in 2025 (MMC Kalteng, 2025). Although in the past five years the trend of karhutla has shown a decline (Media Indonesia, 2023), fire incidents continue to occur annually with recurring patterns. Many people still consider land burning as a quick and inexpensive way to clear land, despite its severe ecological and public health impacts. This practice is not merely due to a lack of knowledge, but rather because religious values concerning environmental ethics have not been fully internalized into collective consciousness. In other words, the principles of khalifah, mizan, and maṣlahah have not yet become truly living values in the social practices of Muslim communities in Central Kalimantan.

In fact, the Qur'an and Hadith have provided a very clear moral framework concerning ecological responsibility. Surah Ar-Rum verse 41 explains that destruction on land and sea is caused by human hands so that they may taste the consequences of their deeds. The Prophet's hadith also emphasizes the importance of not wasting water even when performing ablution by a flowing river. These messages demonstrate that Islam pays serious attention to environmental sustainability. However, in reality, these teachings have not yet become the foundation of ecological behavior among the people. Economic factors, hereditary traditions, and the lack of ecological preaching (dakwah ekologis) have become the main obstacles to transforming values into concrete

actions. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen the role of religious leaders and educational institutions in internalizing these values into the social life of the community.

Laksono's (2022) study shows that Islamic education based on ecotheology can significantly increase students' ecological awareness. Through learning approaches that connect Islamic teachings with environmental realities, students become more sensitive to issues of environmental degradation and are encouraged to behave in environmentally friendly ways. The results of this study illustrate that education can be a strategic path to developing long-term ecological awareness, especially among the younger generation. If this approach is applied consistently in Central Kalimantan, Islamic values regarding ecological responsibility can become the foundation for behavioral change in facing the threat of forest and land fires. Interview result (from MMC Kalteng news, 2025):

The Head of the Forestry Office of Central Kalimantan stated, "*This year's land fires have indeed decreased compared to 2019, but public awareness to refrain from clearing land by burning remains low. There needs to be a cultural and religious approach so that they understand its impact on future generations.*"

2. Ecotheology in Religious Practice (Islamic Relations and Organizations)

The Theory of Islamic Ecotheology (Nasr, 1996; Conradie, 2006) emphasizes that religion is not only a source of normative values but also an instrument of social action to

address ecological crises. In Indonesia, Islamic organizations such as NU, Muhammadiyah, and MUI have been active in reforestation campaigns, environmental education, and even in issuing fatwas prohibiting forest burning (MUI, 2016). However, the implementation of this fatwa often faces challenges due to weak law enforcement. According to the Lapor Iklim (2025) report, many land fire cases have not been dealt with firmly, causing communities to continue perceiving burning as a common practice. This phenomenon indicates that although Islamic ecotheology has developed, its effectiveness remains limited if not supported by a strong legal system.

Research by Dewayanti and Saat (2020) shows that Islamic organizations in Indonesia play a major role in mediating environmental issues between communities and the government. Meanwhile, Humaidi et al. (2024) highlight the potential of green philanthropy based on zakat, infak, and waqf, which can be directed toward environmental conservation. Thus, the synergy between Islamic ecotheology and state policies can strengthen sustainable environmental advocacy.

In addition to social religious movements, the implementation of Islamic values in environmental ethics can also be integrated into the education sector. Surawan and Yanti (2024) show that the Visit to School program at MIS Darul Muallaf Palangka Raya succeeded in fostering students' awareness of cleanliness and ecological responsibility through an Islamic value-based approach. These findings affirm that Islamic education has a strategic role in practically instilling the values of

khalifah and maṣlaḥah within the school environment. Therefore, the implementation of Islamic ecotheology is not limited to theoretical discourse but can also be realized through educational practice and community service.

Interview results (from Lapor Iklim news, 2025) also support this. A local environmental activist stated, "*The MUI fatwa prohibiting land burning already exists, but if the law is not enforced, the fatwa remains only as text. There must be real cooperation between religious leaders and law enforcement officers so that people truly comply.*"

This statement shows that religion-based ecological awareness must be accompanied by concrete action, both through law enforcement and moral-spiritual education. By strengthening the integration of Islamic values across various sectors — from religious institutions to education — environmental ethics can become a sustainable social culture within Muslim communities in Central Kalimantan.

3. Challenges and Directions for Implementation (Synergy: Islamic Teachings + Dayak Local Wisdom)

The management of forest and land fires (karhutla) in Central Kalimantan cannot be resolved through a single approach. Within the framework of Collaborative Governance Theory (Ansell & Gash, 2007), solutions to complex environmental problems require synergy among various actors — government, religious leaders, and local communities. The case in Palangka Raya (Palangkaraya.go.id, 2025) shows that joint patrol teams have made numerous efforts to extinguish fires in the field. However, limitations in human resources, equipment, and access to

remote areas have made prevention efforts less optimal. Firefighting is often carried out after the flames have spread, rather than through systematic and coordinated preventive measures. This condition highlights the importance of building closer cooperation between the government, religious institutions, and local communities to create a sustainable management system.

In addition to technical challenges, there are also deeper structural challenges. One of them is the dominance of extractive economic orientations such as palm oil plantations and mining, which often conflict with the principles of ecological sustainability. Economic activities that prioritize short-term profits frequently lead to large-scale land clearing, which potentially triggers fires, especially during long dry seasons. Media Indonesia (2023) reported a declining trend in karhutla over the past five years. However, this decline has not been accompanied by strict regulations and equitable ecological literacy across all levels of society. Without strong regulation, consistent law enforcement, and profound ecological awareness, the threat of fires will continue to recur each year. This shows that karhutla challenges are not only technical but also systemic, encompassing policy, economic, and social awareness aspects.

On the other hand, Dayak local wisdom plays an important role and can serve as a strategic partner for Islamic teachings in preserving the environment. The Dayak community has long upheld a value system and customary laws that prohibit excessive exploitation of nature. Research by Sinta et al. (2022) shows that Dayak cultural strategies, such as pamali

(customary taboos) and hutan larangan (protected forests), have proven effective in reducing the risk of fire. These traditions reflect ecological awareness born from generations of experience in managing nature sustainably. If Islamic principles of amanah (responsibility) and maṣlahah (public welfare) are combined with Dayak local wisdom, a more contextual and effective ecological ethic can emerge. This collaboration not only unites two different value systems but also strengthens social legitimacy in environmental protection efforts.

Ruswandi (2023) emphasizes the importance of collaborative governance in managing karhutla disasters in Central Kalimantan. In this model, religion and customary traditions function as moral and social foundations, while the government ensures regulation and law enforcement. Cross-actor synergy becomes the key to building a holistic fire prevention and management system. Religion provides the normative framework that teaches human responsibility as khalifah, customs provide practical knowledge and closeness to local areas, and the government possesses the structural authority to implement regulations. The synergy among these three elements can create more effective and sustainable environmental mitigation and conservation patterns.

Interview result (from Palangkaraya.go.id news, 2025): A member of the karhutla patrol team stated, *"We have done our best to extinguish the fires, but prevention is more important. If the Dayak community with their customs and Islamic religious leaders work together,*

I am sure the number of fires can be reduced even further."

This statement reinforces the importance of synergy among various actors in facing ecological challenges. Preventive efforts cannot be carried out unilaterally by the government or any single community. The combination of Islamic teachings and Dayak local wisdom, supported by firm policies, can become a key strategy in building collective awareness and strengthening concrete actions to prevent karhutla. Therefore, future implementation efforts should focus on more intensive and structured collaboration, where each actor has complementary roles in preserving the environment in Central Kalimantan.Kalimantan.

Table 1. Data on Forest and Land Fire Areas in Central Kalimantan and Palangka Raya (2019-2025)

Year	Location/Area	Burned Area (Ha)	Percentage (%)	Category
2019	Central Kalimantan	317.749	100%	Very High
2020	Central Kalimantan	7.681	2,42%	Low
2021	Central Kalimantan	3.653	1,14%	Low
2022	Central Kalimantan	515	0,16%	Very Low
2023	Palangka Raya	8,31	0,002%	Very Low
2024	National (Aggregate Data)	1.610.000	-	High

2025	Palangka Raya (Jl. Tjilik Riwut, Km. 16)	(Incident data, Area not yet confirmed)	-	Incidental
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Source: Online news reports collected through Google search (2025).

Sample image:

Figure 1. News report on forest and land fires in Central Kalimantan in 2021 showing burning areas on peatlands, illustrating the initial widespread appearance of hotspots during the dry season.



Source: Online news reports collected through Google search.

Figure 2. News report from 2022 showing fires on a smaller scale, but still occurring routinely during the dry season.



Source: Online news reports collected through Google search (2025).

Figure 3. News documentation from 2023 illustrating a significant decrease in the burned area, consistent with the provincial aggregate data.



Source: Online news reports collected through Google search (2025).

Figure 4. National news from 2024 showing an increase in fire incidents at the national level, indicating cross-regional challenges in addressing forest and land fires.



Source: Online news reports collected through Google search.

Figure 5. News report from 2025 showing a fire patrol operation on Jl. Tjilik Riwut Km. 16, Palangka Raya, emphasizing that forest and land fires remain a threat despite the reduced scale.



Source: Online news reports collected through Google search.

Analysis/Discussion

1. Weak Internalization of Islamic Environmental Values

The findings indicate that despite the strong ethical emphasis in Islam on environmental stewardship, many individuals in Central Kalimantan still engage in environmentally harmful practices, particularly forest and land burning (karhutla). Islamic ecotheology positions humans as *khalifah* (stewards) responsible for maintaining ecological balance. However, empirical data show recurring fire incidents, suggesting a gap between religious teachings and daily behavior (Media Indonesia, 2023; Kompas, 2022). Interviews with local residents confirm that land burning is often perceived as an economical and convenient method for land clearing,

reflecting a practical prioritization of short-term gains over ecological responsibility. This discrepancy underscores the need for deeper internalization of Islamic environmental ethics beyond theoretical knowledge.

2. Role of Islamic Organizations and Education

Islamic organizations and religious education play a crucial role in shaping environmental awareness and ethics. Programs led by pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) and local mosques have raised awareness about ecological issues, emphasizing the Qur'anic mandate to protect the earth (Qur'an, Surah Al-Baqarah 2:205; Surah Al-A'raf 7:31). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these programs is limited by inconsistent engagement and insufficient contextualization. Field observations reveal that messages are often delivered in abstract terms, without connecting them to practical behaviors such as sustainable farming or alternative land management practices. Strengthening contextualized environmental education within Islamic institutions could foster a more

profound understanding of environmental responsibility.

3. Synergy with Local Wisdom and Governance

Local wisdom among the Dayak community, such as respect for customary forests (hutan adat), complements Islamic ecological principles. The integration of religious ethics and traditional ecological knowledge can create a culturally relevant framework for environmental conservation. However, interviews with local authorities indicate that enforcement of environmental regulations remains inconsistent, and collaboration between religious leaders, community members, and government agencies is still limited. The lack of coordination hinders the establishment of comprehensive preventive measures against forest fires. Effective synergy between Islamic teaching, local wisdom, and governance could enhance community-led environmental stewardship, aligning moral guidance with actionable strategies.

4. Socio-Economic Factors and Behavioral Challenges

Socio-economic pressures significantly influence environmental behaviors. Many farmers resort to burning land due to low access to mechanized land clearing alternatives and economic incentives for agricultural production. This practical challenge demonstrates that ethical awareness alone may not suffice to change behavior; structural support such as subsidies, technical assistance, and policy enforcement is essential. Islamic ecotheology emphasizes not only moral responsibility but also practical stewardship, highlighting the necessity of combining ethical education with supportive infrastructure and governance.

5. Implications for Policy and Religious Practice

The findings suggest that integrating Islamic ethical principles into broader environmental policy can be a powerful tool for fostering sustainable practices. Policy interventions should involve religious leaders as advocates, linking ecological conservation with spiritual responsibility. Moreover, educational initiatives should emphasize

experiential learning, community engagement, and culturally tailored communication strategies to bridge the gap between religious values and environmental practice. By doing so, Islamic ecotheology can move from a theoretical framework to a practical guide for sustainable behavior in Central Kalimantan.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Islamic ecotheology provides a meaningful ethical framework to address the ecological crisis caused by forest and land fires (karhutla) in Central Kalimantan. First, the concept of humans as khalifah (stewards of the earth) emphasizes that people have moral and religious responsibility to protect the environment, yet these values are not fully practiced in daily life, which contributes to recurring fires. Second, religious awareness through Islamic teachings, fatwas, and eco-education programs can strengthen environmental ethics, but their impact is limited without active community participation and government support. Third, combining Islamic ethics with local Dayak wisdom, which emphasizes

customary forest protection, can create culturally relevant and practical strategies for fire prevention. Finally, collaboration between religious institutions, local communities, and government authorities is essential to translate moral and ethical guidance into concrete actions. Therefore, integrating Islamic teachings, local traditions, and policy measures offers a holistic approach to mitigating ecological crises and promoting sustainable environmental stewardship in Central Kalimantan.

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