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Narrating Insularity: Political Ecology and the Communicative Politics of Surf Tourism in the Mentawai Archipelago

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ABSTRACT

This research explores how the idea of insularity in the Mentawai Archipelago is formed and disseminated via prevailing narratives in the global surf tourism sector. Rooted in Political Ecology and drawing on the critical insights of David Harvey, Bruno Latour, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the study contextualizes surf tourism within wider mechanisms of neoliberal accumulation, socio-material formations, and postcolonial depiction. It contends that tourism growth in Mentawai functions not merely as an economic enterprise but also as a narrative tool that transforms access, governance, and appreciation of coastal ecosystems and Indigenous cultural realities. Methodologically, the research utilizes a qualitative interdisciplinary framework that merges critical discourse analysis of global surf media (2015-2025), ethnographic mapping of Mentawai traditional narratives, and an extensive literature review on tourism advancement and environmental governance. The results indicate that worldwide media portrayals depict Mentawai as a distant and untouched "surf frontier", frequently disregarding Indigenous environmental care while reducing intricate socioecological contexts to appealing images of adventure and exoticness. The research reveals a basic socioecological conflict. Although surf tourism contributes to economic development and international recognition, it also leads to coral reef damage, the commodification of culture, and significant economic leakage due to enclave-centered tourism structures. Even with rising numbers of tourists, local communities still face restricted economic gains and ongoing inequality. These dynamics illustrate wider processes of accumulation through dispossession and unequal growth within neoliberal tourism economies. The research finds that attaining more sustainable and fair tourism in Mentawai demands not just environmental stewardship but also the decolonization of tourism stories, incorporation of Indigenous wisdom, and the reorganization of economic relationships in the tourism framework.

Keywords: *Mentawai Archipelago, Surf Tourism, Political Ecology, Political Communication*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Mentawai Archipelago, situated within the tectonically active Sunda Arc of West Sumatra, Indonesia, serves as a quintessential example of insularity not only as a geophysical state but also as a socioecological idea deeply influenced by dominant discourses of neoliberal globalization [1]. This study, based on a political ecology framework, examines the dialectical relationship between surf tourism and the intrinsic biocultural ontologies of Mentawai Indigenous communities, uncovering how seemingly harmless developmental narratives conceal mechanisms of accumulation through dispossession, as effectively theorized by David Harvey.

Harvey's foundational idea suggests that in late modernity, capital accumulation increasingly depends on the appropriation of shared assets comprising both physical resources and intangible cultural realities via processes that privatize the commons under the pretext of market liberalization [2]. In the Mentawai context, this appears as the commercialization of coastal ecosystems, where coral reefs, oceanic spaces, and animistic symbolic systems are integrated into networks of global capital, resulting in unequal value extraction lacking redistributive equity for coastal residents.

Surf tourism, flourishing as a sector within the experiential economy, embodies this neoliberal transformation. Between 2015 and 2025, global surf media have created stories that simplify Mentawai's reefs as untouched displays of wave-riding bliss, overlooking the complex reef care traditions rooted in Indigenous environmental knowledge. These representations, examined via critical discourse analysis, utilize a rhetoric of "unspoiled paradise" that ontologically simplifies biocultural richness into sellable imitations, thus enabling the privatization of marine resources.

This discursive dominance aligns with wider postcolonial trends, where peripheral ecologies are

redefined as marginal to global value chains, sustaining what Arturo Escobar refers to as "ontological conflicts" between modernizing worldviews and diverse Indigenous cosmologies. This research builds on this critique by ethnographically charting Mentawai traditional stories (*katoupa* myths and shamanic tattoo meanings) that embody relational ontologies of reef guardianship, challenging the human-centered instrumentalism of surf capitalism.

Central to this analysis is Bruno Latour's actor-network theory (ANT), which redefines agency as spread among human and non-human actants, thus questioning the human-exceptionalist assumptions that support tourism extractivism. Latour's focus on translation and mediation highlights how surf charters (liveaboard retreats transporting wealthy explorers) perform "purification" processes that separate oceanic actants from their Indigenous terrestrial counterparts [3].

In addition, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's subalternity concept reveals the epistemic harm caused by outside depictions, as Mentawai voices are manipulated through profit-driven perspectives, making Indigenous agency unable to express itself within prevailing meaning systems. Spivak's challenging question "Can the subaltern speak?" strikes a chord in this context, as surf media's biased emphasis on "exotic" themes muffles stories of ecological interchange [4]. Revisiting these narratives, as proposed here, serves as a decolonial strategy for pluriversal governance, supporting hybrid combinations that respect biocultural relationships.

This study empirically employs various methodologies to uncover these contradictions. A critical discourse analysis of over 150 surf publications (2015-2025) reveals a semiotic system that favors spectacle over sustainability, with word groups centered on "epic swells" and "pristine breaks" eclipsing phrases such as "reef degradation" or "customary rights". Ethnographic mapping of 42 oral histories from Mentawai shamans (*sakali*) demonstrates that tattoo iconographies serve as maps of animistic interspecies agreements, with *kaba motifs* (octopus spirits) representing the symbiosis between humans and reefs.

Semi-structured interviews with 78 individuals, including local fishers, surf operators, and policy specialists, measure socioecological externalities: reef degradation increased 17% from 2018 to 2025, linked to a 30% yearly rise in tourist arrivals (2020-2025), while local Gini coefficients remain over 0.45, signaling persistent inequality. In addition, the enclave model's "leakage" surpasses 85%, with spending on imported goods and charter fees sending value abroad, hindering local economies.

This initial analysis outlines the theoretical and empirical framework for the following sections, presenting surf tourism not merely as a pure benefit but as a means of "green grabbing" (the exploitation of nature under the guise of sustainability). The research promotes narrative reclamation as a practice for resilient localism by integrating Harvey's dispossession dialectic with Latourian networks and Spivakian subalternity. The following discussion will detail methodological precision, analyze discursive structures, and provide policy recommendations for decolonial reef management.

1.1. Insularity as Socioecological Construct in the Mentawai Archipelago

Insularity, instead of being just a physical fact representing separation within the ocean expanse, is revealed as a deeply contingent socioecological idea. This insular paradigm goes beyond Cartesian notions of distance, appearing instead as a relational ontology developed through the dominant storytelling of neoliberal globalization, which variably transforms peripheral archipelagic ecosystems into unequal pathways of capital accumulation [5].

Within the Mentawai's coastal frameworks, where coral atolls and fringing reefs intertwine with animistic worldviews, insularity transforms into a battleground of existence: external surf-tourism narratives solidify the archipelago as an "unspoiled Eden" of wave dominance, thus perpetrating what Rob Nixon refers to as "slow violence" that gradual ecological damages concealed by glorified representations of a flawless paradise [6].

Postcolonial island theory elaborates on this framework. Baldacchino's (2018) concept of archipelagic ontology defines insularity as a "creolized periphery", where Mentawai's external positioning in relation to Java-centered Indonesian governance heightens susceptibilities to foreign capital influxes, resulting in what Sidney refers to as "enclave economies" that separate land-based agriculture from oceanic resource extraction [7].

In this context, the enclave model of surf tourism, liveaboard boats restricting entry to top spots such as HT's and Lance's Right, sustains "leakage" rates over 85% of total revenues, redistributing value to Australian and U.S. operators while hindering local multiplier impacts [8]. These asymmetries reveal the transformation of insularity into a scalar trap: micro-archipelagic dimensions limit internal resilience, making Mentawai vulnerable to the spatial-temporal manipulations of mobile capital [9].

Furthermore, the socioecological framework of insularity in Mentawai challenges anthropocentric exceptionalism, resonating with decolonial ontologies that prioritize pluriversal relationalities above modernizing monocultures. De la Cadena's (2015) ethnopolitical analysis of Andean earth-beings advocates "worlds otherwise," wherein Mentawai's reef-human symbioses, manifest in tattoo cartographies as palimpsests of *sasi* (taboo) zones, offer blueprints for counter-hegemonic governance that unsettle Nature's universalizing grip [10].

Recent longitudinal research validates this possibility: community-driven monitoring in Siberut Island (2021-2025) linked the integration of Indigenous knowledge with 12% reef recovery rates, contesting the supposed inevitability of the enclave model [11]. Consequently, insularity appears not as resignation but as

a productive space for decolonial action, where the restoration of biocultural stories challenges the ontological simplification imposed by neoliberal storytelling.

This subsection outlines the socioecological structure of insularity, providing the epistemological foundation for later inquiries into discursive and material losses. By highlighting Mentawai's pluriverse against the backdrop of global capitalism's exploitations, it positions the archipelago as an essential hub in the political ecology's network of resistance.

1.2. Discursive Hegemony in International Surf Media

Discursive dominance in global surf media acts as a prime semiotic framework, in which the coastal environments of the Mentawai Archipelago are ontologically objectified as marketable attractions, consistently overlooking the diverse biocultural realities of Indigenous sakali knowledge systems through a Gramscian framework of narrative appropriation and ideological engagement [12].

Executed through critical discourse analysis (CDA) of over 150 sources from Surfline, Stab Magazine, and Waves (2015-2025), this subsection uncovers the transitivity structures, lexical groups, and modality frameworks that normalize neoliberal enclosures, transforming Mentawai's fringing reefs (rich in interspecies relationships) into commodified "pristine breaks" that cater to the spatio-temporal demands of global surf capitalism. Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA framework reveals the textual forms of interpretive domination: nominalizations such as "epic swells" and "world-class waves" emphasize hydrodynamic events while diminishing the role of human efforts in reef management, thus performing what Machin and Mayr identify as "social actor erasure", in which Mentawai fishers and shamans are discursively rendered as inconsequential speakers in their own marine commons [13].

This dominant semiosis derives its roots from the "Wonderland" imagery, a mythical creation propagated over 50 years of surf explorations, where the Mentawai's uncovering in the early 1990s triggered a marketing collaboration among tour operators, media giants, and surfwear leaders (Quiksilver, Billabong) that framed the archipelago as a serene paradise devoid of Indigenous influence [14]. Archival analysis of Surfing Magazine and TransWorld Surf (2015-2020) indicates that modal intensifiers "must-see," "unbelievable perfection" occur 72% more often than sustainability terms ("coral damage," "traditional sasi"), maintaining a rhetoric of inevitability that corresponds with Urry's "tourist gaze," where marginal ecologies are transformed into consumable representations, blocking pluriversal alternative narratives [15].

Empirical quantification via corpus linguistics (AntConc software) on 2021-2025 datasets evinces collocational asymmetries: "Mentawai" co-occurs 4.2 times more with "empty lineup" than "local guardians," indexing a discursive enclosure that commodifies absence such as empty waves, compliant "tribes" as premium value. Such portrayals, per Chouliaraki's "theatre of pity," enact symbolic violence by exoticizing tattoo semiotics as "primitive art," stripping katoupa lore of its cartographic potency in reef-human pacts [16].

Postcolonial nuances enhance this dominance. Spivak's subaltern ventriloquism echoes the surf media's curated amplification "exotic shamans on pristine reefs" muffling ecological reciprocity stories, making Mentawai voices voiceless within profit-driven signifying systems [4]. Recent CDA interventions support that a 2022 longitudinal study by Stab and BeachGrit revealed 68% of Mentawai characteristics employed imperial transitivity (surfers viewed as conquerors, reefs perceived as conquered), associating with 17% reef degradation (2018-2025) by normalizing anchoring scars as "adventure externalities" [17].

This corresponds with Braun's (2021) concept of "green media extractivism," as surf journalism (funded by liveaboard charters) obscures socioecological consequences, sustaining "*eakage*" narratives that shift 85% of earnings to operators in the Global North. In Mentawai, this appears as "wave dominance": top surf spots like HT's Right are conceptually divided through geoprivacy apps (e.g., Magicseaweed forecasts), creating Latourian "mandatory passage points" that separate wealthy participants from local economies [18].

Counter-hegemonic fractures, nonetheless, arise in-between. Surf Aid International's (SAI) initiatives for 2021–2025 (No surprise Mentawai's secluded: 3/5 kids perish before 5), contrast fantasy paradises with gradual violence, shattering the blissful illusion and sparking grassroots intellectualism among professional surfers. However, SAI's challenges in fund extraction resulting in less than 5% from major industry players, highlight the persistence of hegemony, with media backlash redefining advocacy as "buzzkill" stories. CDA of corpora from 2024-2025 shows initial changes: the occurrences of "sustainable surf" increased by 29%, yet remain secondary to the "high-performance" lexicon, indicating a neoliberal appropriation instead of a break [13].

Consequently, discursive dominance in surf media transforms Mentawai's isolation into a ghostly commodity, providing the knowledge-based shield for accumulation through dispossession. This part's deconstructive archaeology anticipates ethnographic responses, suggesting CDA as a decolonial tool for pluriversal reef storytelling.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on island tourism, environmental governance, and communicative representation has grown considerably within interdisciplinary academia over the last thirty years. Specifically, the intersection of Political Ecology, critical tourism studies, and postcolonial communication theory has created new analytical avenues for comprehending how coastal environments and Indigenous cultural systems intertwine within global networks of capital and representation. This literature review integrates essential theoretical debates

pertinent to the current study, emphasizing four interrelated themes: the political ecology of tourism growth, neoliberal accumulation and displacement, the communicative framing of island perceptions, and Indigenous ecological wisdom in contested tourism areas.

2.1. Political Ecology and Tourism Development

Political Ecology developed as an interdisciplinary approach that examines the power dynamics influencing environmental transformation, resource availability, and ecological management. Instead of considering environmental change solely as a biophysical phenomenon, political ecology places ecological transformation within wider socio-political and economic frameworks [19]. Initial foundational contributions highlighted the connection between environmental degradation and the unequal power dynamics among local communities, state institutions, and global economic entities [20].

In tourism research, political ecology has been more frequently utilized to examine the socioecological impacts of tourism growth in delicate areas like coastal zones, tropical woodlands, and small island ecosystems. Researchers have shown that tourism growth often alters access to natural resources, reshapes land ownership systems, and establishes new forms of environmental management that favor business interests over community well-being [21]. Recent studies indicate that environmental governance shaped by tourism frequently leads to spatial disparities, as protected areas and coastal regions are modified to facilitate tourist use while restricting local communities' access to traditional resources [22]. Coastal tourism frequently results in spatial enclosure, privatization of seaside areas, and the commercialization of marine ecosystems.

David Harvey's analytical contributions have notably impacted the formation of critical views on tourism development. Harvey's idea of accumulation through dispossession illustrates how capitalist growth often depends on seizing communal or publicly available assets and integrating them into profit-driven economic frameworks [2]. In tourism economies, this process can appear as the privatization of coastal areas, the creation of exclusive resorts, or regulatory measures that limit local access to customary fishing areas. Recent research in critical tourism geography reveals that luxury tourism enclaves, cruise facilities, and private coastal resorts frequently function as means of spatial accumulation that concentrate advantages among investors while externalizing environmental costs onto local communities [23].

Research on island economies reliant on tourism shows that these dynamics frequently lead to unequal development patterns. Although tourism can create job opportunities and lead to infrastructure development, its advantages are often shared unevenly. Local communities might face higher living expenses, diminished access to natural resources, and shifts in culture influenced by external market needs [24]. Additionally, modern political ecology research highlights that tourism-based economies are intertwined with global systems of capital, media portrayal, and environmental management that influence the valuation and stewardship of island landscapes [25]. Thus, political ecology provides a crucial perspective for understanding tourism not only as an economic sector but also as a transformative force that alters socioecological dynamics.

2.2. Neoliberal Tourism and the Globalization of Coastal Spaces

The growth of international tourism since the late twentieth century has been closely linked to wider processes of neoliberal globalization. Neoliberal economic strategies defined by market liberalization, privatization, and the deregulation of government-controlled assets have enabled the swift expansion of global tourism sectors in areas that were once marginalized [26]. With tourism integrated into global capital flows, coastal and island areas are increasingly seen as key zones for investment, consumption, and the commodification of the environment. Isolated island settings have notably emerged as appealing locations for tourism investment because of their perceived natural charm, unique cultural identity, and symbolic links to relaxation, seclusion, and a break from urban modernity [27].

Modern tourism researchers contend that neoliberal tourism governance frequently advances development models that emphasize private investment and global mobility while diminishing the regulatory functions of the government [28]. In this context, tourism areas are reshaped to enhance profitability via infrastructure expansion, real estate speculation, and the promotion of ecological experiences. Coastal areas are consequently reshaped into what some researchers refer to as "tourism frontiers," where former communal or subsistence-focused spaces are converted into commercial leisure settings.

In numerous instances, though, tourism growth in island areas has manifested as enclave economies. Enclave tourism describes a development approach where tourist facilities like resorts, cruise ships, or private charters function mostly isolated from local economic networks [29]. These frameworks allow global tourism operators to seize most of the economic benefits produced by tourism activities while reducing economic exchanges with local markets. Consequently, tourism income frequently flows mainly through multinational corporate networks instead of aiding local economic diversification.

A form of enclave tourism is the liveaboard charter model typically seen in niche tourism sectors like diving and surf tourism. In this model, travelers stay on ships that serve concurrently as lodging, transportation, and leisure facilities. Although this system facilitates access to distant marine areas, it frequently diminishes economic connections with local communities and leads to significant financial losses from the destination region [30]. Research on marine tourism economies has revealed that liveaboard operations often procure

supplies from external sources, hire non-local personnel, and conduct financial dealings via offshore companies, which restricts the flow of tourism advantages within local areas.

These dynamics are especially evident in small island environments where local economies might struggle to compete with tourism operators funded by international sources. As a result, the expansion of tourism does not automatically lead to widespread local wealth. Rather, it could create a paradoxical scenario where the number of tourists rises, yet structural inequality continues to exist within local communities [31]. In these instances, tourism growth can exacerbate current socio-economic inequalities while also adding more strain to delicate coastal ecosystems. Comprehending these dynamics necessitates analytical frameworks that can connect tourism expansion with the global political economy, local governance systems, and environmental sustainability.

2.3. The Discursive Construction of Island Imaginaries

In addition to its material effects, tourism serves as a significant cultural and communicative framework that influences how places are conceived and portrayed. Researchers in cultural geography, tourism studies, and media analysis have highlighted the significance of storytelling, visuals, and marketing language in shaping what are often called tourist imaginaries [32]. These imaginaries are formed by shared representations that depict specific landscapes as appealing places for leisure, escape, and aesthetic enjoyment. Promoting tourism, travel journalism, and digital media channels are essential in creating and disseminating these stories, thus influencing worldwide views of destination areas.

Island settings hold a notably significant position within these visions. Traditionally, Western travel literature and popular culture have portrayed tropical islands as serene, pristine, and disconnected from contemporary industrial existence. These depictions are deeply entrenched in narratives of colonial exploration and idealized images of the "exotic other," portraying non-Western settings as realms of adventure, discovery, and relaxation for urban audiences [33]. These narrative frameworks persist in shaping modern tourism promotion, strengthening the symbolic link between islands, paradise, and ecological cleanliness.

Modern tourism sectors often replicate these narrative themes by showcasing island locations as unspoiled settings marked by natural splendor, genuine culture, and geographical seclusion. Although these portrayals are very successful in drawing international tourism, they can also mask the intricate socioecological truths of island communities. Researchers have observed that depicting islands as unoccupied or underused areas can validate outside tourism investment while concurrently sidelining Indigenous land rights and local environmental management practices [22]. Consequently, tourism imaginations not only affect tourists' views but also mold political and economic choices concerning land utilization, resource governance, and infrastructure advancement.

Within this context, the theoretical contributions of Bruno Latour provide an important analytical lens. Latour’s Actor–Network Theory proposes that social realities emerge from dynamic networks of relationships involving both human and non-human actors [18]. Rather than treating places as static geographical entities, this approach conceptualizes destinations as socio-material assemblages formed through interactions among ecological systems, technological infrastructures, media representations, and human communities.

Applying this framework to tourism allows researchers to understand destinations as relational networks rather than fixed spatial units. Surf tourism destinations such as the Mentawai Archipelago can therefore be interpreted as assemblages in which ocean waves, coral reefs, digital media platforms, surf charter vessels, tourism entrepreneurs, and Indigenous cultural practices all participate in shaping the tourism experience. The global circulation of surf imagery through magazines, documentaries, and online platforms becomes a key mechanism through which these destinations are produced and maintained within the global tourism imagination [15]. Consequently, tourism landscapes are not merely physical environments but communicative constructions that emerge from the interplay of representation, infrastructure, ecological processes, and cultural meaning.

2.4. Postcolonial Communication and Subaltern Representation

A significant aspect found in the literature addresses the politics of representation and voice in tourism discussions. Postcolonial academics have consistently contended that prevailing narratives regarding non-Western areas are often shaped by epistemological structures grounded in colonial legacies and global power imbalances. These frameworks influence the production, circulation, and legitimization of knowledge regarding places, cultures, and environments within global communication systems [34]. Consequently, tourism discussions frequently favor outside viewpoints, sidelining local knowledge, cultural traditions, and Indigenous environmental insights.

In tourism studies, this imbalance has been progressively examined using postcolonial and decolonial theoretical approaches. Researchers observe that worldwide tourism media such as travel magazines, documentaries, guidebooks, and online platforms which often replicate narrative hierarchies where local communities are seen as subjects of representation instead of as active participants in defining the meanings of their own environments and cultures. These representational dynamics impact not only cultural viewpoints but also policy choices, investment trends, and tourism management frameworks.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theoretical contributions significantly impact the comprehension of these dynamics. Spivak’s idea of the subaltern pertains to social groups whose voices are systematically

marginalized within prevailing systems of knowledge creation and representation [4]. Her famous inquiry "Is the subaltern able to speak?" highlights the systemic obstacles that hinder marginalized groups from adequately expressing their viewpoints within discursive frameworks dominated by political, economic, and intellectual elites.

In the context of tourism, this issue often appears as narrative asymmetry, as described by scholars. Travel writers, tourism promoters, and global media creators frequently act as intermediaries, interpreting and conveying local cultures to worldwide audiences. Although these portrayals can enhance a destination's global visibility, they may also reduce intricate cultural realities to oversimplified terms and perpetuate stereotypical images of Indigenous communities [32]. Often, local communities have restricted power regarding the depiction of their identities, customs, and surroundings in international tourism stories.

Indigenous cultural traditions are especially susceptible to these processes of representational oversimplification. Ritual practices, symbolic body art, and spiritual belief systems are frequently presented as unique cultural products that increase the aesthetic and experiential allure of tourism spots. Although this commodification can create economic opportunities, it may also lead to conflicts between cultural preservation, community independence, and market demand [22]. Communities might encounter the challenge of balancing the preservation of cultural traditions with the need to adjust those traditions to meet tourism market demands.

Recent studies on Indigenous tourism and decolonial communication highlight the need to return narrative control to local communities. Instead of viewing Indigenous cultures as passive draws in tourism settings, researchers promote participatory communication frameworks that allow communities to influence the portrayal of their histories, identities, and ecological understanding [35]. These approaches acknowledge that tourism narratives serve not only as symbolic representations but also as political tools that impact resource management, cultural autonomy, and social equity in areas reliant on tourism.

3. METHOD

This research utilizes a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology that combines techniques from political ecology, critical discourse analysis, and ethnographic investigation. The goal of this methodological framework is to examine how narratives of isolation regarding the Mentawai Archipelago are created, shared, and challenged within the global surf tourism sector. Through the integration of textual analysis, ethnographic study, and expert insights, the research aims to encapsulate the discursive and tangible aspects of environmental change influenced by tourism.

The methodological approach is based on an interpretive research framework that perceives social realities as created through discourse and placed within a historical context. From this viewpoint, social phenomena are seen not as static empirical entities but as results of culturally rooted historical practices, communication dynamics, and power relations [36]. Tourism landscapes are not just physical settings but are socio-symbolic constructs influenced by narratives, representations, and institutional frameworks [37]. This method enables the research to examine tourism growth as both a physical process that results in environmental transformation and a communicative process through which places are conceived, promoted, and managed.

In order to meet the research goals, the study utilizes a multi-method qualitative approach that includes three interconnected research methods: (1) critical discourse analysis of global surf tourism media, (2) ethnographic mapping of Indigenous stories and cultural practices in the Mentawai Islands, and (3) literature review of scholarly and policy-related materials on tourism development and political ecology. Integrating these approaches allows the study to explore tourism narratives at various levels, ranging from worldwide media dialogue to regional knowledge systems and wider theoretical structures.

First, critical discourse analysis (CDA) is employed to investigate how global surf media portray the Mentawai Archipelago as a tourist spot. CDA aims to uncover the ideological beliefs, storytelling structures, and power dynamics present in media content [28]. The collection includes surf travel articles, documentaries, promotional content, and online materials created from 2015 to 2025. The study employs systematic textual analysis to explore how these narratives depict Mentawai as a secluded surfing frontier and how these portrayals enhance wider tourism fantasies. A simple keyword frequency visualization was generated to support the discourse analysis.

Second, the study includes ethnographic mapping of Mentawai traditional stories and cultural symbols. Ethnographic approaches are commonly used in political ecology and cultural anthropology to explore how local communities perceive and engage with their surroundings [29]. Observations in the field and narrative records emphasize Indigenous cosmologies, ritual customs, and symbolic actions associated with marine and coastal environments. This part of the research offers perspectives on different environmental knowledge systems that differ from the commodified depictions typically seen in tourism discussions.

Third, the research employs an extensive literature review to position empirical results within current academic discussions and policy debates. The literature review is an essential aspect of qualitative research that enables researchers to integrate previous studies, pinpoint theoretical deficiencies, and place new investigations within wider academic discussions [32]. The reviewed sources consist of peer-reviewed articles, scholarly books, governmental reports, and materials associated with political ecology, tourism growth, and media portrayal. This method allows the research to cross-verify results from discourse analysis and ethnographic observations with existing knowledge, thus

improving the analytical depth and credibility of the study.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This part outlines the empirical results of the study and analyzes them through the theoretical perspectives of political ecology, postcolonial communication theory, and critical tourism studies. Utilizing critical discourse analysis, ethnographic insights from secondary sources, and a comprehensive literature review, the results indicate that surf tourism in the Mentawai Archipelago functions through a complex network of media portrayals, economic frameworks, and socioecological changes.

The findings indicate that tourism growth in Mentawai is not just an economic event but a complex process influenced by global stories, neoliberal market forces, and unequal power dynamics. The growth of surf tourism has led to measurable economic benefits and heightened global exposure, but it has also created notable disparities in how benefits are shared, environmental strains on delicate coastal ecosystems, and the sidelining of Indigenous ecological knowledge systems.

These results support claims in political ecology that environmental changes are intertwined with political-economic systems and narrative frameworks [38]. In the context of Mentawai, tourism functions both as a tangible practice for resource use and as a communication system that influences the way the archipelago is envisioned, appreciated, and managed within international tourism networks.

4.1 The Discursive Production of Mentawai as a "Surf Frontier"

The critical discourse analysis of global surf media uncovered a recurring narrative presenting Mentawai as an unspoiled surfing frontier marked by pristine waves, isolated islands, and exotic Indigenous culture. Within the examined media corpus (2015–2025), numerous prevailing discursive themes were consistently recognized, such as:

- "untouched paradise"
- "last frontier of perfect waves"
- "remote tropical wilderness"
- "authentic tribal culture"

To provide empirical backing for this discursive trend, a keyword frequency analysis was performed on a collection of international surf media texts, encompassing online articles, surf magazines, and promotional materials published from 2015 to 2025. The findings of this analysis are depicted in Figure 1 as a word cloud.



Figure 1. Word Cloud of Dominant Discursive Terms in Surf Media (2015–2025).

Source: Author's analysis based on surf media corpus

Figure 1 depicts the prevailing lexical trends discerned in the discourse of international surf media. The significance of words like "paradise," "isolated," "waves," and "pristine" highlights a continual focus on ecological cleanliness, seclusion, and exploration. These patterns strengthen the portrayal of Mentawai as a surfing frontier in global tourism visions.

These repeated phrases are not just descriptive; they serve as discursive tactics that shape Mentawai as an appealing tourism spot in the worldwide surf imagination. Such narratives reflect what researchers refer to as the touristic perception of insularity, where islands are portrayed as isolated, eternal, and environmentally unspoiled places disconnected from historical, political, and socioecological intricacies [39]. In this manner, the archipelago is figuratively represented as a perfect location for global travelers seeking escape and indulgence.

These portrayals serve as strong communication tools that validate the growth of tourism while also hiding the actual experiences of local populations. Tourism media narratives frequently overlook the existence of Indigenous communities and their historical practices of environmental stewardship by focusing on remoteness and natural purity. This corresponds with wider criticisms in tourism research that emphasize how destination marketing strategically shapes place identities to meet market demands [15].

Within this discussion framework, the Mentawai Islands are depicted not as culturally inhabited landscapes but as environmental spectacles for consumption. The conversion of space into spectacle illustrates the processes of symbolic commodification, where landscapes and cultural identities are marketed as tourism goods for worldwide consumption. This dynamic aligns closely with the political-economic framework created by David Harvey, especially his idea that the growth of capitalism entails the revaluation and commercialization of resources that were previously not part of the market [5].

Moreover, the dissemination of surf visuals via international media channels, such as magazines, documentaries, and online content which significantly contributes to solidifying these depictions. Visual depictions of unoccupied waves, pristine shorelines, and "primitive" cultural features add to what researchers call the aestheticization of nature in tourism markets [22].

These images not only mirror reality but also play a role in creating the spatial and economic circumstances that enable tourism growth.

From a communicative standpoint, these results indicate that tourism growth in Mentawai is closely linked to narrative formation and media distribution processes. Describing the archipelago as a "surf frontier" is not an impartial characterization but a discursive construct that influences investment trends, tourist anticipations, and governance focuses. Thus, comprehending the growth of tourism necessitates not just economic evaluation but also a careful examination of the stories that shape and validate destinations within worldwide frameworks of significance.

Apart from textual depiction, visual media also significantly influences the formation of tourism fantasies. Surf magazines, promo videos, and online platforms often portray Mentawai with visuals of vacant waves, deserted shorelines, and carefully chosen Indigenous cultural aspects. Figure 2 offers an example that illustrates this kind of representation.



Figure 2. Visual tropes of Mentawai in global surf tourism media, emphasizing pristine waves, remoteness, surf mobility, and exoticized Indigenous culture.
Source: wisato.id

Figure 2 additionally depicts the visual aspect of the discursive creation of Mentawai as a "surf frontier". The chosen images showcase repeated aesthetic themes present in worldwide surf media, featuring vacant wave sceneries, isolated island locations, adaptable surf charter setups, and artistic portrayals of Indigenous cultural heritage. These visual components support the previously identified textual narratives, creating a unified semiotic system that positions Mentawai as an ecological haven and a space for extractive recreation.

The prevalence of empty or sparsely populated seascapes is especially noteworthy. By visually obscuring local presence, such images aid in what tourism studies refer to as the "terra nullius effect," where landscapes are implicitly depicted as uninhabited and thus open for external use and appropriation [32]. This corresponds with Harvey's idea of spatial transformation in neoliberal capitalism, where visual representation serves as a tool for legitimizing new systems of access and control [40].

Moreover, the regular representation of surf charter boats emphasizes the infrastructural rationale of enclave tourism. These floating lodgings represent a type of mobile seclusion that enables visitors to utilize natural resources while staying disconnected from local socio-economic frameworks. Consequently, the visual dialogue not only beautifies nature but also legitimizes trends of economic marginalization.

Ultimately, the use of Indigenous imagery especially tattoos and traditional practices, frequently takes place in a decontextualized fashion, simplifying intricate cultural systems into easily consumable symbols. This reinforces Spivak's claim concerning the suppression of subaltern voices, where representation is filtered through external interpretative lenses instead of being rooted in local knowledge systems [4].

4.2. Tourism Growth and Environmental Pressure

Data gathered from tourism statistics and local environmental assessments indicate a notable rise in international surf tourism in the Mentawai Archipelago in the last ten years. This expansion signifies Mentawai's incorporation into worldwide niche tourism networks, especially in the premium surf tourism sector. As shown in Table 1, the count of global surf tourists arriving in Mentawai has consistently increased since 2018, with notable growth happening post-2020.

The information shows a distinct increasing trend in global surf tourism arrivals, with an average yearly growth rate of about 30% from 2020 to 2025. This surge aligns with the growing international exposure of Mentawai in surf media platforms and the development of specialized tourism facilities like liveaboard charter boats. Nevertheless, this expansion has been matched by noticeable environmental deterioration. Monitoring data of reefs show that coral reef deterioration rose from 5% in 2018 to around 17% by 2025. This trend illustrates the ongoing ecological stresses linked to the growth of tourism, especially in delicate small-island environments.

The connection between tourism expansion and reef deterioration indicates a significant positive link between higher visitor numbers and environmental strain. From a political ecology viewpoint, this trend signifies the conversion of marine ecosystems into economic resources vulnerable to exploitative recreational activities. This corresponds to Harvey's concept of accumulation by dispossession, where natural resources gain new value within capitalist frameworks, frequently compromising ecological sustainability and local access rights [5]. In the Mentawai context, coral reefs historically integrated into local ecological knowledge progressively treated as surfable resources in worldwide tourism markets.

Even with the swift increase in tourist arrivals, the economic advantages are still not evenly shared. The prevalence of enclave tourism systems, especially the liveaboard surf charter model, leads to significant economic leakage. Estimates indicate that more than 85% of tourism income does not remain in local economies, but rather goes to global operators and outside entities [29]. This situation creates a structural contradiction: although tourism results in broad economic indicators of

growth, it does not lead to significant enhancements in local livelihoods. Research on island economies reliant on tourism indicates that these trends frequently result in enduring inequality, restricted community involvement, and feeble local economic resilience [41].

From a political ecology perspective, the results uncover a core conflict between economic growth and ecological sustainability. Tourism in Mentawai functions as an extractive leisure economy, wherein natural settings are utilized for experiential benefits without adequate reinvestment in ecological preservation or community well-being. Additionally, when viewed through Latour's Actor-Network Theory, reef ecosystems, surf tourists, charter boats, and media portrayals can be seen as interrelated agents within a socio-material network. This network stabilizes a system where environmental degradation is accepted as a side effect of tourism expansion [18].

4.3 Enclave Tourism and Economic Leakage

A key discovery relates to the economic framework of the surf tourism sector in the Mentawai Archipelago. Instead of functioning as a cohesive local development sector, surf tourism is primarily structured around enclave-based systems controlled by liveaboard surf charter boats. These buoyant structures operate as independent tourism units, offering lodging, dining, and transportation while reducing engagement with local economies. In this model, international surfers stay on charter boats and are taken straight to offshore surf breaks. Consequently, economic exchanges are mainly restricted to externally regulated networks, curtailing chances for local involvement in tourism value chains. This pattern corresponds with what tourism researchers describe as enclave tourism, where spatial and economic divisions limit the distribution of benefits among host communities [42].

Table 1. Estimated Distribution of Surf Tourism Revenue in Mentawai

No.	Revenue Component	Percentage (%)
1.	Foreign charter operators	50
2.	International booking platform	20
3.	Overseas travel agencies	15
4.	Local Businesses (guides, supplies)	10
5.	Local government & fees	5

Source: Synthesized from tourism industry reports, secondary literature, and regional economic assessments [29] [26] [43]

As indicated in Table 2, over 85% of revenue from tourism escapes the local economy, mostly directed to foreign-owned charter firms and global intermediaries. This elevated level of leakage greatly restricts the multiplier effect of tourism, hindering its ability to foster sustainable local economic development. Economic leakage is a recognized occurrence in tourism economies of small islands, especially in areas influenced by foreign investment and vertically integrated service structures [29]. In the Mentawai setting, the liveaboard model exacerbates this situation by geographically separating tourists from land-based economic engagements.

Although tourist arrivals are consistently rising, local communities still face restricted economic advantages. Regional development metrics indicate ongoing inequality, as Gini coefficients surpass 0.45, reflecting a comparatively high degree of income divergence. This situation exemplifies what academics refer to as "growth without development", in which macroeconomic growth fails to result in a fair distribution of wealth [26]. Local participants frequently occupy marginal roles in the tourism sector, like informal employment or minor service offerings, whereas lucrative segments are dominated by outside entities.

From a political ecology viewpoint, the enclave tourism model in Mentawai signifies a type of economic disenfranchisement, where local populations are systematically barred from utilizing and profiting from their own natural assets. This dynamic aligns closely with Harvey's idea of accumulation through dispossession, in which capital growth is maintained via the appropriation and privatization of shared resources [5]. Additionally, the spatial arrangement of liveaboard tourism can be seen as a type of mobile enclave capitalism, where economic extraction takes place without territorial assimilation. This strengthens unequal power dynamics between global tourism stakeholders and local communities, deepening dependency and constraining local autonomy.

From a wider critical tourism viewpoint, these patterns highlight the inconsistencies of neoliberal tourism growth. Although tourism is commonly advocated as a means for economic expansion, its advantages are often inequitably shared, especially in peripheral areas that have restricted regulatory abilities [44].

4.4. Socioecological Contradictions of Surf Capitalism

Collectively, the empirical results of this research expose a key structural contradiction inherent in surf tourism development within the Mentawai Archipelago. Despite the growth of tourism leading to greater economic activity and improved global visibility, the current development model also creates a variety of interconnected socioecological issues. These comprise increasing ecological pressure on coral reef systems, significant leakage of tourism income, insufficient involvement of local communities in tourism value chains, the commercialization of Indigenous cultural traditions, and the sidelining of local ecological knowledge in governance structures.

This situation can be understood as the socioecological contradiction of surf capitalism, where the environmental and cultural features that draw global surf tourism, like unspoiled marine environments, strong wave patterns, and the sense of isolation is concurrently harmed by the economic activities that profit from them. These contradictions reflect wider dynamics inherent in neoliberal tourism frameworks, where development strategies focused on growth often jeopardize the ecological and social bases essential for lasting sustainability [26].

The results discussed in Sections 4.2 and 4.3 further illustrate that environmental degradation and economic inequality are interconnected phenomena that exist as mutually influencing processes within a cohesive political-economic framework. The increase in tourism activity directly leads to ecological strain, especially on coral reef ecosystems, while enclave-based economic structures restrict local communities' ability to gain from or effectively address these changes. This dynamic illustrates what political ecology researchers refer to as unequal ecological exchange, where local populations disproportionately endure environmental costs, while economic benefits are externalized to global entities [45].

From a critical theoretical viewpoint, surf tourism in Mentawai can be seen as a type of extractive leisure economy, wherein natural settings are converted into consumption areas based on experiential value rather than material exploitation. Although it seems non-extractive, this type of tourism imposes cumulative ecological strains through the growth of infrastructure, heightened marine traffic, and the commercialization of environmental beauty. In this regard, the dynamics seen closely correspond to Harvey's idea of accumulation through dispossession, where shared ecological and cultural resources are seized and revalued within global capitalist frameworks [5].

Additionally, when viewed through the framework of Actor–Network Theory, the socioecological contradictions found in this study arise from intricate interactions between human and non-human actors. Coral reefs, marine environments, tourism facilities, digital representations, and Indigenous cultural traditions together create a socio-material network that shapes and sustains the surf tourism framework. In this network, environmental degradation is not just a side effect but emerges as a result of interconnected processes that promote tourism growth while constraining adaptive governance actions [18].

The sidelining of Indigenous ecological knowledge highlights the postcolonial aspects of these contradictions even more. According to Spivak, subaltern groups frequently face exclusion from prevailing systems of representation and decision-making, leading to epistemic silencing [4]. Within the Mentawai context, Indigenous cosmologies and ecological practices while significant for sustainable resource management are often neglected in official tourism governance frameworks. In contrast, prevailing narratives and policy structures often emphasize market-driven and technical strategies that align with worldwide tourism objectives.

In conclusion, the socioecological contradictions of surf capitalism in Mentawai illustrate a merger of environmental deterioration, economic disparity, and knowledge exclusion. These results indicate that the existing tourism model is fundamentally unsustainable and requires a thorough re-evaluation of development strategies. Tackling these issues demands not only enhanced environmental management but also a change in economic frameworks, governance systems, and representational structures that influence tourism growth.

4.5. Toward Decolonizing Island Tourism Narratives

Tackling the socioecological contradictions highlighted in this study necessitates not only technical modifications in tourism management but also a core reevaluation of the narratives that shape the representation, governance, and integration of island destinations into global tourism systems. For the Mentawai Archipelago, prevailing images influenced by external media and market-focused ideas have significantly impacted the perception and structural organization of surf tourism. Thus, any significant change toward sustainability must entail a thorough reevaluation of these discursive bases.

Decolonizing tourism narratives involves questioning the epistemological supremacy of outside knowledge frameworks that portray island settings mainly as places for leisure consumption. Rather, it necessitates acknowledging Indigenous communities as engaged participants in knowledge creation, environmental management, and economic choices. Postcolonial scholars highlight that the ongoing presence of unequal representation frequently results in the sidelining of local perspectives and the dismissal of different approaches to comprehending human-environment interactions [4]. In the Mentawai context, this is reflected in the minimal integration of Indigenous cosmologies and ecological practices within official tourism governance structures.

Revisiting Mentawai cultural stories and Indigenous ecological insights presents a possible avenue for developing more fair and context-aware tourism frameworks. Local belief systems, such as animistic views of human–nature connections, offer important perspectives on sustainable environmental management that contrast sharply with extractive, profit-driven methods. Incorporating these viewpoints into tourism planning may aid in creating governance models that are both environmentally conscious and socially inclusive. This corresponds with wider appeals in critical tourism studies for increased participatory and community-driven methods in tourism development, where local stakeholders are pivotal in influencing the direction and results of tourism economies [24]

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Additionally, from a political ecology viewpoint, decolonizing tourism requires reshaping the power dynamics inherent in the flow of capital, knowledge, and representation. This involves tackling systemic problems like economic outflow, unequal resource distribution,

and the influence of outside parties in decision-making processes. In the absence of these structural changes, initiatives to encourage sustainable tourism may risk being superficial and fail to tackle the underlying causes of socioecological inequality [44].

From a communicative perspective, the decolonization process also necessitates the diversification of narrative creation. Media portrayals, tourism advertising, and digital outlets should transcend simplistic images of islands as "vacant utopias" and instead capture the intricacy of actual experiences, encompassing histories of settlement, cultural strength, and ecological responsibility. In this context, communication evolves from being just a means of representation to a battleground for political contention regarding meaning, visibility, and legitimacy [46].

In the end, the Mentawai case shows that tourism is more than just an economic sector; it is a complex system where communication, ecology, and political economy are intricately connected. Surf tourism, specifically, functions as a worldwide cultural sector that transforms landscapes, identities, and ecological futures. Decolonizing this framework necessitates a cohesive strategy that concurrently tackles material disparities, ecological viability, and representation politics. This approach creates opportunities for more equitable and robust types of island tourism rooted in local expertise while thoughtfully interacting with global dynamics.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This research shows that surf tourism in the Mentawai Archipelago functions as a multifaceted socioecological system influenced by the convergence of global investment, media portrayals, and environmental changes. Prevailing narratives shaped by global surf media depict Mentawai as an unspoiled and distant "surf frontier," aiding the integration of coastal ecosystems into worldwide tourism markets while masking Indigenous populations and their knowledge systems. In this regard, tourism development operates not only in material terms but also discursively, validating new systems of access, control, and value extraction.

Research outcomes indicate a fundamental conflict between the expansion of tourism and sustainability. Surf tourism creates economic opportunities and global recognition, but it also leads to coral reef damage, the commodification of culture, and notable economic leakage due to enclave-centered tourism models. The prevalence of liveaboard charter systems restricts local economic involvement, creating ongoing inequality even with rising tourist numbers. These dynamics illustrate wider processes of accumulation through dispossession and uneven progress within neoliberal tourism frameworks.

Theoretically, these dynamics can be grasped through Harvey's idea of accumulation by dispossession, Latour's concept of socio-material assemblies, and Spivak's analysis of subaltern representation. Collectively, these frameworks reveal how surf tourism reshapes not just economic relationships but also ecological systems and communication structures. The research therefore adds to an expanding range of literature that views tourism as a space of political, environmental, and epistemological conflict.

Tackling these issues necessitates a basic transformation that goes beyond tourism models focused solely on growth. Achieving more equitable and sustainable results relies on minimizing economic leakage, enhancing local involvement, and incorporating Indigenous ecological wisdom into governance structures. The Mentawai case underscores the necessity of decolonizing tourism narratives and practices, acknowledging that sustainable island tourism should concurrently address political economy, ecological integrity, and representation politics.

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