

DESTINATION MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING TOURIST LOYALTY AT WADUK DARMA

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Abstract

Destination management is a key factor in enhancing regional tourism competitiveness, particularly in fostering sustainable tourist loyalty. Waduk Darma, one of the leading tourist destinations in Kuningan Regency, has considerable natural and recreational potential but continues to face challenges in encouraging repeat visits. This study aims to analyze the destination management strategies implemented at Waduk Darma, examine tourists' perceptions of their visiting experiences, and formulate strategic implications for strengthening tourist loyalty. The research adopts an exploratory qualitative case study approach without hypothesis testing. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, field observations, and documentation. Informants, including destination managers, tourists, and relevant stakeholders, were selected purposively based on the relevance of the required information. Data were analyzed through data reduction, narrative and matrix-based data presentation, and systematic conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that destination management strategies at Waduk Darma focus on managing natural attractions, improving supporting facilities, enhancing tourism services, and creating positive visitor experiences. Tourist loyalty is primarily shaped by satisfaction with the destination atmosphere, facility comfort, and service quality. The study concludes that integrated destination management strategies centered on visitor experience play a significant role in strengthening tourist loyalty and supporting the sustainable development of Waduk Darma as a regional tourism destination.

Keywords: Destination Management, Tourist Loyalty, Tourism, Waduk Darma

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become a strategic sector that contributes significantly to regional economic growth, community welfare, and territorial competitiveness when managed sustainably. Beyond its direct contribution to income generation, tourism creates substantial multiplier effects by stimulating transportation, trade, hospitality, creative industries, and other supporting sectors (UNWTO, 2021). However, increasing competition among destinations has shifted the focus of tourism development from merely attracting large numbers of visitors toward creating long-term relationships with tourists. Consequently, tourist loyalty has emerged as a critical indicator of sustainable destination performance

because it reflects a destination's ability to maintain visitor engagement over time rather than relying solely on first-time arrivals.

Tourist loyalty is widely recognized as a fundamental outcome of successful destination management. Loyal visitors are more likely to revisit destinations, recommend them to others through positive word-of-mouth, and develop favorable perceptions that strengthen destination competitiveness (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). From a managerial perspective, retaining existing visitors is generally more cost-effective than continuously attracting new markets, making loyalty an important component of sustainable tourism marketing strategies (Kotler et al., 2017). Therefore, contemporary destination management increasingly prioritizes visitor retention alongside visitor acquisition.

The formation of tourist loyalty depends on comprehensive and integrated destination management rather than isolated improvements in physical infrastructure. Destination management encompasses the coordination of attractions, facilities, accessibility, service quality, safety, cleanliness, and promotional strategies that collectively shape visitor experiences (Buhalis, 2000; Pike & Page, 2014). Positive travel experiences subsequently influence tourist satisfaction, destination image, and behavioral intentions, including revisit intention and loyalty (Chen & Tsai, 2007). This perspective suggests that sustainable tourism development requires a visitor-centered management approach that consistently delivers memorable and satisfying experiences.

Waduk Darma is one of the leading natural tourism destinations in Kuningan Regency, offering considerable potential through its scenic reservoir landscape and outdoor recreational attractions. Originally functioning as a water resource infrastructure, the reservoir has evolved into a popular recreational destination for both local and regional visitors. Tourist arrivals increase substantially during national holidays, with approximately 7,000–8,000 visitors recorded on New Year's Day 2024 following destination revitalization and facility improvements (Kuningan Oke, 2024). Similarly, during the 2023 Eid holiday period, the destination received approximately 27,000 visitors, including a peak daily attendance exceeding 6,600 visitors (Pikiran Rakyat, 2023; iNews Indramayu, 2023). These figures demonstrate the destination's strong attraction while simultaneously indicating that visitation remains concentrated during specific holiday periods.

The broader tourism performance of Kuningan Regency also illustrates this fluctuating pattern. According to the West Java Statistics Agency, domestic tourist arrivals reached 3.45 million in 2022, declined to 2.79 million in 2023, increased sharply to 3.82 million in 2024, and exceeded 5.59 million in 2025 (BPS West Java, 2025). This recovery reflects growing public interest in nature-based and ecotourism destinations across the region. Nevertheless, visitor numbers at Waduk Darma remain highly uneven, with daily visits during ordinary weekdays reportedly ranging from only 100–200 visitors before increasing to approximately 600 or more during weekends and public holidays (ANTARA News, 2023). Such fluctuations suggest that high visitor volumes do not necessarily translate into sustained tourist loyalty or consistent repeat visitation.

Field observations indicate that Waduk Darma possesses strong competitive advantages, including attractive natural scenery, waterfront landscapes, and proximity to surrounding residential areas. However, these strengths have not been fully supported by an integrated destination management system. Current development efforts remain largely fragmented, with

greater emphasis placed on physical infrastructure expansion than on improving visitor experiences, service quality, and coordinated management practices. As a result, the destination has yet to fully capitalize on its natural assets to generate long-term competitive advantages through repeat visitation.

Another challenge lies in the institutional and community dimensions of destination management. Several aspects—including tourism service standards, integration between attractions and supporting facilities, destination branding, and policy implementation—remain insufficiently coordinated. Community participation also tends to focus on short-term economic benefits rather than long-term sustainable destination stewardship, limiting opportunities to strengthen environmental quality, authentic cultural experiences, and visitor comfort. Furthermore, collaboration among government institutions, businesses, local communities, academics, and media has yet to reflect the integrated principles of the Pentahelix model, despite its recognized importance for promoting innovation and strengthening destination competitiveness through cross-sector collaboration (Buhalis, 2000).

Existing studies have consistently emphasized the relationship between destination management, visitor satisfaction, and loyalty (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Pike & Page, 2014), yet empirical research examining these relationships within reservoir-based tourism destinations remains relatively limited. In particular, few studies have explored how integrated management strategies, stakeholder collaboration, and visitor experience jointly contribute to tourist loyalty in emerging nature-based destinations such as Waduk Darma. Addressing this gap is important because visitor loyalty represents a key indicator of sustainable destination development beyond temporary increases in tourist arrivals.

Against this background, this study investigates destination management strategies at Waduk Darma by examining how destination managers and local stakeholders understand tourism potential, how visitor experience and satisfaction contribute to sustainable tourist loyalty, and how collaborative and integrated management strategies can strengthen the destination's long-term competitiveness. The findings are expected to provide practical implications for sustainable destination management while contributing to the broader discussion on tourist loyalty in nature-based tourism destinations.

IMPLEMENTATION METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using an exploratory case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of destination management strategies and their contribution to tourist loyalty at Waduk Darma. A qualitative case study was considered appropriate because it enables researchers to explore social phenomena within their real-life context while capturing the perceptions, experiences, and interactions of multiple stakeholders involved in destination management (Creswell, 2014). Waduk Darma was purposively selected as the case because of its considerable tourism potential alongside persistent challenges related to fluctuating visitation patterns and sustainable visitor retention.

The research was conducted at Waduk Darma in Kuningan Regency, West Java, Indonesia. The destination represents a nature-based tourism area with dual functions as a water resource infrastructure and a recreational attraction, making it an appropriate setting for examining integrated destination management. The study focused on understanding how

destination management practices shape visitor experiences, satisfaction, and loyalty within this specific local context.

Data were collected through three complementary techniques: in-depth semi-structured interviews, non-participant field observations, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted with purposively selected informants, including destination managers, local government representatives, tourism business operators, and visitors who had experienced the destination. Field observations documented tourism attractions, facilities, visitor activities, cleanliness, safety, and stakeholder interactions, while supporting documents—including tourism reports, visitor statistics, and destination management records—were used to strengthen contextual understanding and triangulate empirical findings (Patton, 2015).

Purposive sampling was applied to select participants who possessed relevant knowledge and direct experience regarding Waduk Darma's tourism management. Rather than determining a fixed sample size, data collection continued until data saturation was achieved, meaning that additional interviews no longer generated substantially new information (Creswell, 2014). This approach ensured rich, context-specific insights from multiple stakeholder perspectives.

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentary evidence were coded and organized into thematic categories related to destination management, visitor experience, satisfaction, stakeholder collaboration, and tourist loyalty. The credibility of the findings was enhanced through methodological triangulation by comparing evidence across interviews, observations, and documentary sources, thereby producing a comprehensive and trustworthy interpretation of destination management practices at Waduk Darma.

RESULTS

Waduk Darma in Kuningan Regency, West Java, demonstrates a distinctive destination management context because it simultaneously functions as a water resource infrastructure and a nature-based tourism destination. This dual role requires tourism development to be balanced with reservoir management, environmental conservation, and community welfare objectives. Field observations revealed that the destination benefits from attractive waterfront landscapes, a tranquil atmosphere, and diverse recreational opportunities, positioning it as a promising destination for sustainable nature tourism. The integration of ecological functions with tourism activities represents one of the destination's principal strengths.



Figure 1. Waduk Darma, a tourist destination in Kuningan

The destination's tourism appeal is primarily shaped by its natural landscape and outdoor recreational activities. Boat tours, family picnic areas, walking and trekking trails, and photography spots constitute the most popular visitor activities, while the surrounding vegetation and wildlife enhance the educational and ecological value of the destination. Visitors consistently described the peaceful environment as one of Waduk Darma's strongest attractions, with one participant noting, "I came to Waduk Darma to enjoy the natural scenery and peaceful atmosphere" (W1). Another visitor emphasized that the reservoir felt "more natural than other destinations" (W13), suggesting that environmental authenticity contributes significantly to the perceived uniqueness of the destination.

Observations further indicate that supporting facilities generally provide adequate basic services, including parking areas, public toilets, resting spaces, and information boards. Nevertheless, both visitors and managers acknowledged uneven facility quality across different sections of the destination. Several pedestrian pathways require maintenance, while destination information remains insufficient for first-time visitors. As one manager explained, "Limited information boards remain an issue, so visitors frequently ask staff directly" (P5). Similarly, tourists appreciated the availability of basic facilities but considered that several areas require further improvement (W5), indicating that infrastructure quality directly influences visitor comfort.

Community involvement constitutes another important component of destination management, although its implementation remains relatively limited. Local residents participate primarily through small-scale businesses, food stalls, boat services, local transportation, and environmental maintenance activities. Community members acknowledged that tourism creates additional income opportunities, particularly through food vending (M1) and boat operations (M2). Furthermore, participation in cleaning activities (M3) and generally positive coordination with destination managers (M4) demonstrate that community engagement has begun to develop, although it has not yet evolved into a fully integrated community-based tourism model.



Figure 2. View of Waduk Darma

Despite these strengths, the findings reveal that visitor loyalty has not yet developed consistently. Tourist arrivals continue to fluctuate considerably between weekdays and holiday periods, indicating that many visits remain occasional rather than habitual. Interviews suggest that repeat visitation is strongly influenced by visitor satisfaction with facilities, destination information, and activity diversity. Although many tourists expressed positive revisit intentions—“I want to come back because the atmosphere is perfect for relaxing” (W11)—they also indicated that additional recreational innovations and better visitor services would strengthen their motivation to return more frequently.

Stakeholder collaboration also emerged as a critical issue in destination management. The Pentahelix framework involving government, businesses, local communities, academics, and media has not yet been implemented systematically. Managers reported that development decisions generally consider visitor feedback alongside budget constraints (P7), while routine facility maintenance continues despite financial limitations (P2). However, collaboration remains largely sectoral rather than strategically integrated, limiting coordinated destination branding, innovation, and long-term planning. These findings indicate that institutional coordination remains one of the principal challenges affecting sustainable destination management.

Environmental management remains central to maintaining Waduk Darma's tourism quality. Managers emphasized ongoing efforts to preserve cleanliness and protect the reservoir ecosystem, stating that “we strive to maintain the cleanliness of the reservoir and surrounding areas so they remain natural and uncontaminated” (P8). Nevertheless, observations identified localized waste accumulation, confirming visitors' perceptions that although the environment is generally clean, some areas still require better waste management (W6). Community members likewise expressed expectations that future tourism development should continue protecting environmental sustainability (M6), highlighting broad stakeholder recognition of conservation as an essential component of destination quality.

Overall, the findings indicate that visitor experience at Waduk Darma is shaped by the interaction between environmental quality, supporting facilities, social interactions, and recreational participation. Visitors who actively engaged in boating, trekking, and interactions with local residents reported greater satisfaction than those making brief visits, suggesting that experiential tourism contributes positively to destination attachment. Moreover, tourists

frequently described friendly staff (W7), comfortable surroundings (W8), emotional relaxation (W9), overall satisfaction (W10), and willingness to recommend the destination to others (W12). Collectively, these findings suggest that strengthening integrated destination management through improved facilities, expanded tourism activities, environmental stewardship, and stronger stakeholder collaboration would enhance visitor satisfaction and foster more sustainable tourist loyalty at Waduk Darma.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that the utilization of digital technology in promoting *heritage tourism* at Taman Sari Yogyakarta extends beyond information dissemination and functions as a medium for communicating the historical, cultural, and identity values of the site to a broader audience. The use of digital platforms such as Visit Jogja, Jogja Cagar, Jadesta, the official Kraton Yogyakarta website, and social media demonstrates that digital technology has become an important component of destination promotion. This condition indicates that digitalization can simultaneously strengthen the visibility of Taman Sari as a tourism destination and introduce its cultural significance to prospective visitors. In the context of *heritage tourism*, this function is particularly important because heritage destinations cannot be positioned merely as attractive tourism sites but must also communicate the historical meanings, cultural values, and identity embedded within them.

1. Tourism Destination Potential and Tourism Development Concept at Waduk Darma

Waduk Darma demonstrates substantial potential as a nature-based tourism destination because of its unique dual function as both a water resource infrastructure and a recreational area. This characteristic distinguishes the destination from conventional nature tourism sites, as tourism development must coexist with reservoir management, environmental conservation, and local socioeconomic interests. The findings indicate that destination management has attempted to balance these functions by maintaining the ecological integrity of the reservoir while providing recreational opportunities such as boating, trekking, family picnics, and landscape photography. This management orientation reflects the principles of sustainable destination systems proposed by Buhalis (2000), which emphasize balancing visitor experiences with long-term resource conservation.

The management of tourism attractions represents one of the destination's greatest strengths. Field observations revealed that the reservoir landscape remains the primary attraction, complemented by trekking routes that enable visitors to experience the surrounding environment with minimal ecological disturbance. Managers explained that future plans include developing environmental education areas and family-oriented tourism products to diversify visitor experiences. These initiatives correspond with Buhalis' (2000) argument that tourism attractions should function not merely as physical assets but as integrated components capable of generating meaningful visitor experiences while supporting environmental sustainability. The preservation of natural scenery therefore becomes both a tourism asset and a conservation strategy.

Supporting facilities constitute another important component of destination development, although several limitations remain evident. Basic infrastructure—including

parking areas, toilets, resting spaces, and boating facilities—generally supports tourism activities, yet observations identified uneven facility quality across different sections of the destination. Visitors particularly emphasized the need for clearer directional signage and improved pedestrian pathways. Hall (2011) argues that effective destination management requires seamless integration between attractions and supporting infrastructure because visitors evaluate destinations holistically rather than through isolated service components. Consequently, improving infrastructure consistency represents an essential step toward strengthening visitor satisfaction.

Service quality also emerged as a significant element in the destination development process. Interviews consistently highlighted the friendliness and responsiveness of frontline staff, particularly in providing information regarding tourism activities and safety procedures. Visitors appreciated these interactions because they enhanced feelings of comfort and security during their visit. According to Buhalis (2000), customer-oriented services play a fundamental role in shaping destination image because visitor perceptions are strongly influenced by interpersonal encounters throughout their travel experience. The positive interactions observed at Waduk Darma therefore contribute to creating favorable impressions beyond the destination's physical attractions.

Environmental management further reinforces the destination's sustainability orientation. Waste management facilities, conservation signage, and visitor regulations demonstrate efforts to minimize environmental degradation while maintaining the reservoir's ecological value. Nevertheless, observations also revealed localized waste accumulation, suggesting that environmental management requires more systematic implementation. Hall (2011) emphasizes that sustainable destinations must integrate conservation practices with visitor education to maintain long-term competitiveness. The findings indicate that Waduk Darma has established an appropriate foundation for sustainable management, although implementation consistency remains an ongoing challenge.

Community participation constitutes another valuable asset within Waduk Darma's development framework. Local residents participate through boat services, food businesses, souvenir sales, and environmental maintenance, creating economic benefits while contributing to authentic visitor experiences. Visitors frequently described local hospitality as an important aspect of their overall experience, demonstrating how social interactions enhance destination attractiveness. These findings support Buhalis (2000) and Hall's (2011) assertion that stakeholder collaboration represents a fundamental component of sustainable destination systems because effective tourism development depends upon coordinated relationships among government institutions, businesses, and local communities.

2. Tourist Experience and Satisfaction in Supporting Sustainable Tourism Development

The findings indicate that tourist experience constitutes the primary mechanism through which Waduk Darma generates visitor satisfaction. Visitors consistently described the reservoir's tranquil atmosphere, expansive water landscape, and surrounding greenery as distinguishing features of their visit. These sensory experiences extend beyond visual appreciation by creating feelings of relaxation, emotional comfort, and escape from urban environments. Such experiences correspond with Pine and Gilmore's (1999) concept of the

aesthetic experience, whereby visitors become immersed in the destination's atmosphere rather than simply observing its physical characteristics.

Visitor experiences also incorporate educational dimensions through environmental interpretation. Information boards concerning local flora, fauna, and conservation practices encourage visitors to understand the ecological significance of the reservoir, transforming recreational activities into learning opportunities. This reflects Pine and Gilmore's (1999) educational experience dimension, where visitors actively acquire knowledge while engaging with the destination. The findings suggest that integrating environmental education into tourism activities strengthens both visitor engagement and sustainability awareness, thereby extending the destination's value beyond recreation alone.

Social interaction represents another important contributor to visitor satisfaction. Family picnics, group boating activities, and interactions with local residents create opportunities for shared experiences that strengthen emotional attachment to the destination. Visitors particularly appreciated purchasing local food, communicating with boat operators, and experiencing community hospitality, all of which added authenticity to their visit. These findings indicate that destination experiences are socially constructed through interactions among visitors, service providers, and local communities rather than being determined solely by physical attractions.

Participation in diverse recreational activities further enriches visitor experiences. Hiking, boating, photography, and family recreation provide multiple opportunities for active engagement, with visitors who participated in several activities generally reporting higher satisfaction than those making shorter visits. This finding supports Pine and Gilmore's (1999) argument that memorable experiences emerge when visitors actively participate rather than passively consume tourism products. Consequently, expanding activity diversity represents an effective strategy for increasing experiential value and encouraging longer visitor stays.

Service quality and supporting facilities further reinforce visitor satisfaction. Although visitors acknowledged that some facilities require improvement, they generally appreciated clean picnic areas, safe trekking routes, accessible boating services, and courteous staff assistance. These practical elements contributed to feelings of security and convenience throughout the visit. According to Oliver (1980), satisfaction emerges when actual experiences meet or exceed prior expectations. The findings indicate that Waduk Darma generally fulfills visitors' expectations regarding natural tourism experiences, although improvements in infrastructure quality would likely increase overall satisfaction.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that visitor satisfaction results from the interaction between environmental quality, recreational participation, social encounters, and service performance. Rather than functioning independently, these elements combine to create comprehensive tourism experiences that generate positive emotional responses. Pine and Gilmore (1999) emphasize that memorable experiences create lasting psychological impressions, and the present findings suggest that such impressions provide an important foundation for strengthening sustainable tourism development by encouraging positive destination perceptions and future revisit intentions.

3. Collaborative and Integrated Strategies for Destination Development at Waduk Darma

The findings demonstrate that Waduk Darma's destination management has begun incorporating collaborative principles, although implementation remains insufficiently integrated to maximize tourist loyalty. Current management primarily focuses on maintaining natural attractions, basic infrastructure, and operational services while responding to visitor feedback when resources permit. However, long-term strategic coordination among tourism stakeholders remains limited, restricting the destination's ability to consistently deliver innovative visitor experiences. This finding suggests that operational management alone cannot fully support sustainable destination competitiveness without broader institutional integration.

The Pentahelix framework offers an appropriate perspective for interpreting these findings because it emphasizes collaboration among government, businesses, communities, academics, and media in destination development. Although each stakeholder already contributes individually—for example through policy implementation, business activities, community participation, or promotional efforts—their roles remain fragmented rather than strategically coordinated. Buhalis (2000) argues that destination competitiveness increasingly depends upon stakeholder integration because tourism products are collectively produced across multiple sectors. Consequently, strengthening institutional coordination would likely improve both management effectiveness and visitor experience consistency.

Community participation represents one of the destination's strongest collaborative assets, although its potential has not yet been fully realized. Local residents contribute through tourism businesses, boat services, food provision, and environmental maintenance, creating authentic social interactions that visitors consistently value. Nevertheless, community participation remains concentrated in economic activities rather than broader destination planning or product development. Expanding community involvement into cultural interpretation, environmental education, and tourism innovation would strengthen community-based tourism while enriching visitor experiences through greater local authenticity.

Innovation also emerges as an important area requiring further development. Many visitors expressed satisfaction with the existing natural attractions but simultaneously identified limited activity variation as a factor reducing revisit motivation. Managers likewise acknowledged plans to introduce environmental education programs and family-oriented tourism facilities, indicating awareness of this challenge. Kotler et al. (2017) emphasize that tourism destinations must continuously innovate to maintain visitor interest because contemporary tourists increasingly seek diverse and meaningful experiences rather than repetitive recreational activities.

The relationship between destination management and tourist loyalty observed in this study closely reflects established tourism theories. Visitors who experienced attractive natural scenery, comfortable facilities, friendly services, and authentic community interactions expressed stronger intentions to revisit and recommend the destination. These findings support Oliver's (1980, 1999) satisfaction-loyalty framework, which proposes that positive experiences generate satisfaction, while sustained satisfaction subsequently encourages behavioral loyalty. Similarly, Yoon and Uysal (2005) argue that destination loyalty develops

through the combined influence of satisfaction, destination image, and memorable experiences rather than through infrastructure alone.

Overall, the findings suggest that Waduk Darma possesses substantial opportunities to strengthen tourist loyalty through more integrated collaborative management. Improving facility quality, diversifying tourism activities, expanding environmental education, strengthening community participation, and institutionalizing Pentahelix collaboration would collectively enhance visitor experiences while supporting long-term sustainability. These integrated strategies align with Buhalis' (2000) sustainable destination management framework and demonstrate that balancing environmental conservation, visitor satisfaction, and stakeholder collaboration represents the most promising pathway for increasing both destination competitiveness and sustainable tourist loyalty at Waduk Darma.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, observations, interviews, and discussion, it can be concluded that Darma Reservoir has strong potential to be developed as an experience-based nature tourism destination through its scenic landscape, recreational activities, and involvement of the local community; however, the quality of facilities and infrastructure, diversity of tourism activities, and environmental management still need to be improved in an integrated and sustainable manner. Destination management has involved the pentahelix stakeholders, consisting of government, destination managers, tourism businesses, local communities, academics, and media, but coordination among stakeholders has not yet been optimal, resulting in relatively partial development that has not been systematically oriented toward building tourist loyalty. Tourist experiences and satisfaction are shaped by a combination of natural beauty, facility comfort, friendly services, tourism activities, and interactions with the local community, yet tourist loyalty has not been strongly and consistently established because repeat visits are still influenced by destination proximity, family recreation needs, holiday periods, and the limited diversity of activities and supporting facilities. Therefore, the development of Darma Reservoir should focus on diversifying nature-based, environmental education, and thematic recreational activities through attractive experience packages, improving the quality and distribution of facilities and destination information, strengthening community empowerment through tourism service training and local product development, and establishing a more structured pentahelix collaboration through clear role distribution, regular coordination, and long-term development programs. Furthermore, strengthening destination identity and branding through creative, informative, educational, and consistent digital and multimedia marketing strategies should be prioritized to expand promotional reach, create more memorable tourist experiences, increase satisfaction, encourage repeat visits, strengthen positive recommendations, and ultimately support the sustainability and competitiveness of Darma Reservoir as a nature tourism destination.

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