

## SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN TORAJA: PERSPECTIVE OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

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*Stakeholders in Indonesia have accepted sustainable tourism as the protection and the long use of tourism resources as well as the availability of the resources for current and the future generation. Although such concept has been recognised as a good notion for developing tourism destination, its implementation needs to be investigated. Since 1970s, Toraja has been promoted as one of the main tourism destinations of Indonesia. For this reason, Toraja was chosen as a location for qualitative fieldwork to investigate the conduct of sustainable tourism. This article provides insights about sustainability and sustainable tourism based on the perspective of indigenous people in Toraja. Participant observations and interviews to stakeholders in South Sulawesi Province, Indonesia (specifically in North Toraja and Toraja land) were utilised to obtain information about sustainable tourism. On the basis of traditional cultural practices, Torajanese believe that the way they practice culture is actually a sustainable way. The idea of sustainability links to sustainability tourism which is now being promoted by the levels of government in Indonesia.*

challenges, community participation, sustainability, sustainable tourism

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### INTRODUCTION

Sustainability and/or sustainable tourism has been widely accepted by tourism scholars as a leading concept in understanding tourism practice which then becomes an objective and expectation of tourism policy makers and practitioners (Sharpley, 2000). According to Cohen (2002, p. 267), "the aim of the proponents of sustainability in tourism was to introduce and promote the concept in research and practice, in order to help conserve the environment and culture of the destination and provide the tourist industry with a more secure future". This is also reflected in Indonesia tourism policy where sustainable tourism is one of the desirable goals. It is believed that the concept provides positive consequences to a destination in terms of the protection of the environment and tourism resources and the opportunity to develop economic prosperity of communities which then links to poverty alleviation.

Although sustainable tourism has been accepted as a good notion for developing a destination, a critical investigation is needed to understand the implementation of the concept. In a destination where tourism has been recognised as the coming of Western people to see the indigenous people's tradition and cultural elements, there is a fact that sustainability provides different conception. In this sense, although tourism scholars have proposed sustainability, there might be other definitions proposed by the indigenous people. I consider that the voice of indigenous people can be very important aspect in understanding the notion of sustainability and how such concept links to sustainable tourism. Specifically, this article examines the understanding of the indigenous people related to why tourism is important and how sustainable tourism should be managed in a destination that mostly promote cultural heritage and landscape as well as natural resources as tourism resources.

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## RESEARCH METHOD

Qualitative methodology was employed to understand the socio-cultural condition of the indigenous people and the conduct of sustainable tourism in Toraja. Richards and Munsters (2010) argue that the use of qualitative research has been largely accepted in tourism research to explain the nature of experience and relationship between tourists and hosts of destination. According to Alasuutari (2010, p.147), qualitative approach “produces different lenses on social reality, lenses that make society and its phenomena understandable”. This means that a qualitative methodology can be used to explain social phenomena. This is relevant with the purpose of this research, that is, to investigate the social condition of communities under the framework of sustainable tourism.

Data were collected through interviews to indigenous people in Toraja specifically to guides, cultural observers (observers (*pemerhati/pengamat budaya*) and other indigenous people. Jennings (2005) affirms that the use of interviews in tourism research enables the researcher to address issues that are being investigated as well as to understand the respondents’ point of view. Since interview is a social interaction between researcher and respondent (Jennings, 2005), the voice of indigenous people can be represented. I interviewed indigenous people who have knowledge and understanding about tourism and the culture of Toraja. It is also necessary to interview guides because they know about the establishment of tourism and the culture of Toraja. Fourteen indigenous people in Toraja participated in the research interviews, four of them were tour guides.

This research also utilised participant observation as complementary information for interview data. Observation was done by participating as a tourist and utilised the chance to communicate with the indigenous people. The research was done by visiting Toraja in August and December 2011. Visiting Toraja for one week in August provided relevant information about the conduct of tourism in Toraja. Furthermore, the researcher spent seven days in Toraja to participate in an event called “Lovely December” in December to obtain more information about tourism in Toraja. In North Toraja and Toraja Land, there are two groups of communities including Torajanese and local people who are staying as residents. For the purpose of this research, Torajanese are considered as indigenous people whilst others are non-indigenous community.



Source : Max Oulton, 2013

**Figure 1.** Toraja is Located in South Sulawesi Province of Indonesia

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Sustainability and Sustainable Tourism: Conceptual Approach**

Countries in the world have adopted and demanded the implementation of sustainability or sustainable development in their development policies. The notion of sustainability is considerably important because it provides ideas for policy implementation and economic development of communities (Baker, 2006; Beeton, 2006). Sustainability emphasises the importance of utilising resources in any development policies by prioritising the ability of current and future generations to access and utilise the resources (United Nations, 1987). This means that the inclusion of communities is essential to achieve the goal of sustainability. As countries in the world have been working to develop their communities through sustainability concept, there is a consensus that sustainability is a good notion to be implemented. The idea of sustainability raises questions on what to sustain and how to sustain something. Murphy and Price (2005) affirm that although sustainability or sustainable development has been accepted as a good concept, the practical use of sustainability in overcoming environmental matters has been critiqued. According to Murphy and Price (2005), sustainability should be viewed as a summary goal and thus, the concept should create methodologies, ways or objectives to be reached. For instance, sustaining the economy of communities and the quality of the environment (Knowles-Lankford & Lankford, 2000) as well as the protection of resources are three important goals of sustainability. The integration of economic development and the protection and preservation of the environment (d'Hauteserre, 2006; Redclift, 2008) as well as the preservation of resources become the main concern of sustainable development.

Sustainability and/or sustainable development is used as interrelated discourse with sustainable tourism or sustainable tourism development (d'Hauteserre, 2006; Moscardo, 2003). The idea of sustainability is adopted in sustainable tourism. The necessity to implement sustainable tourism is rooted in the belief that economic development of communities should be parallel with the utilisation of resources as tourism attractions. Human beings use the resources for the economic benefit, but the use of the resources should consider the protection of the environment. Furthermore, mass tourism can create negative consequences to the destination in various scales (Swarbrooke, 1999). For instance, the tourists' visit in a historical site without considering the protection of the sites can create damages to the authenticity or originality of the site. D'Hauteserre (2006) argues that the exploitation of resources as tourism attractions should be avoided and thus, regulation should be made so that the principles of sustainability can really be implemented.

Sustainable tourism aims at improving the quality of life of communities through maximising positive advantages of tourism and minimising negative consequences (Hugo, 1998; Junaid, 2014; Moscardo, 2003; Ost, 2009). Quality of life is reflected in the ability of human beings particularly those who live in poor condition to improve their economic well-being. The availability and access to real income, food, education and health are some important factors that human beings expect. In order to achieve these goals, tourism should be prioritised as a key component to develop the economy of communities (Chok et al., 2007). In this sense, the participation of communities is one of the key elements to achieve the goal of sustainable tourism.

The economic benefit of tourism is the reason why communities need to be involved in tourism. In a destination for example, tourists require services such as accommodation, transportation, entertainment (Ardahaey, 2011; Freytag & Vietze, 2013; Tribe, 2007). In order to provide these services for tourists, the tourism industry requires employees that are certainly recruited from communities. This is relevant with the purpose of countries in the world especially developing country which is working on economic development of

communities (Freytag & Vietze, 2013). The availability of employment in tourism helps countries in the world to alleviate poverty which is now become major issue in many countries.

Six levels of participation proposed by Pretty (1995) which are then affirmed by Mowforth and Munt (2009) can be used to measure the level of participation of communities. According to Mowforth and Munt, community participation consists of six levels including “passive participation, participation by consultation, bought participation, functional participation, interactive participation and self-mobilisation and connectedness” (2009, p.229). For the purpose of this article, there are only two levels of participation that reflect sustainable principles. First, interactive participation which is defined as the involvement of communities in tourism activities by people get involved in planning and management of tourism resources. The involvement of communities is shown in the involvement in analysis for development, plans and implementation. Second, self-mobilisation and connectedness is the effort of communities in the establishment of tourism through taking initiatives independently. Communities participate actively in tourism solely for the purpose of developing tourism and helping communities through tourism activities.

In this article, participation by indigenous people of tourism destination is the priority without ignoring other non-indigenous people who inhabit the destination. The coming of tourists to see the unique culture of indigenous people in a destination (Hinch, 2004) is the reason why indigenous people need to be supported to participate actively in tourism. Indeed, sustainable tourism emphasises equal benefit for residents of the destination. However, since the cultural and natural resources of indigenous people are utilised and promoted as tourism attractions, they should be encouraged to obtain benefit through tourism. Hinch (2004, p.246) argues that “indigenous people are increasingly used in reference to communities, peoples, and nations that have historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies”. The term “indigenous people” are interrelated with indigenous tourism which is defined as the involvement of indigenous people in tourism activities either their culture is utilised as attraction or they control tourism activities. For the purpose of this article, the economic development of indigenous people and the preservation of their cultural and natural resources are the concerns of this research.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **The Challenges for Sustainable Practices**

Toraja tourism has provided the opportunity for the tourism industry particularly tours and travel agents to attract international tourists to visit Toraja. Stakeholders in Indonesia also promote Toraja as one of main destinations. The levels of government (the local, provincial and central government) for example, have prioritised Toraja in their promotion which is shown in their support of yearly event called “Lovely December”. Attention is also given in the effort of government to promote and register Toraja in UNESCO world heritage list.

Tourism has been one of the drivers for economic development of community. Many communities have utilised tourism as their main income through establishing various business. Torajanese who have the ability to speak English for example, utilise their skill to work as guides. Some manage tourist information center whereas others work as freelance guides. Torajanese and local people also utilise tourism to gain income by selling souvenirs. Accommodation business is one of the options for Torajanese to gain profit from tourism. For Torajanese, more benefit will be obtained in peak season of tourists’ visit in terms of the establishment of the yearly event. I had to struggle to find

accommodation when visiting Toraja in December. Nevertheless, I noted that one should book accommodation in advance if he/she plans to visit Toraja in December. Although Lovely December is intended to attract Torajanese who live outside of Toraja to celebrate Christmas, the event has provided the opportunity for indigenous people to obtain economic benefits. The event also attracts international tourists to visit and enjoy the cultural heritage of Toraja.

Although economic benefits have been obtained by Torajanese, there are situations that one will question the conduct of sustainable tourism in Toraja. In this sense, there are challenges and/or obstacles in implementing the principles of sustainable tourism. For example, equitable benefit of tourism has not been achieved because economic benefit is mostly obtained by those who have more capitals to invest. Indeed, there are indigenous people who stay very close to tourism attraction do not get benefit from the visit of tourists. I consider that these people as passive participation and should be encouraged to get involved in tourism. I utilised my visit to talk and discuss with these groups of people so that I could get information about their expectation and how tourism should be managed sustainably.

It was interesting that they wanted to talk with me simply because my role as indigenous person of South Sulawesi province and my position as the government employee of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. I noted that they were actually poor people but in fact, their culture was utilised as tourism attraction. They expect that my interview with indigenous people in Toraja could help them achieve economic prosperity through my role in representing their voice to the top level of government. I did not promise to communities about my role as government employee. Rather, the information they provided through my research should enable policy makers in Indonesia to manage Toraja tourism based on the voice of indigenous people.

Indeed, the poor people who live around the cultural sites expect to obtain benefits through tourism. They require financial aids to run a business such as selling souvenirs as well as having education and training or skills in tourism that enable them to participate in tourism activities. However, unequal benefits of tourism activities seem to constrain the participation of indigenous people in tourism. There is a reality that some families who live closed to cultural tourism attractions do not participate in tourism. In other words, passive participation may represent their condition in tourism establishment.

Furthermore, indigenous people expect that their culture should not only be utilised as tourism attraction. Rather, they expect that levels of government in Indonesia pay attention on Toraja as the main destination in Indonesia. Road condition for example, has been complained by the indigenous people as well as tourists who visited Toraja. Torajanese argue that government is considered as the main actor to overcome this issue. This is reflected in the respondent's point of view about Toraja tourism, "it seems that the government's attention on Toraja tourism has not been optimum. The road is damaged and it is the role of government to manage the damaged road" (respondent, December 2011). The two conditions above are some of the reasons why indigenous people provided their time to participate in my research.

Another challenge of sustainable tourism is lack of awareness of the community in protecting the environment. A guide in Toraja mentioned that communities need to be encouraged to preserve the environment through various programs. She was concerned with the cleanliness of Toraja. For her, Toraja tourism cannot be developed if the awareness of communities on the importance of cleanliness is not resolved. Rubbish management for example, needs more attention because people seem to let the rubbish on the side of the road. Road condition also affects the establishment of tourism in Toraja.

Sustainability of the environment seems to be the reason for managing Toraja as destination sustainability.

The principle of sustainable tourism requires the preservation of culture as the core element of Toraja tourism. To some extent, the practice of funeral ceremony enables Torajanese to understand and safeguard their cultural heritage. However, there are cultural elements that need more attention in terms of the physical condition of their heritage. For example, original *Tongkonan* traditional house should be maintained in a way of the top roof should be made of traditional roof. In fact, communities are forced to use metal roof (*atap seng*) when repairing their Tongkonan traditional house. It is for economic and practical reason that they use metal roof because bamboo roof is becoming scarce. Indeed, tourists expect to see the authentic Tongkonan with its traditional roof. The tourists' expectation may still be achieved since there are still authentic Tongkonan in Toraja. However, if we look at the traditional values of Tongkonan and the sustainability of cultural heritage, the authenticity of Tongkonan is essential to support sustainable tourism in Toraja.



*Source : Author, 2011*

**Figure 2.** Tongkonan in Toraja with Metal Roof

In some tourism attractions in Toraja, massive numbers of visitors potentially destroy the sustainability of cultural sites. Londa is one of favourite tourist attractions that most guides recommend to visit. From its main gate, tourists are welcomed by receptionists that require visitors to pay. Then, guides offer their services for visitors to explore the cave. In this site, visitors are required to pay 35,000 IDR (US\$ 3.18) because guides provide torch and explanation about the cultural site. The more visitors come, the more economic benefits are obtained by the guides.

However, more visitors can cause negative consequences to the existence of the sites. Indeed, Torajanese have put the dead body in the caves in a way that the family members manage it when doing traditional ceremony. Protection of the site from human's touching and visit is essential. Since the visit is not regulated and visitors can enter the cave with or without guides, there is a high risk that the site can be devastated. Another consequence of tourists' visit in cultural sites in Toraja may be vandalism- the tourists' unethical behaviour of writing on the caves. Hence, regulation for visitors seems important so that visitors have an understanding on what to do and how to visit the sites. In this sense, the tour guides are responsible in guiding the tourists especially because the caves contain bone and skeleton that must be treated carefully.

### Destination Sustainability: Conditions for Sustainable Tourism

Indonesia consists of more than 17,000 islands and hundreds of ethnic groups (Forshee, 2006) that are potentially promoted as tourism destinations. Toraja is part of South Sulawesi Province and is open as tourism destination since 1970s (Adams, 1984; 1997). Since then, the cultural identity of Toraja is one of the most fascinating cultures in the world that still maintains traditional practices (Volkman, 1984). The arrival of tourists to witness funeral ceremony provides the opportunity for Toraja tourism as one of the main destinations of Indonesia.

Questions might arise on what makes Toraja interesting to tourists. Generally, domestic and international tourists come to Toraja to fulfil their curiosity on the uniqueness of Toraja culture. For Indonesian people, Toraja is one of interesting places and options to choose if they plan to travel. Visiting hanging graves for example, is the main activity of tourists when they travel to Toraja. *Ketekesu* is one of favourite attractions that many tour guides recommend when they lead a tour for domestic and international tourists. Traditional house of *Tongkonan* is also considered as one of the main tourism attractions which can be found in the areas of Toraja. For tourists, original or authentic *Tongkonan* is interesting to see because the architectures of *Tongkonan* with traditional roof and wood as the main construction. Interestingly, people build their houses by maintaining the traditional style or the architecture of *Tongkonan*.

*Aluk Todolo* is the term that most Torajanese use in explaining their culture especially their traditional practices. *Aluk Todolo* is reflected in the way Torajanese practice their culture by following their ancestors' ways. One of traditional practices is the funeral ceremony called *Rambu Solo*. In this ceremony, there are some rituals and activities that most Torajanese should practice such as performing traditional dances, songs and music. Fighting buffaloes and slaughtering them are rituals that many tourists see in Toraja. Putting the dead body on rocky cliffs and mountains is the most important part of the ceremony. In addition to *Rambu Solo*, Torajanese also practice *Rambu Tuka* which is referred to happiness and is contrary to *Rambu Solo*.



Source : Author, 2011

**Figure 3.** Rambu Solo Ceremony, A Sustainable Practice in Toraja

For Torajanese, practising their traditional culture is a sustainable way. For them, philosophy of “take and give” should be implemented in human’s life. The environment for example, should be treated based on what the environment has given to human beings. They believe that the soil is used for cultivating and thus, they do not put the dead body in the soil. Nature is regarded as the main source for sustaining human’s life. If human beings have taken benefit from the use of resources (the environment) as source

for their life, people need to safeguard the resources not only for temporary benefit but also for long term use. Most Torajanese utilise natural resources to maintain their life by growing agricultural products such as rice, cassava, etc. as well as by raising buffaloes and pigs which are then sold for the purpose of traditional ceremony.

Sustainability is also shown in the way Torajanese treat their traditional house. *Tongkonan* traditional house of Toraja links to the ancestors and the future of the family relationship (Volkman, 1984). *Tongkonan* represents the socio-cultural life of Torajanese as well as the symbol of family (Junaid, 2014). *Tongkonan* is not only recognised as traditional house with its traditional architecture but also its function as the centre for family gathering. For instance, members of family who have been away and are not living in Toraja because of occupation or marital relationship that require them to stay outside of Toraja can be tightened with *Tongkonan*. Torajanese believe that *Tongkonan* enables them to recognise their family relationship. Furthermore, *Alang Sura* (rice barn) is usually built near *Tongkonan*. Since Torajanese realise that nature does not always provide foods and agricultural products, they utilise *Alang Sura* as a place for agricultural products. Here, *Tongkonan* and *Alang Sura* are interrelated because the first refers to the place where family can gather and the latter is a place for foods that will anticipate if families are lack of food stocks.

Sustainability is not used as a term to explain the conduct of traditional practices and the existence of cultural elements of Toraja. They do not recognise the term although scholars have introduced it as an important concept for developing any forms of tourism. My interviews with some Torajanese as the indigenous people indicate that Torajanese tend to explain the reason and meaning of their culture rather than to answer my questions about definition of sustainability. Indeed, sustainability is defined as the ability of people to sustain their life either economically or socially. The traditional practices enable them to obtain income through selling agricultural products, buffaloes and pigs. The ceremony also provides the chance for members of family to strengthen their family and community relationship because the sharing of meat after slaughtering buffaloes and pigs to family members and communities are believed as sustainable way.

The meaning of sustainability by the indigenous people of Toraja links to how sustainable tourism should be managed. Indeed, there is an expectation that the increasing numbers of tourists to Toraja will provide the opportunity for Torajanese to obtain more economic returns. However, the numbers of tourists have been decreasing after bomb explosions occurred in Bali in 2002 and 2005. However, Toraja tourism has started to develop tourism by establishing yearly event that focus on selling cultural or ethnic tourism and nature-based tourism. Lovely December brings positive nuances to the development of Toraja tourism. This meant that although the event was only held yearly, positive advantages in terms of economic impacts of tourism have given positive consequences to the economy of community.

Given the importance of tourism for economic development of the community, there is a need that Toraja tourism should be managed sustainably. Communities believe that tourism activities have provided the opportunity for communities to sell souvenirs representing the cultural heritage of Toraja. The indigenous people who have the ability to speak English and other foreign languages can also gain income through guiding. Besides, the existence of tourists in Toraja has encouraged communities to create any form of economic activities. For example, some people build their houses to be rent for accommodation purpose. So, there is a general conception that tourism should continue so that the flow of economic activities can grow and thus, sustainable tourism can be implemented.



As noted earlier that the implementation of sustainable tourism should consider three essential factors including active participation of communities, the conservation and/or the preservation of tourism resources and the protection of the environment. First, Toraja culture is mostly promoted and sold for tourist consumption. For this reason, the indigenous people should be prioritised in tourism activities. To some extent, the tourists' visit to cultural sites enables souvenir sellers to gain more income particularly if tourists spend their money in those sites. However, there are many souvenir sellers in one cultural site. The fact is that more benefits are gained by those who have more souvenirs (capital) and close to the cultural sites. In this sense, equal benefit of tourism cannot be achieved because other sellers might not be able to compete with others because of limited capital.

People who stay very close to cultural sites need to be empowered by providing education and skills so that they can get involved in tourism. Poor people around the sites should be given more attention so that they realise the importance of tourism for economic development. Tourism education and entrepreneurship skill are important for these people. In this sense, the role of the local government is important in providing short courses of education and skill. There are many options of business that the host of destination can create. This is relevant with the vision and mission of government in encouraging communities to create creative efforts that can support the economic development. Similarly, the indigenous people who have the capability to become guides should be supported by providing them the chance to work as professional guides. This does not mean that non-Torajanese are not given the opportunity to become tour guides. Rather, there should be regulation on how to achieve equal benefits from guiding. The tourism industry should also consider to employ Torajanese as the front-liner in explaining their cultural heritage to tourists.

Second, most tourists seek information about when the traditional ceremony is held in Toraja. Many hotels and inns provide information about the cultural event (*Rambu Solo*). For Torajanese, all aspects of Toraja culture are important aspects to see. However, the tourists' expectation is to see the funeral ceremony as well as other cultural elements. This means that Toraja tourism is a seasonal-based tourism. In fact, there are some hotels in Toraja could not operate because the number of visitors is decreasing. On the contrary, inns and hotels are fully booked in certain season.

This condition requires sustainable effort by emphasising that Toraja tourism should not solely depend on one kind of tourism. Other forms of tourism need to be promoted by managing regular events. In Bali for example, many events are held which consequently attract domestic and international tourists. Toraja can also be promoted as tourism destination with its national and international scale events. To achieve these goals, infrastructure is the priority by the levels of government. Accessibility to Toraja is important because the availability of international airport will support the development of tourism. Cultural tourism or heritage tourism is still the magnet and the icon of Toraja tourism as well as the necessity to develop other forms of tourism.

Above all, the role of *yayasan keluarga* (family foundation) is important in encouraging communities to obtain benefits from tourism. In Toraja, cultural sites are owned by many families which may consist of many people that can live in Toraja as well as Torajanese who live overseas or other areas in Indonesia. To manage the sites, family foundation is made to help people manage the sites. The family foundation is a kind of organisation that works based on the family relationship to manage the cultural sites as tourism attractions. This foundation has important role in providing mechanism for tourism development in Toraja. At the end, the role of government is essential together with other stakeholders in implementing sustainable tourism.

## CONCLUSION

Toraja tourism is well recognised as culture tourism combined with nature. Stakeholders agree that the increasing numbers of tourist enable local and indigenous people to improve their economic well-being. Although tourism is not the only economic activity for local and indigenous people, they expect that tourism provides more benefits for people. Since culture and nature are interrelated elements in Torajanese life, sustainability is reflected in the way they treat culture and nature. For them, maintaining traditional practices is the way to respect their family especially parents who passed away. By putting the dead body in the cave or on the rocky cliffs or mountains, they protect the environment because the soil is intended for cultivating lands. The philosophical foundation of Toraja culture indicates that sustainability has been thought long before the concept of sustainability is proposed by scholars.

Torajanese believe that with or without tourism, they can still sustain their life. Tourism is considered important as economic booster, but it is not the only way to sustain their life. In order to achieve tourism as economic driver, active participation by communities is the requirement for sustainable tourism. The indigenous people have the right to participate in and gain income through tourism. Stakeholders have the same goal in developing Toraja tourism, that is, to support communities to participate in tourism. However, the economic benefits of Toraja tourism are not only enjoyed by Torajanese but also local people either in Toraja or in other peripheral areas.

Toraja tourism now faces challenges in implementing sustainable principles. To overcome the challenges, the indigenous people, the local government and the tourism industry should work together to develop tourism. The indigenous people's point of view about sustainability becomes the basis for managing Toraja tourism sustainably. The paper suggests that maintaining the traditional practices provides the opportunity for the sustainability of tourism in Toraja. To achieve this, it is necessary to tackle issues related to the obstacles and challenges of tourism development in Toraja. Hence, as the shareholders of tourism development in Toraja, the indigenous people play important role in achieving the goals of sustainable tourism.

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