



When Political Will Fades: Policy Discontinuity and Tourism Stagnation on Rupert Island, Indonesia

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Abstract

The abrupt stagnation of tourism development on Rupert Island, Indonesia, following a 2015 political leadership change presents a compelling case study of policy discontinuity in decentralized governance systems. This research investigates how the transition from Regent Herliyan Saleh (2010-2015) to his successor triggered the collapse of a previously successful tourism development initiative, despite the island's designation as a national strategic tourism area. The study employs a qualitative single-case study design, utilizing multiple data sources including government planning documents, budgetary records, in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, and extensive field observations conducted between 2017-2018. The findings reveal a two-phase developmental trajectory: rapid progress (2010-2015) driven by a powerful policy entrepreneur who allocated approx. 500 billion rupiah to infrastructure development, followed by immediate stagnation post-2015 when the new administration abandoned key projects, particularly a crucial 20-kilometer road connection. The research illustrates that the failure to institutionalize tourism development policy within permanent bureaucratic or legal frameworks created vulnerability to political transitions, effectively derailing national strategic objectives through local electoral politics. The study contributes to understanding policy implementation challenges in developing democracies, highlighting the critical need for institutional mechanisms that protect long-term development projects from political discontinuity. These findings have significant implications for sustainable tourism development in decentralized systems, emphasizing the importance of embedding transformative initiatives within robust institutional frameworks rather than relying solely on individual political champions.

Keywords: Policy Discontinuity, Tourism Development, Political Entrepreneurship, Decentralization, Institutional Vulnerability

1 Introduction

Since Indonesia's democratic transition and the subsequent wave of decentralisation reforms, district and municipal governments have gained significant autonomy over development planning and budget allocation. This restructuring has opened space for local innovation, but

it has also created new vulnerabilities. In the tourism sector, the promise of decentralised governance frequently collides with clientelistic practices, fragmented authority, and weak institutional continuity, producing highly uneven development outcomes across regions.

Rupat Island in Bengkalis Regency, Riau Province, illustrates these tensions in sharp focus. Despite its strategic location close to international shipping lanes and neighbouring Malaysia, and its designation as part of a National Strategic Tourism Area (*Kawasan Strategis Pariwisata Nasional*, KSPN), tourism development on North Rupat has followed a boom–bust pattern. Under Regent Herliyan Saleh (2010–2015), the area was promoted as a flagship tourism and agribusiness hub, supported by substantial public investment in access roads and basic tourism infrastructure. However, following an electoral change in 2015, the initiative stalled. Key projects were delayed or abandoned, visitor numbers declined sharply, and policy attention shifted toward alternative coastal destinations.

Existing scholarship on tourism in Indonesia has emphasised the importance of planning instruments, infrastructure provision, and destination marketing. Recent work has also highlighted “smart-destination governance” as an integrated approach that combines governance, innovation, technology, accessibility, and sustainability to orchestrate multi-actor collaboration (Alhadi et al., 2024). Yet far less attention has been paid to the political conditions under which such frameworks are (or are not) realised in practice, particularly in decentralised settings where local leaders wield substantial discretion over resource allocation.

This article addresses that gap by examining the rise and stagnation of tourism development on North Rupat as a case of “champion-dependent” policy in a decentralised political system. It asks: how did local political leadership and institutional arrangements shape the trajectory of North Rupat’s tourism initiative between 2010 and 2018? Why did a seemingly well-resourced and strategically aligned project lose momentum so quickly after a leadership change? And what does this reveal about the broader risks of policy discontinuity in decentralised tourism governance?

Drawing on in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis, the article shows that North Rupat’s transformation was driven by a strong policy entrepreneur who mobilised significant resources but failed to embed the project in robust institutional structures. As a result, the initiative proved highly vulnerable to electoral turnover, legal–administrative bottlenecks, and shifting political priorities. By tracing this process in detail, the article contributes to debates on decentralisation, policy entrepreneurship, and tourism governance in developing democracies, and offers practical recommendations for insulating long-term tourism projects from short-term political cycles.

2 Literature Review

Recent scholarship has advanced the concept of smart-destination governance as an integrated framework that combines governance, innovation, technology, accessibility, and sustainability to coordinate multi-actor collaboration in tourism development (Alhadi et al., 2024). In practice, however, the promise of such governance models is often constrained in highly decentralised political systems. In Indonesia, post-reform decentralisation has diffused authority across multiple levels of government, creating space for clientelistic networks that capture resources and redirect benefits toward patronage structures rather than long-term strategic goals (Aspinall & Fealy, 2003; Ristiawan et al., 2023). This fragmentation of policy authority generates particular vulnerabilities for large, long-horizon development initiatives such as tourism destination building.

Within this context, local political leadership plays an outsized role in determining whether tourism projects advance or stall. Tourism-planning literature has long recognised the importance of political champions in placing destinations on policy agendas and mobilising resources for infrastructure and promotion (Hall, 2008). Policy entrepreneurship theories emphasise how individual actors use their political capital, strategic framing, and coalition-building skills to open “windows of opportunity” and push through ambitious policy changes (Kingdon, 1984; Peters, 2019). In decentralised settings, such entrepreneurs can be especially influential because they command considerable authority over local budgets and development priorities.

At the same time, dependence on individual champions creates significant risks. The notion of champion-dependent policy cycles captures situations in which major initiatives rise and fall with the fortunes of specific political leaders, rather than becoming anchored in enduring institutional arrangements (Dioko, 2024; Hall, 2008). When projects are strongly associated with particular office holders, changes in leadership can trigger abrupt policy reversals, budget reallocations, and administrative obstruction. Tourism projects are particularly vulnerable to such cycles because they require sustained investment not only in physical infrastructure, but also in marketing, destination management, and service quality over many years (Edgell & Swanson, 2018; Goeldner & Ritchie, 2012).

Community-based tourism (CBT) has often been promoted as a way to counterbalance elite capture and foster more inclusive, resilient tourism development. In principle, CBT emphasises local ownership, equitable benefit-sharing, and participatory decision-making. However, empirical studies from developing countries show that CBT initiatives frequently struggle when local power structures are dominated by political and economic elites, when benefit-sharing mechanisms are weak, or when external support is withdrawn (Permana et al., 2025; Yanes et al., 2019; Zielinski et al., 2020). In such contexts, the lack of meaningful community involvement and institutionalised participation can undermine project sustainability, particularly when broader governance conditions are unstable.

Recent work also cautions against overly simplistic explanations that attribute policy change solely to political will or electoral outcomes. In decentralised democracies, shifts in development trajectories may reflect not only leadership change, but also fiscal constraints, legal and administrative hurdles, anti-corruption enforcement, and changing societal preferences (Ristiawan et al., 2023). Unresolved land acquisition issues, environmental permitting delays, and heightened risk aversion among officials in the wake of corruption investigations can all impede project implementation, even when formal budget allocations exist. Moreover, the reorientation of tourism policies toward alternative sites may in some cases represent efforts to respond to different constituency demands, rather than mere patronage-driven withdrawal of support.

These insights suggest that analysing cases like North Rupal requires attention to both agency and structure: the role of individual policy entrepreneurs, and the institutional configurations that either embed or undermine their initiatives. The following sections apply this lens to trace the rise and stagnation of North Rupal’s tourism development, and to identify the mechanisms through which champion-dependent policies interact with broader institutional constraints.

3 Materials and Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative single-case study design, focusing on North Rupert as a critical example of a rapid, policy-driven tourism development cycle followed by abrupt stagnation. The case provides a microcosm for examining post-decentralisation governance dynamics in Indonesia, particularly the interaction between political leadership, institutional arrangements, and policy continuity. An interpretive approach is used to combine empirical observation with analytical interpretation, enabling exploration of subtle relationships between individual political actors, bureaucratic structures, and development outcomes that are less accessible through purely quantitative designs (Budiardjo, 2008; Surbakti, 1992).

3.2 Sampling and Participants

Data collection drew on both primary and secondary sources to capture the multi-layered political and institutional context of tourism development on North Rupert. Primary data were obtained through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with purposively selected key informants who had direct involvement in, or knowledge of, the 2010–2015 tourism programme.

Seven core informants were selected ($n = 7$): two former officials from the Department of Culture, Tourism, Youth and Sports, one village head, two private-sector entrepreneurs (hotel/homestay owners), one long-term resident, and one staff member from the regional planning agency. This composition was intended to represent policy makers, implementers, local economic actors, and community perspectives. Snowball sampling was then used to identify and approach additional actors connected to the programme, ensuring that individuals with firsthand experience of the 2010–2015 initiatives were included (Budiardjo, 2008; Surbakti, 1992)

3.3 Data Collection

Observation. Four field visits to North Rupert were conducted between August 2017 and February 2018. A standardised observation checklist was used to record the physical condition of the arterial road, tourism facilities (gazebos, solar-powered lamps, public toilets, homestays), and coastal-erosion control structures. Photographs and descriptive field notes documented visible evidence of both the progress achieved during the 2010–2015 period and the subsequent deterioration after the change of administration in 2015.

Interviews. Semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 45–60 minutes were conducted with the seven primary informants. The interview protocol covered four main themes: (i) political leadership and decision-making processes; (ii) budget allocation and implementation; (iii) institutional mechanisms and coordination; and (iv) community participation and local responses. All interviews were conducted in Indonesian, audio-recorded with informed consent, and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Document analysis. A total of 34 documents were systematically reviewed. These included the Regional Medium-Term Development Plans (RPJMD 2010–2015 and RPJMD 2016–2021), Government Accountability Performance Reports (LAKIP), budget-allocation and realisation records, master-plan dossiers, and media reports referring to tourism financing or the arterial road project. Documents were selected on the basis of explicit relevance to tourism policy or infrastructure on North Rupert.

3.4 Data Management and Coding

Interview transcripts and documentary materials were compiled in a qualitative data-management workbook for systematic analysis. Coding was performed manually. An initial deductive coding frame was developed from the literature on policy entrepreneurship, institutional embedding, and political continuity (Dwijowijoto, 2016; Fischer & Miller, 2017). During the coding process, inductive codes were added to capture emerging themes not anticipated in the initial framework, such as “corruption-linked delays” and “community disengagement.” Each segment of text was assigned one or more codes and organised into thematic matrices, allowing comparison across data sources and informant categories.

3.5 Analytical Procedure

Data analysis proceeded in three stages:

- 1) Chronological reconstruction. A detailed timeline of key policy decisions, infrastructure investments, and political transitions was constructed, tracing the evolution of the tourism initiative and identifying critical junctures at which the development trajectory shifted.
- 2) Thematic analysis and pattern identification. Coded data were aggregated to reveal recurrent patterns linking political behaviour (for example, champion dependency, clientelistic practices, shifting priorities) to implementation outcomes (such as the unfinished arterial road segment, decline of homestay operations, and reduced event attendance).
- 3) Interpretive synthesis. The empirical patterns were then interpreted through the lens of policy entrepreneurship and institutional theory, and compared with broader scholarship on decentralised development politics. This step generated a set of explanatory mechanisms for the observed stagnation of tourism development on North Rupa.

3.6 Validations and Limitations

Validity was enhanced through methodological triangulation, by cross-checking interview accounts against observational evidence and documentary records. Member checking was conducted by sharing a summary of the preliminary findings with three informants (one former tourism official, one village head, and one entrepreneur). Their feedback on factual accuracy and interpretation was incorporated into the final analysis. Temporal consistency was assessed by aligning retrospective accounts of the 2010–2015 period with field observations and documents from 2017–2018 to ensure a coherent reconstruction of events.

As a single-case study, the research does not aim for statistical generalisation. Instead, it seeks analytic generalisation to other decentralised tourism contexts where similar configurations of political leadership, institutional weakness, and policy discontinuity may be present (Peters, 2019). A key limitation is the inability to interview former Regent Herliyan Saleh directly. His perspective was reconstructed from official documents, media coverage, and secondary accounts provided by other informants, which may not fully capture his intentions or internal decision-making processes.

4 Results

4.1 The Genesis of Policy Entrepreneurship: Constructing Rupert Utara's Tourism Vision (2010-2015)

The transformation of North Rupert Island from a neglected coastal periphery into a flagship tourism destination represents one of the most striking examples of policy entrepreneurship in post-decentralisation Indonesia. When Herliyan Saleh assumed office as Regent of Bengkalis in 2010, he inherited a district with a vast territorial expanse and diverse development challenges that demanded clear prioritisation. His decision to designate North Rupert as one of four regional development centres—specifically as the focal area for tourism and agribusiness—marked the beginning of an ambitious experiment in local development leadership.

Herliyan's approach displayed the classic features of a policy entrepreneur, combining visionary planning, substantial resource mobilisation, and sustained personal political commitment. In Kingdon's (1984) terms, he effectively opened and exploited a "policy window" to push tourism development onto the local and national agenda. The adoption of Regional Regulation No. 19 of 2011 on the Regional Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMD) 2010–2015 provided the formal institutional foundation for this shift. This regulation explicitly positioned Rupert District and North Rupert District as integrated tourism and agribusiness zones, mirroring broader patterns of tourism planning in Indonesian regions where the formalisation of tourism potential is anchored in regional regulations and master plans (Muljadi, 2009; Pitana & Surya Diarta, 2009).

The breadth of Herliyan's development vision is evident in the ten supporting programmes embedded within the RPJMD framework. These programmes ranged from the planning of regional facilities and natural resource management, tourism destination development, and environmental quality improvement, to research and development, electricity sector expansion, road and bridge construction, transportation infrastructure, natural resource rehabilitation, and water management systems. Taken together, they outlined a comprehensive agenda for transforming North Rupert into a viable tourism hub.

A particularly significant element of this agenda was the scale of financial commitment. Over the five-year period, approximately 500 billion rupiah was allocated to support the various development programmes, with an estimated 345 billion rupiah earmarked specifically for the arterial road linking Batu Panjang and Tanjung Medang. This level of allocation underscores the distinction between rhetorical support for tourism and genuine policy entrepreneurship: it reflects a willingness to commit substantial political and fiscal capital to a long-term, high-risk initiative whose payoffs were unlikely to materialise within a single electoral cycle. According to multiple informants, the regent's personal oversight of the arterial road project and his repeated interventions in budget negotiations signalled strong political prioritisation, enabling the accumulation of developmental momentum that might otherwise have dissipated under competing demands.

4.2 Institutional Mobilization and Community Response

The infrastructure improvements achieved during this period were substantial and visible. The completion of ten rest gazebos, three kilometers of jogging track, twenty solar-powered lamps, three public toilet facilities, and ten homestay units created the basic framework for tourism reception. More significantly, the commencement of arterial road construction promised to resolve the fundamental accessibility challenge that had historically constrained developmental potential. These challenges were compounded by environmental degradation,

including illegal sand mining operations that threatened the island's coastal integrity (Rizky, 2016)

The implementation of Herliyan's tourism vision relied heavily on the Department of Culture, Tourism, Youth and Sports, which emerged as the primary executing agency. In line with the RPJMD, the department developed a 26-point maritime tourism programme for Rupert that combined infrastructure provision, event-based promotion, and basic destination management. Activities included the development of flagship tourism objects, preparation of detailed engineering designs (DEDs) for mangrove conservation and Malay-style resorts, upgrading of beach facilities, and regular organisation of coastal festivals such as the Mandi Safar and Pesta Pantai events.

Table 1 Tourism sector allocations and key North Rupert tourism expenditures

Category	Item	Value (Rp)
RPJMD tourism allocations	RPJMD 2010–2015 – tourism-related programmes (aggregate)	Rp 4.500.000.000 per year (sum of three programmes)
RPJMD tourism allocations	Programme 1: tourism-marketing development (2010–2015)	Rp 2.000.000.000 per year
RPJMD tourism allocations	Programme 2: destination-development (2010–2015)	Rp 2.000.000.000 per year
RPJMD tourism allocations	Programme 3: partnership development (2010–2015)	Rp 500.000.000 per year
RPJMD tourism allocations	RPJMD 2016–2021 – total tourism-sector budget	Rp 4.500.000.000 per year (sum of three programmes)
RPJMD tourism allocations	Programme 1: tourism-marketing development (2016–2021)	Rp 2.000.000.000 per year
RPJMD tourism allocations	Programme 2: destination-development (2016–2021)	Rp 2.000.000.000 per year
RPJMD tourism allocations	Programme 3: partnership development (2016–2021)	Rp 500.000.000 per year
Department budget (all programmes)	Department of Culture, Tourism, Youth and Sports – total budget 2010	Rp29.524.288.733
Department budget (all programmes)	Department of Culture, Tourism, Youth and Sports – total budget 2011	Rp26.862.698.972
Department budget (all programmes)	Department of Culture, Tourism, Youth and Sports – total budget 2012	Rp36.261.210.424
Department budget (all programmes)	Department of Culture, Tourism, Youth and Sports – total budget 2013	Rp33.245.706.709
North Rupert realised spending	2010 – development of flagship tourism object (North Rupert Subdistrict)	Rp1.319.524.000
North Rupert realised spending	2010 – organisation of beach festival event	Rp198.108.400
North Rupert realised spending	2011 – construction of DED for mangrove forest (North Rupert)	Rp257.963.475
North Rupert realised spending	2012 – preparation of DED for Malay-style resort (North Rupert)	Rp252.326.703
North Rupert realised spending	2012 – development of tourism destination area (North Rupert)	Rp61.869.428
North Rupert realised spending	2013 – development of tourism object (North Rupert)	Rp497.000.000
North Rupert realised spending	2013 – upgrade of tourism infrastructure (gazebo, etc.)	Rp234.694.079
North Rupert realised spending	2013 – maintenance of tourism infrastructure (tourism object)	Rp632.929.000
North Rupert realised spending	2013 – construction of beach sand replenishment (Pantai Pasir, North Rupert)	Rp632.929.000
Road project	Multityear road-repair project Pangkalan Nyirih – Tanjung Medang	Rp 355.840.000 (total cost, not executed by 2018)

Budget and expenditure records for 2010–2013 indicate that North Rupert was a clear priority within the department's tourism portfolio (Table 1). In 2010, for example, more than 1.3 billion rupiah was spent on the development of a flagship tourism object in North Rupert, complemented by nearly 200 million rupiah for a beach festival event. Subsequent years saw additional allocations for DED preparation, tourism destination development, infrastructure upgrades (gazebos and related facilities), and coastal sand replenishment. These North Rupert-specific activities were financed within a broader tourism budget framework of approximately 4.5 billion rupiah per year for three core programmes—tourism marketing, destination development, and partnership development—under both the 2010–2015 and 2016–2021 RPJMDs (Table 1).

On the ground, this institutional mobilisation translated into visible changes. Field observations conducted between August 2017 and February 2018 documented the presence of ten rest gazebos along the beach, approximately three kilometres of jogging track, twenty solar-powered lamp posts, three public toilet facilities, and ten purpose-built homestay units. Although some facilities already showed signs of neglect by the time of fieldwork, local respondents consistently associated them with the intensive development phase under Herliyan's administration. For many residents, the combination of new facilities, partial completion of the arterial road, and increased attention from district officials signalled that North Rupert was finally moving from a neglected coastal fringe to a recognised tourism destination.

Community responses were generally positive and proactive. A modest ecosystem of local tourism enterprises emerged, including two operating hotels, one hotel under construction, around fifteen guesthouses, and at least twenty family-run homestays (Table 2). Local

entrepreneurs invested personal savings and pension funds in accommodation and food services, while warung owners along the beach installed free Wi-Fi to attract younger visitors and extend length of stay. These initiatives illustrate a degree of community adaptation and risk-taking that went beyond passive expectation of state-led development and reflected growing local confidence in tourism as a viable livelihood option.

At the same time, interviews revealed that this emerging tourism economy remained heavily dependent on political sponsorship and was only loosely connected to formal planning instruments. Community initiatives were not embedded in strong institutional support structures such as cooperatives, formal training schemes, or legally mandated participation forums. As a result, both infrastructure and enterprises were highly exposed to subsequent political shifts—an exposure that became starkly evident after the 2015 electoral change.

4.3 Quantitative Patterns of Stagnation After 2015

Available quantitative indicators reinforce the qualitative accounts of stagnation following the change of administration in 2015. Although precise annual visitation data are incomplete, records and respondent estimates indicate that attendance at the flagship Mandi Safar and Pesta Pantai events declined by at least 80 per cent between 2015 and 2018 (Table 2). Several informants linked this decline to the stalled road project, reduced promotional activities, and the reorientation of district-level tourism programming toward alternative coastal destinations.

Table 2 Tourism visitation and tourism-related enterprises and facilities on North Rupert (as of fieldwork, 2015–2018)

Category	Indicator	Value / observation
Visitation	Decline in attendance at “Mandi Safar” and “Pesta Pantai” events (2017–2018)	≥ 80% drop compared with previous years
Accommodation	Representative hotels (operating)	2 units
Accommodation	Hotel under construction	1 unit
Accommodation	Guest houses	15 units
Accommodation	Homestays (family-run)	≥ 20 units
Facilities	Gazebos (tourist rest areas)	10 units
Facilities	Jogging track	3 km (single linear track)
Facilities	Solar-powered lamp posts	20 units
Facilities	Public toilets	3 units

Budgetary patterns reveal a similar decoupling between formal allocations and on-the-ground implementation. As shown in Table 1, the RPJMD 2016–2021 continued to allocate approximately 4.5 billion rupiah per year to tourism programmes, mirroring the nominal allocations of the 2010–2015 period. However, a multiyear road-repair contract for the critical Pangkalan Nyirih–Tanjung Medang segment, valued at 355.84 million rupiah, remained unexecuted by 2018. This unspent allocation, combined with the absence of significant new North Rupert-specific activities after 2013, illustrates the widening gap between planning documents and realised spending in the successor administration.

The mismatch between continued formal allocations and declining implementation, together with the sharp drop in event attendance and the stagnation of local tourism businesses, underscores the extent to which North Rupert’s tourism development became vulnerable to policy discontinuity once its entrepreneurial champion left office.

5 Discussion

5.1 Champion-Dependent Development and Policy Discontinuity

The North Rupert case confirms the centrality of policy entrepreneurs in initiating ambitious tourism projects in decentralised settings, but it also highlights the fragility of development

trajectories that depend heavily on individual champions. Under Regent Herliyan Saleh, tourism development on North Rupat benefited from a clear strategic vision, strong political sponsorship, and substantial resource mobilisation. The formal designation of North Rupat as a tourism and agribusiness hub in the RPJMD 2010–2015, combined with sizeable investments in access roads and basic facilities, generated a period of rapid, policy-driven transformation.

However, the same concentration of initiative in a single leader created structural vulnerabilities. Once Herliyan left office, the institutional coalition underpinning North Rupat's development quickly eroded. Key projects stalled, budget execution declined, and attention shifted toward other coastal destinations. In line with the notion of champion-dependent policy cycles (Dioko, 2024; Hall, 2008), the evolution of North Rupat's tourism initiative demonstrates how projects that are strongly identified with particular office holders may fail to survive leadership turnover in the absence of robust institutional continuity mechanisms.

5.2 Alternative Explanations: Fiscal, Legal, and Democratic Factors

Local officials in the successor administration frequently cited fiscal constraints to justify deprioritising North Rupat. Yet the budget data in Table 1 suggest that tourism allocations did not disappear. On paper, the RPJMD 2016–2021 maintained the same aggregate annual budget for tourism programmes as the preceding period. What changed was the pattern of implementation: North Rupat-specific initiatives diminished, a multiyear road-repair contract remained unexecuted, and spending was reoriented toward alternative sites such as Pantai Indah Selat Baru. This indicates that political re-prioritisation, rather than absolute budget scarcity, played a central role in the observed stagnation.

Legal and administrative factors also contributed to delays. Interviews and documentary sources pointed to unresolved land acquisition issues, protracted environmental permitting processes, and heightened risk aversion among public works officials following a corruption investigation by the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK). These factors created an environment in which officials were increasingly reluctant to authorise or accelerate contentious infrastructure spending, even when funds were formally available. In this sense, anti-corruption enforcement and regulatory requirements, while normatively desirable, can inadvertently reinforce policy discontinuity when they interact with weak planning capacity and politicised accountability.

Finally, it is important to consider the possibility that the shift in development focus away from North Rupat reflected not only clientelistic realignment, but also attempts to respond to different constituencies and spatial equity concerns. Some informants suggested that alternative coastal areas offered easier access, lower land-acquisition costs, or stronger demands from local communities. From this perspective, the reorientation of tourism policy may partly reflect democratic responsiveness rather than simple abandonment. Recognising this complexity helps avoid overly deterministic accounts that attribute policy change solely to leadership preferences, and underscores the need to situate champion-dependent trajectories within broader political–economic and institutional contexts.

5.3 Policy Recommendations and Future Directions

The findings of this study point to several policy measures that could mitigate the risks of policy discontinuity in decentralised tourism development contexts such as North Rupat. A first priority is to strengthen the institutional anchoring of strategic tourism projects. National and provincial governments can play a more active role by creating legal and financial

incentives for local administrations to formalise long-term commitments. This might include requiring multi-administration agreements for nationally designated strategic tourism areas, or establishing special-purpose entities with cross-party oversight to manage core infrastructure and destination management functions.

Second, tourism development master plans should be more firmly embedded in provincial and district spatial planning regulations and related legal instruments. When key components of a tourism strategy—such as primary access roads, zoning for tourism facilities, and environmental protection measures—are clearly codified in binding spatial plans, it becomes more difficult for incoming administrations to unilaterally abandon or radically redirect them. Stronger legal embedding can help ensure that strategic visions survive beyond individual political terms and are treated as shared institutional commitments rather than individual projects.

Third, strengthening community-based tourism enterprises is essential for enhancing local resilience to political and economic shocks. Cooperative models, capacity-building programmes, and business-diversification training can bolster the ability of local entrepreneurs and households to adapt when public investment patterns shift. By deepening local ownership and organisational capacity, such measures can help sustain tourism-related livelihoods even when higher-level political support fluctuates.

The study also highlights several avenues for future research. Comparative analyses across multiple cases of policy continuity and discontinuity in Indonesian tourism development would allow for more systematic assessment of the conditions under which institutional mechanisms succeed in protecting long-term projects. Quantitative studies could examine correlations between specific institutional features—such as the presence of binding legal frameworks, dedicated funding streams, or independent destination-management bodies—and the durability of tourism initiatives across electoral cycles. In addition, research on the role of digital platforms and social media in generating alternative, citizen-led tourism narratives may shed light on how bottom-up promotional efforts can help maintain destination visibility and visitor interest despite changes in formal political support.

6 Conclusion

This article has examined the rise and stagnation of tourism development on North Rupert Island as a case of champion-dependent policy in a decentralised political system. Under Regent Herliyan Saleh (2010–2015), North Rupert was elevated from a marginal coastal periphery to a flagship tourism and agribusiness hub, backed by a clear strategic vision, formal recognition in the RPJMD, and substantial public investment in access roads and basic tourism infrastructure. The emergence of local tourism enterprises and the proliferation of small-scale facilities indicated that communities were willing to respond to perceived opportunities.

Yet the same factors that enabled rapid initial progress also contained the seeds of subsequent stagnation. The initiative was closely identified with a single political champion and was not sufficiently embedded in robust institutional arrangements, legal frameworks, or multi-actor coalitions that could sustain it beyond one electoral cycle. Following the 2015 leadership change, the final segment of the arterial road remained unfinished, tourism programming was redirected to other destinations, and visitation to emblematic events such as Mandi Safar and Pesta Pantai fell by more than 80 per cent. Formal tourism allocations persisted on paper, but implementation in North Rupert declined sharply.

The North Rupat case thus underscores a central paradox of decentralised development politics in Indonesia: local autonomy can facilitate bold, entrepreneurial initiatives, but without strong institutional anchoring, such initiatives are highly vulnerable to political turnover, legal–administrative bottlenecks, and shifting priorities. For tourism development, which depends on long-term investments in infrastructure, marketing, and service quality, the costs of this discontinuity are particularly acute.

Addressing these challenges requires moving beyond reliance on charismatic leaders and embedding strategic tourism projects in durable legal, financial, and organisational structures. This includes stronger legal integration of tourism plans into spatial planning regulations, more stable multi-actor governance arrangements, and targeted support for community-based tourism enterprises. While a single case study cannot provide statistically generalisable findings, the mechanisms identified in North Rupat are likely to resonate with other decentralised tourism contexts where political leadership, institutional weakness, and policy discontinuity intersect. By foregrounding these mechanisms, the article contributes to wider debates on how to reconcile local political dynamics with the need for long-term, sustainable tourism development in emerging democracies.

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