



## Qualitative Inquiry in Nature-Based Tourism: A Case of Business Crisis Recovery at PT Satwa Sumatera Ecolodges

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### APA Citation:

Mariskova, D., & Anggoro, Y. (2025). Qualitative Inquiry in Nature-Based Tourism: A Case of Business Crisis Recovery at PT Satwa Sumatera Ecolodges. *TIJAB (The International Journal of Applied Business)*, 9(1), 69-83.

Submission Date: 25/06/2024

Revision Date: 29/07/2024

Acceptance Date: 23/10/2024

Publishing Date: 07/04/2025

### Abstract

**Background:** Until 2019, the tourism sector consistently contributed to Indonesia's GDP, establishing itself as a key economic driver. However, the COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted the tourism industry, causing a sharp decline in GDP contribution and resulting in millions of job losses. PT Satwa Sumatera Ecolodges (Satwa) exemplifies the struggles of the nature-based tourism sector during this period. Founded in 2007, Satwa, located adjacent to Way Kambas National Park (WKNP) in Lampung Timur, offers eco-lodging and tours of the park's natural and wildlife attractions. The prolonged closure of WKNP triggered a financial crisis for Satwa, leading to significant business challenges.

**Objective:** delves into how Satwa, a tourism business, has managed to navigate and withstand the adverse effects of external factors. This study hopes to contribute to the works on tourism resilience and offers insights for similar businesses facing external disruptions.

**Method:** Employing a qualitative case study approach, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted to gather primary data. The primary data collected from interviews and focus group discussions were thematically analyzed and coded for qualitative interpretation. Cross-method triangulation was applied to confirm interview and FGD outcomes using site visits, observations, internal documentation, and literature.

**Results:** The findings highlight that the company's commitment to exclusively hiring local staff was crucial for its survival.

**Conclusion:** The tourism industry is notably prone to shifts in external conditions, with the COVID-19 pandemic creating a major crisis for businesses within this sector. Nature-based tourism is especially impacted due to its reliance on natural attractions. However, such crises can also encourage businesses to develop resilience and innovation. In particular, this example shows that supporting local communities can provide a solid basis for overcoming external challenges, demonstrating how community empowerment can promote resilience as the basis for innovation.

**Keywords:** Ecotourism; Ecolodge; Nature-based Tourism; Resilience; Crisis Mitigation

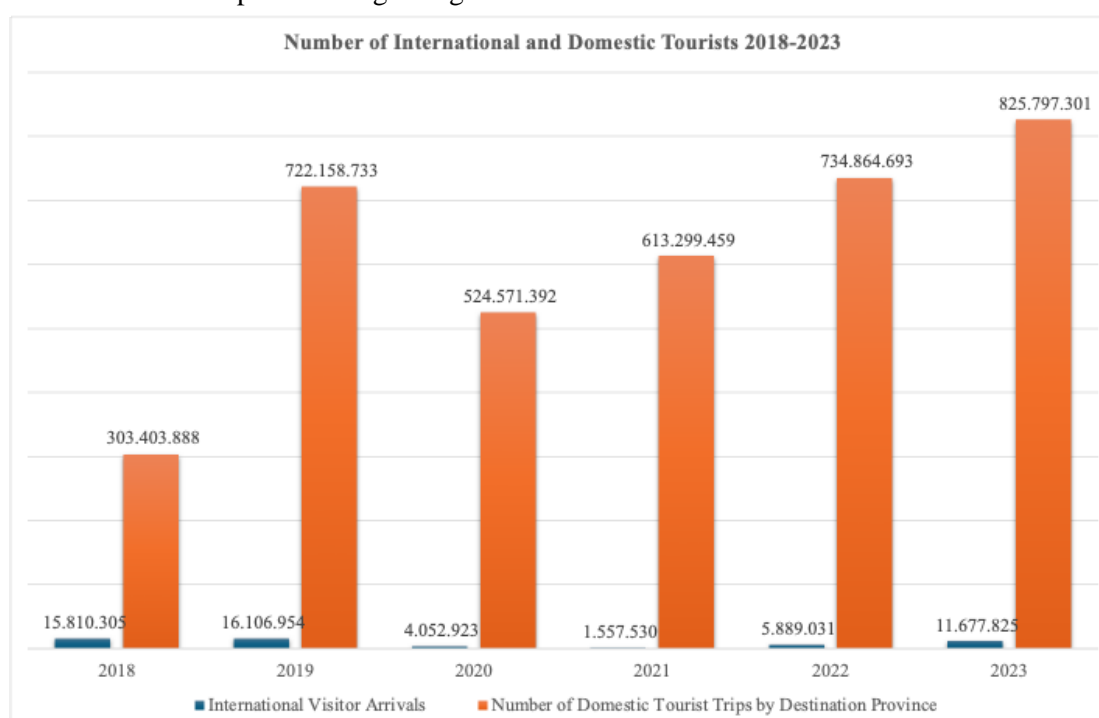
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## 1. Introduction

Over a decade, the tourism sector contributed to Indonesia's GDP from international tourist arrivals, reaching 4.97% in 2019 (DataIndonesia.id, 2023). The same year, Indonesia welcomed over 16.1 million international tourists (Ferdiana et al., 2024). It observed 722.16 million domestic trips (Sugiyarto et al., 2024), establishing tourism as a key economic driver, as shown in Figure 1. The 2020-2024 National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN) recognized the crucial role of the tourism sector in Indonesia's economic growth, enabling the country to maintain an average annual growth rate of 5% from 2015 to 2020 despite challenges in global conditions.



**Figure 1.** Number of International and Domestic Tourists from 2018 to 2023. Sources: BPS-Statistics Indonesia, n.d.; Ferdiana et al., 2024; Sugiyarto et al., 2024.

In January 2020, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) reported a 4% global increase in tourist arrivals, reflecting a positive outlook for the industry (UNWTO, 2020b). In light of this momentum, the Indonesian government outlined Strategic Priority Projects in the 2020-2024 RPJMN, aiming to develop 10 Priority Tourist Destinations. The goals were to amplify foreign exchange earnings to US\$30 billion by 2024 in the tourism sector, boost tourist visits to 350-400 million, and attract 22.3 million international tourists. The plan projected an increase in tourism's contribution to GDP from 4.8% in 2019 to 5.5% in 2024 and a rise in tourism-related jobs from 13 million in 2019 to 15 million in 2024 (Appendix I: Presidential Regulation No. 18 of 2020 Concerning The National Medium-Term Development Plan for 2020-2024, 2020). This plan aligns with UNWTO's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which emphasizes tourism as a key contributor to economic growth in developing countries. It supports the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 1 and 2, aiming to reduce poverty through job creation and infrastructure development (UNWTO, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic, which broke out in mid-2020, dramatically altered the global tourism industry. The sudden halt in international travel significantly impacted countries dependent on tourism. The absence of tourists also affected related industries due to the interdependence of sectors. Tourist

spending influences the economy across three levels: Direct (goods consumed by tourists), Indirect (products and services required by the tourism sector from other sectors), and Induced (income received by residents, including salaries and wages) (Fletcher et al., 2017). With tourists, tourism-related businesses could have helped the country's economy as incomes across connected sectors decreased.

The International Labour Organization (ILO), in its May 2020 brief, highlighted the pandemic's impact on the tourism sector, causing widespread unemployment. The industry was severely affected by being labour-intensive and consisting of small to medium-sized businesses (ILO, 2020). The ILO also noted the vulnerability of marginalized groups, with 54% of the tourism workforce being women and young people. According to the 2020 Policy Brief by UNWTO, the global tourism sector accounts for 1 in 10 jobs, emphasizing its role in increasing employment (UNWTO, 2020a). As a result, the pandemic greatly affected the incomes of tourism workers. In Indonesia's tourism sector, one million people were out of work (CNN Indonesia, 2021).

The downturn in tourism had a ripple effect on small and medium-sized businesses and communities. Local businesses, including restaurants, transportation, food and beverage services, agriculture, and handicrafts, operated by communities with limited or no access to external funding, quickly went out of business. Travel and movement restrictions in Indonesia led to the closure of all tourism sites, causing severe consequences. In 2020, Indonesia saw a 56% decline in tourism GDP (OECD, 2022).

In response to the spread of COVID-19, the Indonesian Ministry of Environment and Forestry ordered the closure of 57 conservation sites, including 26 national parks, 27 nature tourism parks, and three wildlife sanctuaries (The Jakarta Post, 2020a). Consequently, Balai Besar Taman Nasional Way Kambas (WKNP) enforced a complete shutdown from March 2020. The government lifted travel restrictions in mid-2021, and other national parks were reopened by the end of the year. However, unlike other national parks in Indonesia that reopened after the travel ban was lifted, WKNP remained closed until 20 December 2023 (The Jakarta Post, 2020b and Oktavia, 2023). The economy around WKNP has always relied heavily on the park's natural attractions and wildlife. When access to the national park was restricted, local businesses lost customers. The three-year enforced closure significantly decreased tourist interest in visiting the park, which profoundly affected the income of villagers and park-related businesses.

PT Satwa Sumatera Ecolodges (Satwa) is one of the five affiliated companies of PT Ecolodges Indonesia (ELI). Founded in 2007 as an ecotourism business by conservationists and environmental enthusiasts, Satwa runs the ecolodges and nature-based tour business in Lampung Timur. It was established to participate in the efforts to conserve nature and wildlife in WKNP and for sustainable employment for communities around the lodge. Administratively, Satwa is located in Desa Labuan Ratu IX, Lampung Timur, just 500 meters from the entrance of Way Kambas National Park (WKNP). The Labuan Ratu IX village is one of the villages used as buffer zones for the national park, protecting the conservation area from the intrusion of factories, households, and agricultural activities. The villagers' main income is from agriculture, ranging from small-holder farmers to large plantation workers.

Located adjacent to the park, Satwa offers four lodges managed entirely by staff from the local villages. Satwa employs eleven permanent staff, with service duration ranging from four months to ten years. Satwa's management structure includes two ELI personnel serving as commissary and director, while local personnel hold the positions of manager and staff. The local management team handles daily operations but depends on ELI's head office in Denpasar, Bali, for strategic planning, management guidance, external relations, and financial support. This centralized management approach means that ELI makes the key decisions, and Satwa implements those directions.

In addition to providing bed and breakfast services, Satwa offers a range of nature and wildlife tours both within and on the outer side of the national park. These tours include river cruises, night walks, birdwatching, elephant and rhino conservation visits, jungle tracks, and village life. Due to the specific tourism attractions around WKNP, Satwa draws tourists from special interest segments, particularly those interested by nature, wildlife conservation, physical activities, and local culture. The continued closure of WKNP started Satwa's business crisis due to financial challenges and future uncertainties in nature-based business around WKNP. Data from Satwa's financial statement showed that the pandemic-related decline in tourist visits significantly impacted Satwa's finances, leading to a 72% drop in revenue from 2019 to 2020. Despite the loss of revenues, the management decided to retain the staff, made

necessary adjustments, and developed strategies to ensure the sustainability of employment. This decision aligned with their commitment to strengthen collaboration between wildlife conservation efforts and the involvement of the local community. This study aims to explore the impact of external challenges on nature-based tourism businesses like Satwa from 2019 to 2023 and the strategies employed to mitigate these effects. Interviews and Focus Group Discussions were conducted to gather data, which later were confirmed with data from other sources, such as internal documents, observations, and site visits. The findings will address the following research questions:

1. How did the prolonged closure of Way Kambas National Park affect the nature-based tourism business of PT Satwa Sumatera Ecolodges?
2. How did PT Satwa Sumatera Ecolodges mitigate the impact of the crisis?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Nature-based Tourism

Nature tourism, or nature-based tourism, is a type of tourism that focuses on activities to enjoy nature in its pristine condition. It covers a wide spectrum of travel experiences, utilizing natural resources in their wild state and encompassing everything from diverse species and habitats to natural landscapes (Goodwin, 1996). This type of tourism encourages visitors to conduct responsible travel practices that prioritize environmental conservation and benefit the local communities (Fennell, 2000). Nature-based tourism may include wildlife safaris, hiking through forests, river cruising, or birdwatching. Nature-based tourism is an important component in fostering sustainable development (Silva et al., 2023) by generating foreign exchange and providing economic incentives to protect natural habitats and the species that rely on them (Goodwin, 1996). Among other natural landscapes, national parks and protected areas are important assets for nature tourism (Goodwin, 1996). For communities residing around national parks and protected areas, nature-based tourism generates substantial indirect economic advantages, spreading to the poorest households, stemming from income and production spillovers (Gupta et al., 2023).

#### 2.1.1 Ecotourism

Ecotourism is considered a subcategory of nature-based tourism primarily because of its emphasis on natural resources as the main attraction. Global Sustainable Tourism Council categorizes ecotourism as a niche division within the scope of nature tourism (GSTC, 2022). Fennell (2015) defines ecotourism as:

“Travel with a primary interest in the natural history of a destination. It is a form of nature-based tourism that places about nature first-hand emphasis on learning, sustainability (conservation and local participation/benefits), and ethical planning, development, and management” (Fennell, 2015, p. 17).

From that definition, ecotourism significantly emphasizes its contributions to local communities and environmental sustainability. The definition aligns with how it is measured based on its commitment to sustainable development, which includes preserving natural environments, educating tourists on sustainable practices, and enhancing the welfare of local communities (Wood, 2022). The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) highlights three key elements in defining ecotourism. Firstly, ecotourism emphasizes biodiversity conservation to protect the planet's natural and cultural heritage. Secondly, it stresses the significance of community development in empowering local people. Lastly, TIES underscores the provision of interpretation for staff and guests to foster knowledge creation (TIES, 2015). Besides supporting the local economy and preserving local cultures, ecotourism encourages financial investment to preserve and safeguard sensitive natural areas and maintain scenic beauty and appeal (Fang, 2020).

Furthermore, ecotourism allows consumers to contribute positively to the environment by supporting local communities, thus enhancing their quality of life and promoting regional economic growth (Rhama & Kusumasari, 2022). Protected areas are recognized globally as the most effective strategy for conserving biodiversity (Forje et al., 2021). In Indonesia, national parks are an example of such

protected areas. Additionally, ecotourism is acknowledged as a strategy to improve the livelihoods of communities residing near protected areas; however, establishing a sustainable economic foundation for these locals is necessary for the objective of ecotourism to be realized (Das & Chatterjee, 2015). The ability of ecotourism to boost the local economy relies on institutions that support local employment and are situated near tourist destinations (Cheng et al., 2023).

### 2.1.2 Ecolodges

Ecotourism sites attract a special segment of tourists, and like other destinations, they require supporting facilities such as accommodation and food services to cater to tourists. The type of tourists who travel to explore and enjoy the biodiversity of a place presented in ecotourism is called ecotourism (Fang, 2020, p. 177). In line with ecotourism principles, ecotourists look for environmentally friendly, simple yet comfortable accommodation that offers a unique experience in nature (Bulatović, 2017). Additionally, ecotourists choose to visit ecolodges because they are attracted by the appealing features of the destination (pull factors) and are motivated by their desires for adventure, relaxation, and meaningful experiences (push factors) (Chan & Baum, 2007). Ecolodges then offer accommodation and services to those who aim to engage with nature responsibly, learn from their environment, and support the welfare of local communities (Varmazyari et al., 2022). Ecolodges must be situated where the surrounding ecosystem is intact to thrive and fulfil their purpose. Its natural environment is carefully preserved and not subjected to problems such as excessive construction or exploitation of resources so that guests can truly experience nature while staying at the ecolodge and that the lodge can operate sustainably without causing environmental degradation (Wood, 2022). This type of accommodation is designed carefully considering environmental and social impacts throughout the construction process. Therefore, a facility must meet specific criteria to be considered an ecolodge. Mehta (2007) provides a detailed definition of the ecolodge concept, explaining the specific criteria that determine the classification of an accommodation as an ecolodge, which follows:

“A five- to 75-room, low-impact, nature-based, financially sustainable accommodation facility that helps protect sensitive neighboring areas; involves and benefits local communities; offers tourists an interpretive and interactive participatory experience; provides a spiritual communion with nature and culture; and is planned, designed, constructed and operated in an environmentally and socially sensitive manner” (Mehta, 2007, p. 419).

In addition to protecting natural areas, another key aspect of ecolodges is providing training and education to increase the knowledge and experience of local communities and tourists (Kumaji et al., 2021). Through training and educational initiatives, ecolodges can empower tourists and local communities to contribute to environmental and social sustainability by promoting cultural knowledge exchange. Eventually, ecolodge marketing strategies should prioritize highlighting unique destination features—such as wildlife and pristine environments—over the ecolodge's attributes, as these aspects create a competitive edge and attract ecotourists more effectively (Chan & Baum, 2007).

## 2.2 Crisis

The tourism industry is extremely prone to crises triggered by external sources, such as political instability, economic downturn or natural disasters. The COVID-19 pandemic is an example of a disaster that has plunged the tourism industry into crisis. For a business, a crisis usually indicates considerable financial losses, disruptions to normal business activities, or the risk of going bankrupt, all of which affect the stability and continuity of the business (Pedersen et al., 2020). The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism businesses demonstrate an organizational crisis as described by Bundy et al., who refers to an organizational crisis as an incident that is seen by people at the management level and stakeholders as extremely significant, unpredicted and potentially harmful which leads to threatening the organization's objectives and severely affecting its interactions with stakeholders (Bundy et al., 2017). In terms of timing, the crisis is also seen as a series of occurrences that can lead to significant unfavourable outcomes if they are not handled correctly, which implies that a crisis occurs within a specific timeframe and has distinct beginning and end points (Pedersen et al., 2020). However, while disasters and crises can harm tourism businesses, they can inspire innovation and creativity within the

industry (Bhaskara et al., 2023). How companies respond to and manage a crisis will likely play a significant role in determining their potential for success (Pedersen et al., 2020). Therefore, effective crisis and disaster management should be a fundamental capability for businesses in the tourism sector (Ritchie, 2004).

### 2.3 Business Resilience

The COVID-19 pandemic has created challenges that demand tourism and hospitality organizations to cultivate resilience capacities (Prayag & Dassanayake, 2023). Resilience suggests the ability of an entity to cope with or endure changes, particularly those that happen quickly, such as during a crisis like an economic slump or a disaster (Hall et al., 2018). Whereas enterprise or business resilience is the capacity of a business to withstand shocks, quickly modify to new circumstances, and continue to thrive despite facing substantial challenges and uncertainties (Fiksel, 2006). Business resilience can be developed by focusing on three key components: people, core operations, and networks (Foster & Dye, 2005, as cited in Hall et al., 2018, p. 84), and also by leveraging the company's existing knowledge base and the availability of resources, social support, and effective distribution of power and responsibility within the organization (Duchek, 2020). Because people are one of the keys to organizational resilience, tourism organizations depend on their employees' resilience to develop and maintain sustainability initiatives during disasters and pandemics (Prayag & Dassanayake, 2023), and effective leadership behaviours can further enhance employee resilience, significantly increasing organizational resilience (Prayag et al., 2023). In light of COVID-19's impact on tourism destinations, tourism resilience is regarded as a method to strengthen sustainability following ecological or environmental crises and to provide options for sustainable development (Kristiana et al., 2021).

### 2.4 Previous Research in Indonesia

Previous research by Dahles and Susilowati (2015) in the tourism sector in Yogyakarta found that tourism businesses demonstrate resilience through survival, adaptation, and innovation. A further report by Dahles (2017) notes that these small-scale businesses simultaneously coped with crises by employing the three strategies. During times of crisis, the close connection and integration of small-scale tourism businesses with the local community in Yogyakarta helped them survive (Dahles & Susilowati, 2015). Regarding innovation, research on tourism entrepreneurs in Lombok, Indonesia, emphasizes that innovative, dynamic capability is essential for fostering business innovation in times of crisis (Bhaskara et al., 2023).

## 3. Method

### 3.1 Sample / Participants

As part of data collection, interviews were conducted with key people from the management and advisory boards of ELI, the parent company, and the management team of Satwa. Additionally, focus group discussions were held with Satwa's staff to gain insights at the operational level. In total, 14 informants participated in the study. From the staff, one person did not join the FGD due to a conflicting schedule.

**Table 1.** List of informants

No. of Informants (person)	Sex	Age	Position	Service Years (as of Jan 2024)	Company	Type of Interview
1	M	61 above	Chairman Board of Advisor	18 years	Ecolodges Indonesia (ELI)	Individual On-site
1	M	51 to 60	• Managing Director	18 years	• Ecolodges Indonesia	Individual On-site
1	M	41 to 50	• Director	18 years	• Satwa Ecolodges	Individual On-site
1	M	41 to 50	• Reservation Manager	18 years	• Ecolodges Indonesia	Individual On-site
1	M	41 to 50	• Director	18 years	• Eco Safari Indonesia (ESI)	Individual On-site
1	M	41 to 50	• Chairman	18 years	• Indonesia Conservation Foundation – Our World	Individual On-site
1	F	51 to 60	Manager of Operations	4 years	Ecolodges Indonesia	Individual On-site
1	M	31 to 40	Lodge Manager	10 months	Satwa Ecolodges	Individual On-site
9	4 M 5 F	20 to 60	Staff	4 months to 10 years	Satwa Ecolodges	FGD On-site

Most of the staff at Satwa have been working there for five to ten years, with some having worked at the site even before Satwa acquired the facilities in 2007. Of the eleven staff members, only the manager and assistant managers hold undergraduate degrees. Two staff members are primary school graduates, three have secondary school diplomas, and four have high school diplomas.

### 3.2 *Instrument(s)*

A case study was chosen because it was particularly effective for questions needing detailed explanations of contemporary issues or an extensive, in-depth description of social phenomena (Yin, 2017). Furthermore, the case study approach was particularly applicable to international business research, as it involved gathering data from cross-border and different cultural contexts (Ghauri & Firth, 2009). The qualitative research approach was used because it was suitable for exploring complex issues in detail, gaining direct insights from individuals, enabling these individuals to share their stories, and understanding the contexts in which they addressed these issues (Creswell, 2013).

Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were employed to gather primary data. Semi-structured interviews are an in-depth qualitative research method used because they imitate the natural flow of real conversation, allowing participants to interact, discuss, and ask and answer questions (Knott et al., 2022). This type of interview is conducted face-to-face, where the researcher encourages participants to share their stories (De Urioste-Stone et al., 2018). In semi-structured interviews, the researcher can probe the participants to explain their answers in detail using several open-ended questions, which outline the research topic and allow the interviewer and interviewee to discuss specific subjects comprehensively (Hancock et al., 2009). Clark et al. (2021) mention that open-ended questions help in the inductive process of building theories. Respondents can answer freely and in their own words, allowing for unexpected responses, including answers that the researcher might not have anticipated or included as options. They can express themselves in their expressions rather than being restricted to predefined choices. This approach can provide a more precise understanding of the respondents' characters. (Clark et al., 2021).

The research questions guided the design of interview questions; however, it was expanded to capture various aspects of the business that could address the research questions. The interview protocol was developed and shared with participants before the sessions. The interviews were recorded with the informants' permission, and the audio recordings were transcribed for analysis. Identities were removed

from the responses to address concerns about the sensitivity of information shared by informants in interviews. Cross-method triangulation was applied to confirm interview and FGD outcomes. The qualitative data from interviews and focus group discussions were analyzed using a thematic approach to identify recurring patterns, which were subsequently coded. Some codes included sub-codes to explore patterns in greater detail.

### 3.3 Data collection procedures and analysis

The data collected were primary and secondary data. The primary data was obtained from site visits, observations, internal documents, interviews and focus group discussions. Secondary data was obtained from literature and online news sources covering COVID-19, national parks, ecotourism, crisis management, resilience, sustained competitive advantage, and other relevant themes. A key reason for utilizing multiple sources of evidence in case study research was tied to the primary purpose of conducting a case study: to conduct an in-depth analysis of a phenomenon within its real-world context (Yin, 2017). Site visits were conducted to observe the company's business activities and assess the condition of the facilities and the destination. Interactions among staff and between staff and local stakeholders were observed during these visits. Internal documentation included financial statements, room occupancy lists, and employees' records.

Site visits were conducted to observe the company's business activities and assess the condition of the facilities and the destination. Interactions among staff and between staff and local stakeholders were observed during these visits. To better understand the issues, preliminary interviews were conducted before the official data collection. First, an on-site preliminary interview was held with the Chairman of ELI's Board of Advisors. That meeting was followed by additional interviews conducted via video call with the Operations Manager of ELI and the Reservation Manager of ELI, who also held a position as the Director of PT Eco Safari Indonesia (ESI), which acted as the travel agency for all affiliated companies. Following that, an online discussion was conducted with three key personnel at ELI and ESI to brainstorm the root cause of the crisis. Afterwards, official data collection through semi-structured interviews was held separately with the Chairman of the Board of Advisors at ELI, key personnel at ELI and ESI, and the manager of Satwa. On-site focus group discussions were also held with staff at Satwa. There were two types of FGDs: the first involved two staff members with tour guiding experience to gain insights into the company's unique product, which was the nature-adventure tour; the second involved all ten staff members of PT Satwa Sumatera Ecolodges. Interviews were conducted in English and Bahasa Indonesia, depending on the informants' nationalities. Bahasa Indonesia was solely used in FGDs.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Business Dependency

All informants revealed that Way Kambas National Park was the central attraction driving Satwa's business. Visitors came primarily to experience the park, and nearly all of Satwa's tours and offerings depended on access. The park's closure severely impacted Satwa, leading to a significant drop in revenue, especially during the initial years of the COVID-19 pandemic, when income was almost nonexistent.

*"So far, the National Park has been our main selling point. This means that all attractions are located within the National Park."*

### 4.2 Business Challenges

Satwa business faced significant challenges in attracting tourists during the extended closure of WKNP. The absence of guests led to neglected buildings and high renovation costs upon reopening. The lack of visitors also resulted in no new ratings and a potential loss of market share to other parks—the pandemic further limited maintenance efforts, with only one room renovated.



### 4.3 *Organizational Challenges*

The local staff needed to operate independently or initiate new ideas, exacerbated by reduced income and financial difficulties. Their hospitality standards deteriorated, and morale was low due to the pandemic and prolonged closure. The lack of previous training and mentoring in past years worsened the crisis. The local management was highly dependent on ELI's centralized decision-making, leaving the staff unprepared to act independently. Additionally, the distance between ELI's head office and Satwa, the local company, created communication breakdowns, resulting from an absence of strong leadership figures. The company needed more technology and skills to improve the situation, particularly in marketing and promotion. Overall, the business was recovering, grappling with infrastructure deterioration and requiring significant investment in staff development.

### 4.4 *Organizational Management*

The head office provided directions and flexibility while continually monitoring the situation. Ultimately, the local staff decided how to manage the work, as they understood their context and situation better, ensuring that Satwa's vicinity remained safe and its facilities were maintained.

### 4.5 *Mitigation Capacity*

First, ELI created a new role at the head office, the Operations Manager, to directly manage and resolve operational issues for Satwa and other affiliated companies. Additionally, a consultant was hired to help the local staff develop new tour offerings. To avoid laying off staff during the pandemic, the head office and local staff agreed to cut salaries. For the first four months, full salaries were paid. After that, salaries were reduced to 50% for one month and then to Rp500,000 per person until 2022 before increasing to 70% of the regional minimum wage. Staff schedules were arranged into shifts to ensure the lodge remained clean and safe. The work shifts allowed staff to seek additional income through activities like farming or selling vegetables when they were not required to be at the lodge. Small initiatives were also undertaken, such as selling packed meals from the restaurant to NGOs that held activities around that time. Using funds from donors at the Indonesia Conservation Foundation-Our World, ELI's management provided financial support for goat farming. The proceeds from raising goats were divided between the staff and the lodge, with the lodge's share recorded as income. Another initiative from the Foundation involved staff volunteering for a fire patrol team during the dry season when forest fires were frequent in Way Kambas. This Firefighting Team collaborated with the National Park and received a small payment of Rp100,000 per trip. Activities funded by the Foundation were documented and published on ELI's website as part of the company's accountability to donors. This transparency fulfilled donor expectations and enhanced the company's public image, demonstrating ongoing operations despite the pandemic. Satwa generated additional income by offering accommodations to schools, a new customer segment. Although the park was closed to regular visitors, students could visit using special educational permits. Schools reserved blocks of rooms and arrived on buses. Satwa utilized the buffer zone villages as attractions for its tours to accommodate guests while access to the park was still closed. Tourists could enjoy river cruises along the park's border and observe elephants from outside the park's boundaries, allowing Satwa to still serve its guests without needing to enter the park.

### 4.6 *Shareholders' Support*

ELI's shareholders have supported Satwa since its establishment, acting as investors and coaches. They played a crucial role in empowering lodge staff by developing tours and training in tour-guiding and hospitality services. They also helped establish NGO connections and bring potential customers to the lodge. Additionally, some shareholders focused on training local communities in hospitality services. During the COVID-19 pandemic, shareholders provided soft loans to help Satwa maintain operations and pay staff salaries. The shareholders provided financial support through loans and encouraged their network to donate. Right after COVID-19, the Indonesia Conservation Foundation was established as a non-profit to raise funds. This Foundation collected donations from shareholders and former guests,

which were used to fund projects at the lodges, providing staff with income and food. This support helped staff engage in productive activities that could generate additional income.

*"So, this Foundation raised funds from shareholders and former guests who had stayed with us, accumulating a substantial amount of money. We could then use these funds to encourage the staff to engage in productive activities that could generate income for them as well."*

#### 4.7 Organizational Culture

Satwa's mission of employing local people fosters deep personal and emotional attachment to the lodge. The land, once belonging to their parents, has a rich familial history, further strengthening their connection to the company and its mission. The staff were often second-generation workers whose parents worked at Satwa, creating a strong sense of continuity and familiarity. Their relationship emphasized a strong sense of family, so they prioritized family values when issues arose. This deep attachment and loyalty to the workplace motivated the staff to protect and maintain Satwa as their livelihood. The proximity of their homes to Satwa allowed them to balance work with their farming activities, ensuring consistent care for the lodge. Additionally, hiring local staff who were integrated into the community ensured a harmonious environment, as they understood the significance of Satwa and its benefits, which increased their loyalty and commitment to the company.

*If they were not local staff and didn't live there, they would automatically return to their homes, and I don't know what would happen to our property there.*

#### 4.8 Stakeholders' Relations

Satwa extended partnerships with NGOs working with the park, benefiting from their expertise and networks. Additionally, some of Satwa's founders were involved in establishing an NGO called Alert, further increasing its connections within the NGO community. Special rates were offered to NGO staff. Furthermore, Satwa maintained a strong rapport with the nearby national park, with staff frequently engaging in park activities. During the prolonged park closure, ministry officials and NGO members often held meetings in the park. The lodge's strategic location and close ties with stakeholders became the preferred accommodation for these visitors, leading to increased revenues in 2021, even before the park reopened.

#### 4.9 Community Engagement

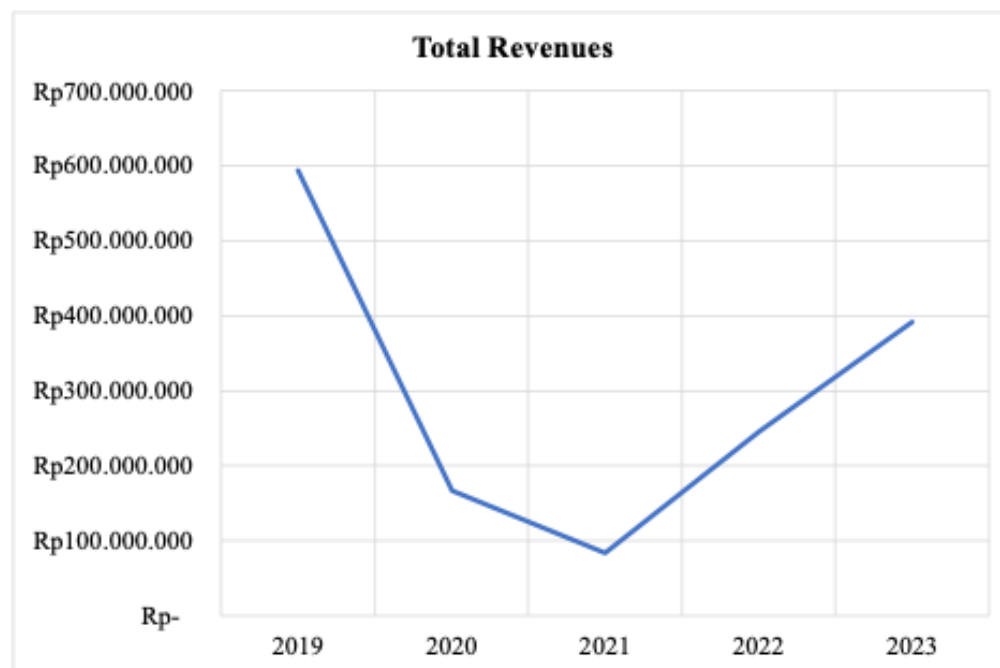
Satwa's staff maintained a strong attachment with the community around its premises. Before the pandemic, the lodge had organized training sessions for local guesthouse owners to improve their facilities and services. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the community collaborated with Satwa to ensure the safety of the lodge and its facilities.

### 5. Discussion

The data analysis shows that the prolonged closure of Way Kambas National Park from 2020 to 2023 had an overwhelming impact on PT Satwa Ecolodges' nature-based tourism business. The primary attraction for Satwa's business was the park, so the company struggled to attract tourists when access to the park was closed. Consequently, the closure resulted in a significant drop in revenue, especially during the first years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Facility maintenance became difficult due to the limited budget, exposing the facility to high renovation costs upon reopening. There was a risk of a potential loss of market share, too.

*"Many people may have shifted their birdwatching activities to other national parks like Bukit Barisan Selatan or Kerinci Seblat. Even when Way Kambas reopened, they might have been comfortable there, causing us to lose our market because of the long closure."*

Furthermore, organizational challenges occurred due to declining work standards, resulting from the staff's limited skills and low morale caused by reduced income and financial difficulties.



**Figure 2.** Satwa's revenues from 2019 to 2023. Source: internal data.

Under the guidance of its parent company, ELI, Satwa implemented several strategies focused on survival, adaptation, and innovation to mitigate the impact of the crisis. As part of Satwa's survival strategy, ELI appointed a dedicated manager to provide immediate assistance and direction during the crisis. Then, a flexible working system was put in place. Satwa's local staff began working in shifts to help reduce labour costs. Following the new working system, gradual salary cuts were implemented to maintain staff employment. This shift arrangement allowed staff to seek additional income elsewhere while maintaining the facilities.

To adapt to the crisis's new circumstances, Satwa launched small projects tailored to the local context. Examples include selling packed meals to customers in the meeting segment and starting a goat farming initiative as a profit-sharing venture, which increased income for both staff and the company. Although the goat farming initiative did not provide immediate cash support, it offered productive activities to help mitigate the pandemic's impact on individuals. Fire patrol activities were also introduced, adding income to the staff and, at the same time, strengthening Satwa's connection with the park. These initiatives were part of Satwa's overall survival strategy, aimed at keeping the business operational without closing and laying off staff.

Bhaskara et al. (2023) highlighted that continuously adapting and innovating is crucial for a business to create new solutions and stay competitive during difficult times. The crisis forced Satwa to innovate and explore alternative sources of income from new market segments. They offered accommodations to schools for their activities and collaborated with villages in the buffer zone for new tour experiences. This collaboration included a walking tour around villages and farms, river cruises along the park's border, and observing elephants from outside the park's perimeter. A consultant was hired to help the local staff develop skills, identify opportunities, and create new tour activities.

Dahles and Susilowati (2015) identified that the strong ties and integration of small-scale tourism businesses with the local community during the crisis enabled their survival. In the case of Satwa, shareholders provided financial support and connections with donors, which were instrumental during the crisis. In addition, its strong partnerships with NGOs working with the park and the surrounding community ensured ongoing support and even increased revenue during the pandemic. Satwa's business principle of employing only local people proved very important. It fostered deep loyalty and commitment among the staff and drew support from its strong network connection, which enabled the lodge to stay open and maintained during the crisis.

## 6. Conclusions

The tourism industry is particularly sensitive to changes in the external environment. The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a severe crisis for businesses in this sector. Nature-based tourism is particularly susceptible due to its reliance on natural attractions. For example, the tourism sector around Way Kambas National Park depends on access to the park's nature and wildlife attractions. However, crises can also drive businesses to develop resilience and innovate.

In Satwa's case, the prolonged closure of Way Kambas National Park led to a substantial decline in tourist numbers, consequently reducing the number of guests staying. The situation strained the company's finances and prompted organizational challenges, from reduced working standards and low staff morale. Satwa adopted strategies focusing on survival, adaptation, and innovation to navigate these challenges. For survival, a dedicated manager was appointed to provide immediate support to the staff, and a flexible working system was implemented to manage the salary reduction and for staff to seek additional income elsewhere. In adapting to the crisis, Satwa launched projects that leverage local staff's deep sector knowledge and connections with their network. This strong connection enabled the company to bring financial and moral support from its network. The necessity for innovation was evident as Satwa needed to seek new revenue streams. The company explored previously untapped markets. New tour experiences were introduced around the park's perimeter to adapt to the park's closure. Additionally, a consultant was hired to mentor the staff to develop new tour activities.

The research underscores that strong ties with local communities play a crucial role in the resilience of tourism businesses during crises. For Satwa, the company's resilience stemmed from the commitment and cohesion of its staff, who were all local people from the surrounding communities. Many had been with the company for years, promoting a strong organizational culture of dedication to the company. This sense of loyalty was crucial in keeping the business operational without incident during the crisis. For a nature-based tourism business like Satwa, which depends on destination attractions, survival strategies, adaptation, and innovation are crucial for overcoming crises and achieving recovery. Additionally, Satwa's commitment to exclusively employing and empowering local staff has created a resilient and sustainable business model deeply rooted in community support and loyalty.

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