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Natural Resource Management and Ecological Sustainability Based on Local Wisdom in the Aceh Besar Society

Ari Zonanda[1], Ahmad Hazim Fakhri[2], Fakhri Yusuf[3], Jufrizal[4]
[1]Universitas Syiah Kuala
[2,3]Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh
[3]Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Fatah Palembang
e-mail: * [1]ari.z@mhs.usk.ac.id, [2]ahmadhazimfakhri@gmail.com,
[3]fakhri.sossos@ar.raniry.ac.id, [4]jufrizal_uin@radenfatah.ac.id

Abstract. Aceh is one of the provinces with the most extensive forest coverage in Sumatra; however, the forests of Aceh Besar are currently under serious threat from illegal logging, land conversion, and the weakening role of customary institutions in forest governance. This study employs a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach, where data were collected through observation and in-depth interviews with informants selected through purposive sampling, including government officials, customary leaders, customary law experts, and community members. The findings reveal that the implementation of wisdom-based forest management through the Panglima Uteun institution has not been carried out sustainably due to limited government support, declining awareness among younger generations regarding customary values, and weak inter-institutional coordination. More than 60 percent of young people in Aceh Besar do not recognize the Panglima Uteun and the Adat Peulara Uteun tradition. This study recommends strengthening binding regulations, fostering collaboration between the Panglima Uteun and forestry authorities, and internalizing local wisdom values as concrete measures to preserve forests and ensure ecological sustainability in Aceh Besar.

Keywords: Aceh Besar, Ecological Sustainability, Forest Management, Local Wisdom, Panglima Uteun.

Introduction

Aceh stands as one of the provinces in Sumatra with the most extensive forest coverage, with the Indonesian Ministry of Environment and Forestry recording a total forest area of 3,551,329 hectares. Despite this, the forests face mounting threats driven by growing demands for land conversion, particularly for plantation development, mining activities, and infrastructure expansion. Satellite monitoring data from Forest Watch Indonesia (FWI) reveals that the province has experienced a forest loss of around 177,000 hectares over the past seven years[1]. The rampant forest degradation and land loss in Aceh have caused various adverse impacts on the environment and community livelihoods, threatening biodiversity and the loss of natural resource potential, particularly in Aceh Besar Regency. Aceh Besar Regency possesses significant forest resource potential, encompassing Conservation Forests, Production Forests, and Protected Forests. The forest area in Aceh Besar Regency covers a portion of the total forest area of Aceh Province, with the aquatic conservation zone in the Aceh Besar area reaching approximately 4,064 hectares. The forests in this region are part of an important

[1] Aceh Prov," Luas Kawasan Hutan Lindung dan Budidaya", artikel diakses pada tanggal 10 Maret 2026 di https://data.acehprov.go.id/id/dataset/luas-kawasan-hutan-lindung-dan-budidaya

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ecosystem in Aceh, whose total protected forest area reached more than 1.7 million hectares in 2021[2].

However, unfortunately, the protected forests and land in Aceh Besar are experiencing serious problems, including the declining function of forests, continuous forest encroachment, large-scale tree felling by local communities and irresponsible parties who clear land for plantations and business interests, resulting in severe damage to forest areas in Aceh Besar, particularly in Lamteuba, Seulimeum District, and the Seulawah Valley. Based on observations from the research, almost every day from 3 o'clock in the morning until the afternoon, timber-hauling trucks are in operation.

Data from the Aceh Besar Forestry Service records that forest destruction is caused by the rampant illegal logging whose extent has not yet been fully identified, particularly in Seulimeum District, Seulawah Valley, and Aneuk Gle. The widespread environmental destruction in Indonesia has now given rise to various debates and discussions. This has led both the community and the government to take various steps in an effort to prevent environmental destruction issues. In this context, one of the efforts undertaken by the community and the government is the establishment of institutions or movements focused on environmental conservation.

Therefore, environmental conservation institutions and movements continue to strive in advocating for the formal rights of the environment. According to Dwi (2008) regarding the ecocentrism paradigm, humans are moral agents who must uphold and respect the existence of nature[3]. The existence of local wisdom in Acehnese society's culture serves various social functions, including fostering collective solidarity and identity, as well as creating communal and cultural harmony (Kasim & Nurdin, 2016)[4]. Indigenous communities have been effectively conserving nature long before modern science existed. Their traditional knowledge needs to be recognized, studied, and integrated into environmental policies and the sustainable development agenda (SDGs 2030), rather than ignored in the name of modernization (Abas et al, 2022)[5].

Traditional practices in forest management have been implemented across various countries around the world. One relevant study was conducted by Akalibey et al. (2024), who examined forest conditions in the African region. The study demonstrated that traditional practices carried out by indigenous communities have proven to contribute significantly to maintaining the ecological sustainability of forests[6]. Furthermore, the research also revealed that many forest areas that remain well-preserved to this day are precisely those managed by indigenous communities. The spiritual beliefs and customary norms upheld by these

[2] Dinas Kelautan dan Perikanan Aceh,"Profil Kawasan Aceh Besar", artikel diakses pada tanggal 10 Maret 2026 di https://uptdpkkpd.acehprov.go.id/halaman/profil-kawasan-aceh-besar
[3] Susilo, R. K. D. (2008). Sosiologi Lingkungan. Jakarta: PT. Raja Grafindo Persada.
[4] Fajri, K.M & Nurdin, A. (2012). Resolusi Konflik Berbasis Kearifan Lokal di Aceh: Studi tentang Eksistensi dan Peran Lembaga Adat dalam Membangun Perdamaian di Kota Lhokseumawe. *Ilmu Ushuluddin*, 6(1).
[5] Abas,A., Aziz, A & Awang, A. (2022). A Systematic Review on the Local Wisdom of Indigenous People in Nature Conservation. *Sustainibility*.
[6] Akalibey, A., Hlaváčková, P., Schneider, J., Fialová, J., Darkwah, S & Ahenkan, A. (2024). Integrating Indigenous Knowledge And Culture In Sustainable Forest Management Via Global Environmental Policies. *Journal of Forest Science*.

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communities serve as a strong foundation that encourages them to continuously protect and preserve the forest environment surrounding them. The customary culture of *uteun* (forest), led and headed by the *panglima uteun* (forest chief), has been implemented by the Acehnese community in managing forests wisely (Taqwaddin 2010)[7]. Fundamentally, the customary culture of *uteun* must be embedded in the activities and daily life of the Acehnese people as a form of local wisdom that upholds the norms and values of ecological sustainability. Therefore, the existence of the *adat panglima uteun* tradition within Acehnese society makes an important contribution to the management and preservation of forests.

According to Taqwaddin (2010), the existence of the customary institution of *peulara uteun* (forest stewardship) within Acehnese society has now weakened, faded, and is on the verge of disappearing[8]. Consequently, it is possible that community support and attention toward forest conservation may also diminish. Based on interviews conducted by the researcher with the *pawang uteun* (forest guardian) of Gampong Lambda, the head of Mukim Lamteba, and community leaders of Gampong Lamteba Droe, it was stated that forest degradation in Seulimum District has increased tenfold over the past ten years, with severe adverse impacts on climate change, floods, and landslides, causing significant ecological damage and serious environmental pollution.

Furthermore, there has been a shift in the community's perspective toward forests and natural resources, with anthropocentrism becoming increasingly dominant. Based on reports from the head of Mukim Lambada and the *Keuchik* of Lambada Droe, the problem of forest degradation is caused by several factors, namely: (a) lack of coordination between the government at the village, sub-district, and district levels with the forestry service, (b) insufficient financial support from the government, (c) the Forestry Institution lacks the courage to confront pressure and threats from certain irresponsible parties. Based on the problems and issues described above, the researcher conducted a study and research on the meaning of changes in community actions that affect the ecological sustainability of forests through the *panglima uteun*, under the research title "Natural Resource Management and Ecological Sustainability Based on Local Wisdom in the Aceh Besar Society."

This study employs the theory of symbolic interactionism, first developed by Herbert Blumer. In his view, understanding reality is a way of engaging in interaction accompanied by various symbols and meanings. Reality is interpersonal interaction carried out through the use of symbols. According to Blumer, the theory of symbolic interactionism rests on three fundamental premises, which include: First, humans perform actions (*act*) toward something (*thing*) based on purposes and meanings (*meaning*). Second, meaning originates from the process of social interaction between one individual and another. Third, the interpretive process (*interpretative process*), whereby meaning is modified through interpretation (Wirawan, 2012)[9].

[7] Taqwaddin, H. (2010). Aspek Legal Penguasaan Hutan Oleh Mukim. *Jurnal Ilmu Hukum*, 12(1).14-48.
[8] Taqwaddin, H. (2010). Aspek Legal Penguasaan Hutan Oleh Mukim. *Jurnal Ilmu Hukum*, 12(1).14-48.
[9] Wirawan, I.B. (2012). Teori-teori Sosial dalam Tiga Paradigma: fakta sosial, definisi sosial, dan perilaku sosial. Jakarta: Kencana (Prenada Media Group.

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According to Turner (Damsar & Indrayani, 2017), the theory of symbolic interactionism has four assumptions as its fundamental basis for thinking, among which: First, humans are beings who possess the ability to create and use symbols in communicating and conveying messages[10]. Blumer understands social behavior as individual behavior that carries subjective meaning (*meaning*) for the individual, which is connected to others through the process of conveying or constructing meaning. Second, humans use symbols to communicate and convey messages. Humans produce symbols to express a value or meaning of something, such as sounds, words, gestures, objects, and so forth.

Third, humans are capable of communicating by assuming certain roles (*role taking*). Fourth, performing a role is a process of role-taking that is anchored to social conditions as seen from the perspective of others. In this regard, a person will respond to others accordingly. Finally, society is established, maintained, and transformed based on the capabilities developed through the process of social interaction, particularly in the processes of thinking, defining, self-reflecting, and evaluating developmental processes through social interaction.

The theory of Deep Ecology was introduced by Arne Naess, a philosopher and leading figure of the Deep Ecology movement, in 1973. The theory of Deep Ecology has developed environmental ethics into practical ethics through concrete movements and moral principles of environmental ethics that are translated in a real and tangible manner (Keraf 2022)[11]. According to Naess, deep ecology has a core philosophy known as *ecosophy*, which conveys the meaning that local wisdom can regulate a harmonious way of life between humans and nature within a household. Furthermore, *ecosophy* is a form of local wisdom for humans regarding the living environment, which is interconnected with the surrounding environment and nature as a unified household (Keraf 2022)[12].

As a theory that pioneered concrete movements in environmental conservation, deep ecology adheres to several environmental movement principles, among others: First, the recognition of all living beings as members with equal status and dignity as a whole, referred to as the principle of *biospheric egalitarianism-in principle*. According to Naess, the right to live for all life forms is a universal right that cannot be disregarded (Keraf 2022)[13]. Second, humans are an inseparable part of nature, referred to as the principle of *non-anthropocentrism*. Third, humans realize themselves by developing their inner potential, referred to as the principle of *self-realization*.

According to Naess, humans will grow and become whole as human beings due to their relationship with nature and life, as well as human self-awareness as an *ecological self* (Keraf, 2022)[14]. Fourth, the appreciation and recognition of ecological diversity and complexity within a mutually beneficial relationship. Fifth, the necessity of transformation from politics into *eco-politics*. Deep ecology demands a transformation that requires change in cultural and

[10] Damsar & Indrayani (2017). *Pengantar Sosiologi Perkotaan*.Jakarta: Kencana (Prenada Media Group).
[11] Keraf, A. S. (2022). *Deep ecology: Untuk peradaban bumi yang berkelanjutan*. Kanisius.
[12] Keraf, A. S. (2022). *Deep ecology: Untuk peradaban bumi yang berkelanjutan*. Kanisius.
[13] Keraf, A. S. (2022). *Deep ecology: Untuk peradaban bumi yang berkelanjutan*. Kanisius.
[14] Keraf, A. S. (2022). *Deep ecology: Untuk peradaban bumi yang berkelanjutan*. Kanisius.

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political terms, which can influence and touch upon the fundamental forms of economic and ideological dimensions.

In this study, there are elements of similarity in decision-making between Arne Naess's theory of deep ecology and Blumer's symbolic interactionism. Based on the theoretical foundation of Blumer's symbolic interactionism, the focus is on human behavior grounded in symbols such as elements of knowledge and experience, by placing oneself within various forms of behavior as well as assuming roles and symbolic communication. Arne Naess's theory of deep ecology views preferences in the norms and values held by the environment and nature. According to deep ecology theory, Naess examines environmental problems from a relational, broad, and holistic perspective, without concentrating solely on the impacts and efforts to address environmental issues, but instead striving to comprehensively examine the root causes of environmental degradation in order for them to be resolved.

A similar study was conducted by Azwir et al. (2016) entitled "Peranan Polisi Hutan Dan Petua Uteun (Panglima Hutan) Dalam Menjaga Pelestarian Hutan Di Pedalaman Kecamatan Geumpang Kabupaten Pidie" using a descriptive qualitative approach[15]. The study affirmed that the Panglima Uteun serves as the frontline guardian in preserving forest ecosystems. The Peutua Uteun holds a vital and strategic role in educating and encouraging communities living around the forest to actively participate in sustainable forest management. However, this study was conducted in 2016 and was geographically limited to Pidie Regency. A subsequent study by Chadijah (2018), entitled "Keberlanjutan Ekologis Hutan dalam Kearifan Lokal Panglima Uteun pada Masyarakat Nagan Raya", found that the weakening of customary norms and the collective wisdom of *peulara uteun* has led to the deterioration and disruption of the forest's ecological sustainability[16]. Nevertheless, this research was similarly confined to a single location, namely Nagan Raya Regency. The most recent study was carried out by Mahmuddin et al. (2024), entitled "Revitalisasi Panglima Uteun dalam Pengelolaan Hutan di Kabupaten Aceh Besar"[17]. The findings revealed that the Panglima Uteun plays a strategic role in forest governance, encompassing the enforcement of customary law related to forest use, as well as the maintenance of ecological balance. However, the research was conducted in Jantho City, an area that does not represent a high-intensity zone of illegal logging activity, thereby limiting its contextual relevance to more critically threatened forest areas.

The novelty of this research lies in two key aspects. Geographically, the study is conducted in Seulimuem, Aceh Besar, a location widely recognized for its high intensity of forest exploitation, thereby providing a more critical and contextually relevant setting compared to previous studies. Furthermore, in terms of methodology, this research employs a

[15] Azwir, Ibrahim,Abdullah, & Djufri. (2016). Peranan Polisi Hutan Dan Petua Uteun (Panglima Hutan) Dalam Menjaga Pelestarian Hutan Di Pedalaman Kecamatan Geumpang Kabupaten Pidie, *Prosiding Seminar Nasional Universitas Serambi Mekah*.

[16] Chadijah, D.I. (2018). Keberlanjutan Ekologis Hutan dalam Kearifan Lokal Panglima Uteun pada Masyarakat Nagan Raya. J*urnal Analisa Sosiologi*, 6(2).

[17] Mahmuddin, Januar, E & Mansari. (2024). Revitalisasi Panglima Uteun dalam Pengelolaan Hutan di Kabupaten Aceh Besar. *Jurnal Sosiologi USK*, 18(2).

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phenomenological approach, which allows for a deeper exploration of the lived experiences and perspectives of the community in relation to the role of Panglima Uteun in forest conservation. The objectives of this study are to discover empirical facts that are factual and comprehensive regarding forest degradation and the weakening role of local wisdom values (*panglima uteun*) in Seulimeum District, Aceh Besar Regency; to explain in depth the changes and shifts in socio-cultural actions (local wisdom) that have an impact on the environment and forests; to explore and understand the cognitive constructions of the Aceh Besar community regarding the ecological sustainability of forests and local wisdom; and to seek solutions and innovations for ideal and innovative forest management for the *panglima uteun* and the community of Seulimeum District, Aceh Besar Regency.

Methods

This study employs qualitative research with a phenomenological study approach. Qualitative research method is a research that intends to fulfill the phenomenon of what is experienced by the research subjects, such as behavior, perceptions, motivations, actions, and so on. It is conducted holistically and described in the form of words and language, within a natural context by utilizing natural methods (Moleong, 2004)[18]. The phenomenological study aims to define the habits of individuals who act as part of social phenomena into a form that carries meaning.

Phenomenological study is part of qualitative methodology that enables researchers to apply and implement their interpersonal skills and subjectivity in the exploratory research stage (Helaluddin, 2017)[19]. According to Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), who is known as the founding father, phenomenological philosophy was used to understand the actual structure of experience, which represents the way humans organize their reality so that it becomes integrated and authentic.

This research was conducted through three stages, comprising the preparation stage, implementation stage, and research report. In the preparation stage, the researcher identifies the topic or problem under study, conducts a literature review, and formulates a research plan. In the implementation stage, the researcher conducts observations, interviews, and documentation related to the required data from the object being studied, as well as data collection, data analysis, data interpretation, and conclusions.

This study uses primary and secondary data. Primary data is the main data comprising the results of observations and interviews conducted with informants selected through purposive sampling, choosing the right and representative people who represent the data needs of this research. The first category of informants consists of the Head of Seulimum District (Camat), the Head of Mukim Lamteba, the Panglima Uteun of Lamteba, the Keuchik of Lamteuba Droe, the Head of Mukim Lamkabeu, the Panglima Uteun of Lamkabeu, the Head of Mukim Lampanah, the Panglima Uteun of Lampanah, and researchers of customary law and customary forests of Aceh.

[18] Moleong, L. J. (2004). *Metodologi Penelitian Kualitatif.* Bandung: Remaja Rosdakarya.
[19] Helaluddin. (2017). *Mengenal Lebih Dekat dengan Pendekatan Fenomenologi: Sebuah Penelitian Kualitatif.* Jurnal Ilmiah.

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The second category of informants consists of customary law experts and local wisdom researchers in Aceh, namely Dr. Teuku Muttaqin Mansur, S.H., M.H. and Dr. Adli Abdullah, S.H., MCL. The third category of informants comprises 5 community members who seek their livelihoods from the forest, consisting of 3 men and 2 women. Meanwhile, secondary data is obtained from study sources in the form of both published and unpublished documents, such as reports, statistics, journals, electronic books (e-books), and others.

Data collection in this study was carried out through three main techniques. First, participatory observation, in which the researcher is directly involved in observing the customary forest management practices in the research area to obtain a real picture of the phenomenon being studied. Second, in-depth interviews, conducted in a semi-structured manner with selected informants to explore their perceptions, experiences, and knowledge regarding customary forests and Acehnese customary law. Third, documentation, namely data collection through the review of relevant documents both official and unofficial in nature, including customary regulations, mukim records, institutional reports, and related academic literature.

Data analysis in this study was carried out systematically following the qualitative data analysis model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which encompasses three main stages that operate interactively and continuously[20]. The first stage is data reduction. At this stage, the researcher carries out a process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the raw data obtained from field notes, interview transcripts, and documents. Data that is not relevant to the research focus is filtered out, while meaningful data is identified and codified. The coding process is carried out by assigning labels or categories to each data segment based on themes that emerge inductively from the data itself.

The second stage is data display and theme categorization. The reduced data is then organized and categorized into interrelated themes. Data is presented in the form of narrative descriptions, matrices, charts, and tables that allow the researcher to draw conclusions and take action. The main themes are developed through a thematic analysis process that refers to patterns of experience and meaning found in the data, in line with the phenomenological approach employed.

The third stage is drawing and verifying conclusions. The researcher draws conclusions based on the categorized findings, then continuously verifies them throughout the research process. Initial conclusions that are still tentative will be refined as more data and analysis are conducted.

To ensure the validity and credibility of the data, this study applies several validation strategies. First, source triangulation, namely comparing and cross-checking information obtained from various informants with different backgrounds to ensure consistency of findings. Second, method triangulation, namely verifying interview findings with the results of field observations and relevant documents. Third, member checking, in which the researcher returns the interpretation results and interim findings to key informants for confirmation of their

[20] Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

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accuracy and correction if there are any misinterpretations (Creswell & Miller, 2000)[21]. Fourth, audit trail, in which the researcher documents the entire research process in detail, from data collection and analytical decisions to the formulation of conclusions, so that it can be traced and verified by other parties. Fifth, persistent observation, in which the researcher is deeply involved and engaged in the field for a sufficient period of time to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

Results

The Concept of Forest Management by Panglima Uteun in Realizing Ecological Sustainability of Forests in Aceh Besar Regency

The implementation of the concept of wisdom-based forest management (Panglima Uteun) in Seulimuem District has not yet been able to be carried out in a sustainable manner. The customary problems occurring in 15 villages (gampong) in Seulimuem District are that all problem resolutions have been transferred to the Mukim Customary Institution. One of the factors is the complete absence of funding and assistance for the Panglima Uteun (forest guardian). This was also conveyed by a key informant:

"...It is very unfortunate that the Panglima Uteun has not been provided with any funding or assistance whatsoever by either the government or the village community, even though there is already legality and a qanun (regional regulation) regarding their existence. In this regard, the Panglima Uteun works voluntarily to guard and manage the forest despite frequently facing various challenges such as encountering wild animals like tigers, snakes, and supernatural disturbances…" (Keuchik (Head of The Village) Lambada Droe, interview, November 12, 2025)

Structurally, the Panglima Uteun is an element of the Mukim government that is directly responsible to the Imeum Mukim. In each village (gampong), the Panglima Uteun must cooperate under the coordination of the respective Keuchik Gampong in resolving various matters. This is influenced by the forest boundaries in each village of Aceh Besar. As an example of the application of the Panglima Uteun's functions in implementing the concept of local wisdom-based forest management by the Panglima Hutan in several areas of Aceh, namely:

1. In the implementation of forest customary practices, the Panglima Uteun holds the authority to enforce customary norms related to the entry, exit, and management of customary forests (meuglee).
2. Supervising activities that violate Adat Glee (forest customary law). In carrying out forest management, it is prohibited to cut or fell trees such as Tualang, Keutapang, Kemuning, Beringin, Glumpang, and others found within the forest if they are considered to be places where bees build their hives. The role of the Panglima Uteun is crucial in overseeing fraudulent forest management practices, so that the

[21] Creswell, J. W., & Miller, D. L. (2000). Determining validity in qualitative inquiry. *Theory Into Practice*, *39*(3), 124–130.

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implementation of customary forest management can be carried out properly and the prohibitions can be adhered to by every individual.

3. Another function of the Panglima Uteun is as a collector of Wasee Glee (forest tax). All forest products taken out of the forest, other than for personal consumption, are required to pay Wasee Glee. Examples of forest products include honey, rattan, rhinoceros horn, bird nests, elephant tusks, rubber sap, resin, timber for sale, and so on. The tax that must be paid amounts to 10% to the authorized party.
4. The Panglima Uteun serves as a judge in resolving cases related to violations of forest customary law. In a deliberation (musapat), the Panglima Uteun first listens to testimonies from the relevant parties before making a decision.

Furthermore, the Panglima Uteun is also appointed as a guide in various ceremonial forest customary activities, such as the harvest feast (kenduri) in the fields, as a guide and supervisor of the community in the forest. If at any time the community needs more forest products, they may invite the Panglima Uteun to explore the forest so as not to get lost, and the opening of new routes in the customary forest must go through the approval and supervision of the Panglima Uteun. A similar account was conveyed by an informant:

"...In the past, there was a keunduri (peusijuk uteun), where we would pray in the forest, then cook and eat together, and some of the water that had been blessed with prayers would be sprinkled on flowering trees so that their fruit would be safe and blessed. Unfortunately, I rarely see it happening anymore these days, and I myself no longer do it. At most, if we want to hold a keunduri, we just do it at home and call a teungku. Because everyone is busy nowadays, so it is difficult to gather people for a kenduri in the forest..." (Head of Mukim Lambada, interview, November 13, 2023)

In this context, the Panglima Uteun customary institution has been regulated under a legal framework in accordance with the life of Acehnese society. The legalization of the Panglima Uteun has been regulated under Law Number 11 of 2006 and Aceh Qanun Number 10 of 2008, stating that the Panglima Uteun holds authority in regulating customs related to the preservation and management of customary forest environments. The election of the Panglima Uteun is carried out by the village (gampong) community living in the areas surrounding the forest. A similar account was also conveyed by an informant:

"...If we look at the history and the requirements for the election of the Panglima Uteun, it is legitimized through a local deliberation every 6 years, as also written in the Aceh Qanun on Acehnese customary institutions. However, the person elected is not just anyone, but someone who possesses courage and expertise related to the order of the forest. Furthermore, the well-organized supervision and utilization of forest products by the Panglima Uteun customary institution represents a long-term investment for the preservation of forest ecosystems in Aceh, without damaging customs and the natural stability system." (Customary Figure, interview, November 7, 2025).

The Existence and Legitimacy of the Panglima Uteun as a Traditional Forest Guardian

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Based on the research findings in Aceh Besar Regency, the Panglima Uteun has become a cultural tradition in forest utilization that is deeply embedded in the life of the community in ancient times. A further similar account was conveyed by a key informant:

"The Panglima Uteun is a tradition and custom that has stood since the time of our ancestors and is directly elected by the community on the basis of a person's expertise, knowledge, and courage in facing various conditions, problems, and challenges in the forest, as well as possessing special abilities in mastering various matters within the forest." (Panglima Uteun of Mukim Lamkabeu, interview, November 13, 2025)

This competency-based selection mechanism reflects the fact that the indigenous communities of Aceh view leadership in forest management not as a political office, but as an ecological mandate that can only be entrusted to individuals with proven knowledge and moral integrity. This finding aligns with the concept of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), which emphasizes the vital role of traditional leaders as guardians of the balance between humans and nature (Berkes, 2012)[22].

Local Wisdom Systems in Customary Forest Governance

This study identifies that the local wisdom of the Acehnese community in forest management is manifested in a comprehensive governance system, encompassing six main dimensions, namely: (1) procedures for forest utilization, (2) procedures for opening fields and gardens, (3) procedures for timber management, (4) procedures for hunting, (5) procedures for profit-sharing, and (6) procedures for logging. These six dimensions collectively form a customary normative framework that regulates the relationship between humans and the forest ecosystem in a sustainable manner.

Recommendations and prohibitions in forest utilization have also been practiced by the community in the past. Such recommendations and prohibitions include not cutting down trees that grow near water springs, rivers, and waterfalls, as doing so can cause the disappearance of water sources.

Regarding logging procedures, the community used to adhere to these cultural practices, but nowadays individual community members no longer heed such recommendations and prohibitions. The community prioritizes fulfilling their daily needs by farming or logging. As a result, Customary Forest Law has begun to disappear from the community, including logging outside protected forests for the opening of new land. Wise forest management has been practiced from generation to generation in Acehnese society through Customary Institutions that are trusted to possess in-depth knowledge of the forest.

Degradation of the Panglima Uteun's Role and the Erosion of Customary Forest Law

The most critical finding of this study is the occurrence of a systematic degradation of the role and function of the Panglima Uteun in Seulimeum District. From the results of interviews and observations, the researchers found that more than 60 percent of young people in Aceh Besar Regency do not recognize the Panglima Uteun and the Adat Peulara Uteun

[22] Berkes, F. (2012). *Sacred ecology* (3rd ed.). Routledge.

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(customary forest preservation tradition). The results of interviews with the Head of Seulimeum District, the Head of Mukim Lamteba, the Panglima Uteun of Lamteba, the Keuchik of Lamteuba Droe, the Head of Mukim Lamkabeu, the Panglima Uteun of Lamkabeu, the Head of Mukim Lampanah, the Panglima Uteun of Lampanah, and researchers of Acehnese customary law and forests indicate that the role of the Forestry Institution is not functioning optimally as expected under the Customary Institution Regulations.

Analytically, this degradation is not of a natural character, but rather the result of a process of institutional marginalization. Namely, the sidelining of the Forestry Institution into the larger Mukim structure without being accompanied by adequate capacity building and sufficient authority. The Forestry Institution is also unaware of the existence of the Customary Institution Regulations that should serve as the legal foundation for their operational activities, thus carrying out its functions solely on the basis of hereditary experience without a clear regulatory framework. This is evident from the results of a key informant interview:

"...Nowadays, the Panglima Uteun does not function as we hear in the Acehnese customary qanun. In the past, the Panglima Uteun held great authority in regulating all aspects of life within the forest and was highly respected by the community, so that all directives and regulations issued in guarding and preserving the forest were greatly trusted and obeyed by the community in utilizing natural resources in the forest." (Indigenous community member, interview, November 7, 2025)

Structural Factors Contributing to Institutional Dysfunction

This study identifies five structural factors that synergistically contribute to the institutional dysfunction of the Panglima Uteun, which can be categorized into two main clusters:

a. Governmental Governance Factors:

- Weak coordination across levels of government (gampong, district, and regency) with the environmental and forestry agencies
- The entry of external actors in the form of plantation entrepreneurs who operate without involving customary institutions or relevant government agencies
- Insufficient financial support from the government for the operational activities of customary institutions

b. Institutional Capacity Factors:

- Low internal knowledge of the Forestry Institution regarding its duties, functions, and the legal basis of its authority
- Declining community awareness in complying with the directives of the Forestry Institution in forest utilization

This pattern indicates that the problems faced by the Panglima Uteun are not merely cultural or social in nature, but rather constitute a multi-level governance failure that requires coordinated policy intervention from various levels of government.

Ecological Impacts of the Weakening of Customary Forest Law

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The weakening of the Panglima Uteun's function has real and measurable ecological implications. The research findings indicate a strong correlation between the declining effectiveness of customary forest law and the increasing intensity of natural disasters in Seulimeum District, particularly floods and landslides. These impacts are directly felt by the community:

"In the past, we very rarely witnessed floods and landslides hitting our area because back then the trees were still very numerous and large, and there was also no gold mining like what we see now. But today, everywhere we look there is tree felling and illegal mining, so that whenever it rains, floods immediately strike the residents' homes…" (Pawang Uteun of Gampong Lambada Droe, interview, November 13, 2025).

Analytically, this testimony confirms that the customary forest law system is not merely a cultural construction, but rather constitutes an ecological adaptation mechanism that functionally serves as an environmental risk management system. When this mechanism weakens, the community loses their first line of defense against the threat of natural disasters. This underscores the importance of revitalizing the Panglima Uteun not only from the perspective of cultural preservation, but also from the perspective of ecological resilience and disaster risk reduction.

Discussion

The Interpretation and Perception of Forests within an Economic Dimension

The resources possessed by humans are always intended to be utilized or managed by humans. Forests are considered a source of livelihood by people who have the opportunity to seek income and become a field of business for local communities (Oldekop et al, 2020)[23]. Research findings reveal that communities originally viewed forests merely as a means of fulfilling basic daily needs, rather than as a vehicle for personal wealth accumulation. However, as surrounding communities began exploiting forest resources for individual economic gain, others were gradually motivated to assert their own control and claim over those resources. This phenomenon reflects an inherent human tendency to position oneself as a party deserving equal recognition and consideration in the utilization of available natural resources.

The community's understanding of forests in the economic dimension aligns with the concept of *self* as proposed in Blumer's symbolic interactionism theory. Blumer argues that the *self* is constructed through an interactional process consisting of two stages. In the first stage, an individual consciously perceives and interprets the reality surrounding them, while simultaneously striving to free themselves from the pressures imposed by that environment. Consequently, when a person begins to internalize and take ownership of the forest, it gradually becomes an inseparable part of their inner experience and consciousness. In the second stage, a

[23] Oldekop, J.A., Ramussen, L.V., Agrawal, A., Bebbington, A.J., Meyfroidt,P., Bengston, D.N.,Blackman, A., Brooks, S., Hunt, I. D., Davies, P., Dinsi, S.C., Fontana, L.B., Gumucio, T., Kumar, C., Kumar, K., Moran, D., Mwambampa, T.H., Nasi, R., Nilsson,M., Vazquez,M.A.P., Rhemtulla, J.M., Shutterland, W.J., Watkins, C & Wilson,S.J. (2020). Forest-Linked Livelihoods In A Globalized World. *Nature Plant*.

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process of transmission occurs, wherein the individual comes to perceive themselves as one of many objects coexisting alongside other objects within their social environment.

The Interpretation and Perception of Forests within the Dimension of Environmental Concern

Forests represent a vital ecosystem that serves as a natural habitat for a wide variety of plant and animal species. Their existence provides extensive benefits not only for flora and fauna, but also for human life as a whole. Beyond that, forests function as the primary foundation sustaining all living organisms on earth while simultaneously delivering invaluable ecosystem services whose worth cannot be measured in material terms alone (Mori & Gustafsson, 2017)[24].

Research findings reveal a significant shift in the way communities perceive and understand forests, particularly in relation to environmental interests between the past and the present. All six research subjects acknowledged that in the past, land clearing was carried out through a method of felling trees, which were then left to decompose and rot naturally. This traditional approach proved beneficial in supporting the process of organic and sustainable soil enrichment. However, over time, all six subjects admitted to having shifted toward the practice of burning land, on the grounds that this method produces looser soil and accelerates the planting process. In addition to yielding more immediate results, this burning method is also considered more efficient in terms of both cost and time. Nevertheless, when examined from the perspective of environmental sustainability, this land-burning practice carries severely detrimental consequences, namely the threat to the survival of various species of fauna and small flora that play a crucial role in maintaining ecological balance.

In Naess's *deep ecology* perspective, the concept of *significant others* refers to various parties that play a strategic role in shaping an individual's worldview toward the environment, encompassing the government, business actors, social groups, and communities residing in areas surrounding forest exploitation (Susilo, 2008). The presence of these parties exerts considerable influence in forming and transforming a person's orientation of thought and behavior toward forests. Such transformation occurs through a mechanism of imitation and self-adjustment, whereby individuals align themselves with the actions and forest management patterns adopted by those considered influential in their surrounding environment.

Strategies for Strengthening the Existence of Panglima Uteun in Sustainable Forest Management

The current existence of the Panglima Uteun has experienced a decline in guarding and managing forests both legally and non-legally. This is caused by the absence of support and assistance from the government in the form of funding, and therefore there is a need to reinforce the existence of the Panglima Uteun through binding and firm regulations. This was also conveyed by a key informant:

[24] Mori, A. S., Lertzman, K. P., & Gustafsson, L. (2017). Biodiversity and ecosystem services in forest ecosystems: A research agenda for applied forest ecology. *Journal of Applied Ecology*, 54(1), 12–27.

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"Based on my research and studies, first, in several places the Panglima Uteun is currently being reinforced by firm and binding regulations so that it does not disappear and continues to operate sustainably. Second, sanctions for violators must be strengthened. As an example, in Gunung Beutong Atueh, Nagan Raya Regency, those who damage the forest, such as cutting trees without the permission and supervision of the Panglima Uteun, are sanctioned to replant 10 to 20 trees in the forest and must sign an agreement not to cut trees without the permission and supervision of the Panglima Uteun." (Acehnese Customary Expert, interview, November 7, 2025)

Furthermore, there is a need for collaboration in taking action between the Panglima Uteun and the forest police, because the resolution of forest issues currently cannot be optimal if it is limited only to a top-down approach (forest police). Instead, a bottom-up approach is needed to revive the values of local wisdom (Panglima Uteun). Therefore, collaboration between both parties is highly ideal in guarding and managing forests in a sustainable and lasting manner. This was also conveyed by a key informant:

"The forest police (polhut) should collaborate and coordinate with the Panglima Uteun as someone who knows all the conditions of the forest and possesses extensive knowledge and extraordinary courage in facing various problems and challenges in the forest, whereas the forest police only guard the forest when there is information from the community. This is different from the Panglima Uteun, whose soul has already become one with nature." (Customary Figure of Gampong Lambada Droe, interview, September 1, 2023)

In order to maintain the existence of the Panglima Uteun as the savior of forests in Aceh, the internalization of local wisdom values in the form of concrete actions that are beneficial to the community is required. In the author's view, the government needs to facilitate environmental communities, forest activists, NGOs, and forest foundations to carry out collaborative programs with the Panglima Uteun that provide positive impacts on social and cultural activities in the community.

Conclusion

The implementation of the concept of wisdom-based forest management (Panglima Uteun) in South Aceh Regency has not yet been able to be carried out in a sustainable manner. The customary problems occurring in 18 districts in South Aceh are that all problem resolutions have been transferred to the Mukim Customary Institution. One of the factors is the complete absence of funding and assistance for the Panglima Uteun (forest guardian). With the Customary Forest Law and the non-optimal functioning of the Panglima Uteun's role, various problems and forest destruction have arisen, such as indiscriminate logging that can affect the natural environment, thereby causing natural disasters such as agricultural land drought, floods, and landslides.

Based on the results of interviews conducted by the researcher with the Pawang Uteun of Gampong Lambda, the Head of Mukim Lamteba, and community figures of Gampong Lamteba Droe, it was stated that forest destruction in Seulimeum District has increased tenfold over the last 10 years, which has had a severe negative impact on climate change, floods, and landslides,

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causing serious ecological damage and environmental pollution. This is caused by several factors, namely: (a) lack of coordination between the government at the village, district, and regency levels with the Forestry Agency, (b) lack of financial support from the government, and (c) the Forestry Institution does not have the courage to face pressure and threats from parties associated with illegal logging. The suggestions and recommendations from this research include:

1. There is a need for strengthening through firm and binding regulations so that the institution does not disappear and continues to operate sustainably, as well as imposing firm sanctions on violators.
2. Establishing regulations and collaborative agreements in carrying out forest rescue actions between the Panglima Uteun and the forest police. In this context, the forest police (polhut) need to collaborate and coordinate with the Panglima Uteun.
3. Strengthening the formal structure of the Panglima Uteun under the supervision of the Acehnese Customary Council (Majelis Adat Aceh/MAA) so that the Panglima Uteun becomes increasingly strong, directly supported by the customary institution, and to cultivate the full trust of the community in the orders and directives of the Panglima Uteun.
4. Carrying out the internalization of local wisdom values in the form of concrete works that are beneficial to the community. In the author's view, the government needs to facilitate environmental communities, forest activists, NGOs, and forest foundations to carry out collaborative programs with the Panglima Uteun that provide positive impacts on social and cultural activities.

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