

## **Ecocentrism in Petkuq Mehuey on Dayak Wehea, East Kutai-East Kalimantan**

**Sari Mulyani<sup>1</sup>, Tendy<sup>2</sup>, Firstyarinda V.I.<sup>3</sup>**

UNU Kaltim, Universitas Mulawarman, Ewha Womans University

*Corresponding author. Email: sari.mulya@unukaltim.ac.id*

### **ABSTRACT**

This study examines Petkuq Mehuey, the local wisdom of the Dayak Wehea community in protecting the Wehea forest in East Kalimantan. Wehea Forest is one of the most productive forests, helping to reduce vulnerability and protect wildlife from the impacts of climate change, while also maintaining a favorable microclimate in Kalimantan. From an ecocentric perspective, this paper examines the local wisdom efforts of the Dayak Wehea indigenous community in Nehas Liah Bing Village, East Kutai, East Kalimantan, in safeguarding this forest area. The findings indicated that the patrol group formed by the community contributed to maintaining a temporary balance between humans and nature. The recognition by the local-level government of the communities' existence and their experiences in preserving the forest helped avoid any potential relocation. Unfortunately, a partial understanding of environmental issues from the national government and no comprehensive legal regulations for the recognition and protection of indigenous people, made them vulnerable to land conversion for mining and palm oil plantations exploitation over the last decade. A qualitative case-study methodology was chosen to analyze the case. The data was collected from in-depth interviews with the village elder and official government documents. The data from NGOs reports, journal articles, and reliable news media are being added as the triangulation to meet the validity and reliability of the research. This article contributes to sustainable development studies, where ecocentrism has become one of the developed theoretical frameworks addressing climate change issues, but still predominantly focuses on ecological sustainability, ecosystem restoration, and responsible management. This empirical case enriches the discourse on the strategic role of the indigenous community as a preventive measure in countering environmental destruction from the Global South perspective.

**Keywords:** *local wisdom, ecocentrism, environmental protection, petkuq mehuey.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The environment became part of the official global agenda at the 1972 Stockholm Conference on Human Environment. The awareness that saving the environment was a shared responsibility and an agenda urged countries to establish the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP). Apart from that, 2 legal instruments were also formulated, the Stockholm Declaration, which contained 24 principles on the environment and development, as well as 109 steps or action plans. The Stockholm Conference was the start of Modern Environmental Law. The UN established the World

Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) as an independent commission specifically to discuss and provide recommendations related to global environmental issues. The 1987 WCED report “Our Future Together” underlined the importance of increasing environmental awareness and economic development from the international to the local level. This report is known as the Brundtland Report (Alisjahbana & Murniningtyas, 2018).

The Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992 started the Rio de Janeiro Declaration, which consisted of 26 principles. The principles of sustainable development (forestry principle, Agenda 21, the Framework Convention on Climate Change, and the Biological Diversity) were born at this conference (Kementerian Lingkungan Hidup dan Kehutanan Republik Indonesia, 2022). Agenda 21 obliges all parties to be involved in development issues and their impact on the environment. The environmental issue cannot be given only to the State or government, but all groups must be involved in it. This includes indigenous peoples. One of the principles of sustainable development in the Rio de Janeiro Declaration demands the role of local communities or indigenous people in sustainable development, especially to protect the environment.

Maintaining and protecting the environment cannot be separated from the local knowledge of indigenous peoples. Their traditions and belief systems teach them to respect and protect nature and have a strong sense of their territory. The values that exist within their group have made Indigenous peoples become staunch opponents of development imposed from outside their communities. They defend their land from illegal encroachment and destructive exploitation of logging and mining in their forests. The foundation of the local wisdom that they adhere to makes them protect the environment in which they live. The way they manage nature to sustain their lives is based on knowledge passed down from their ancestors. The knowledge and way of life adopted by indigenous people related to the environment are in accordance with modern ideas about nature conservation and the sustainable use of natural resources (UN Environment Programme, 2017).

In the Rio de Janeiro Declaration, the role of local communities and also indigenous people must exist in development, especially in relation to preserving nature. According to International Amnesty, there are 476 million Indigenous people around the world and spread across more than 90 countries. They belong to more than 5,000 different Indigenous peoples and speak more than 4,000 languages. Indigenous people represent about 5% of the world’s population (Amnesty International, n.d.). Some of them occupy areas of the world's tropical forests, which function to provide environmental benefits such as clean air, biodiversity, and clean water.

One of the indigenous peoples who protect the tropical forest environment is the Dayak Wehea community, which lives in *Nehas Lian Bing Village*, East Kutai Regency in East Kalimantan Province, Indonesia. They live in Wehea Forest, which is also one of the largest wet tropical forests in Indonesia. Indonesia qualifies for climate finance incentives for greenhouse gas (GHG) emission reductions through the REDD+ results-based payment system outlined in Article 5 of the Paris Agreement. Its achievement in lowering deforestation, evident in the downward trend from 2014 to 2022, has made it

eligible for such rewards. Under this mechanism, Indonesia secured several results-based payments, including about USD 110 million from the FCPF Carbon Fund for East Kalimantan for the 2019–2024 period, corresponding to verified reductions of 22 million tons of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent (Ministry of Environment and Forestry Republic of Indonesia, 2024). The existence of the Dayak Wehea People is very important in protecting the Wehea forest (Jufriadi, 2025). Their knowledge of the forest and the surrounding environment comes from their ancestral heritage. One of them is to protect the forest and also the environment with Petkuq Meheuy.

This study aims to examine the efforts of the Wehea Dayak community to protect their customary forest within the Wehea Protected Forest Area in East Kutai, based on their local wisdom. Securing legal recognition from the state as a customary law community would strengthen their ability to protect forest areas threatened by land conversion. This research seeks to fill a gap in the discourse on environmental governance regarding the role of local actors, particularly Indigenous peoples. Although international relations scholarship has explored this topic since 2011, the discussion remains dominated by debates portraying environmental damage affecting Indigenous peoples as a colonial legacy (Wardhani, 2025), Indigenous peoples are often framed within postcolonial theory, emphasizing the long-term influence of colonial history on environmental policy (Yadav & Sinha, 2024). Other studies examine Indigenous communities in Colombia that are minimally involved in development, highlighting the need for greater inclusion to achieve better outcomes (Ayala, Jiménez-Aceituno, Torres-Torresd, Rozas-Vásquez, & Lam, 2020), as well as the relationship between Indigenous peoples and environmental politics (Dove, 2006).

The above research offers diverse perspectives on Indigenous peoples and environmental protection—drawing from social, anthropological, and postcolonial studies. By contrast, this study adopts an ecocentrism perspective, focusing on a case study in East Kalimantan, the first province in Southeast Asia to receive Carbon Fund payments from the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF) of the World Bank (Ministry of Environment and Forestry, Republic of Indonesia, 2024). This article contributes to the broader field of sustainable development studies by highlighting how ecocentrism, a theoretical framework that views humans as an inseparable part of the natural world, has evolved as a critical lens for addressing the multifaceted challenges of climate change with a case study, Petkuq Meheuy, a local wisdom also forest ranger in the Dayak Wehea Community, to protect their environment. This case enriches the ongoing academic discourse by demonstrating how localized, community-driven practices rooted in traditional ecological knowledge can complement global climate policies, offering preventive and adaptive measures that resonate across diverse socio-ecological contexts

## **METHODS**

This paper will present a descriptive explanation with a case study design, utilizing data obtained from various internet sources, including journal articles, the Ministry of Environment and Forestry, Republic Indonesia report, and NGO websites, like YKAN and Mangobay news, and related webinars. And also doing some interviews with Petkuq

Mehuey member from Dayak Wehea, ibu Yuliana Wetuq, one of the pioneers of the Dayak Wehea Forest Patrol and also the other member. This paper discusses ecocentrism contained in Petkuq Mehuey, a forest protection movement based on the local wisdom of the Dayak Wehea, *Nehas Lian Bing Village*, East Kutai - East Kalimantan.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### **Petkuq Mehuey as an Ecocentrism value in the Dayak Wehea People**

Living in harmony with nature is one of the characteristics of indigenous peoples. Their living space, which is still surrounded by the natural environment, makes it a home and also a source of life. For the Wehea Dayaks, the forest where they live is their home for life. Protecting the forest is believed to be the same as maintaining their survival. Petkuq Mehuey was formed from the local wisdom values of the Dayak Wehea people, who have lived side by side with nature for generations. Petkuq Mehuey is the front guard to protect the Wehea Forest remains sustainable and the culture that coexists with nature continues today. The Wehea people have come a long way in their struggle to protect the forest. They continue to strive to obtain formal legality so that their existence can be recognized so that there are regulations that protect their group, and their culture, including the Wehea forest (Maulana, 2022).

The Wehea Forest has changed its function several times. In 1972, many timber companies began to be established in East Kutai, and almost the entire Wehea area was used by companies. In order to avoid rejection and conflict, these companies employ the Wehea people. However, the companies gave minimum wages to Wehea people, and this has an impact on their social and economic life. Hunted animals are decreasing, large trees are cut down and fewer fruits for consumption. Agarwood is becoming scarce due to the logging process, which destroys the existing trees. Minimum wages and fewer resources from the forest have made the Wehea people reconsider the existence of these timber companies. They also experience conflict because of the pros and cons of companies in the Wehea forest. Internal conflicts are starting to occur frequently, although they can still be resolved by consulting the residents (Yovanda, 2017).

The palm oil business that entered Wehea in 1986 reduced the forest space. This time Wehea people have a difficult choice to meet their economic needs. Most of them become palm oil laborers or become illegal loggers because of the reduced amount of land for farming or gardening. The head tribe of the Wehea tradition, Ledjie Taq, decided to gather all components of the Wehea community to make them aware of the environmental conditions and also their future. The Wehea people decided to return to their customary ethics to live in harmony with nature by nurturing and protecting the Wehea forest under their customary law. With the identity as a customary forest, the Wehea forest area is under the customary rules of the Dayak Wehea which have consequences for the violators, both for the Wehea people and outsiders (Yovanda, 2017).

The Dayak Wehea put up a pair of their ancestral statues of *Jot Blie* (male) and *Hong Ngah* (female) at the entrance to the Wehea forest as a sign that the place is part of

their customary territory and a symbol that the forest belongs to the Dayak Wehea Tribe. The rituals to summon the spirits of the ancestors are carried out when the statue is plugged in. The Dayak Wehea asked their ancestors for help to protect the forest, and they wrote down several regulations related to the Wehea forest. Some of these rules do not allow cutting trees, taking wood, or killing animals without permission. Permits must also be limited, and if there is a violation, a customary fine will be given. The HPH Gruti III forest area ceased operating in 2002, the forest being abandoned. The Wehea Forest became the target of illegal logging and legal and illegal forest encroachment. The Dayak Wehea community is trying to get permission to manage the area. In 2003, the Faculty of Forestry, Mulawarman University, together with The Nature Conservancy (TNC) conducted research on orangutans in the Wehea Forest, which made the area have a special purpose to be managed and maintained as a center for animal research. The Dayak Wehea community became part of the forest management team and established a team known as Petkuq Mehuey to help protect the area (Yovanda, 2017).

In November 2004, the Wehea Forest area was confirmed through the Wehea Customary oath to become 'Keldung Laas Wehea Long Sekung Metguen', which means a rule: protection and limited use of the Wehea forest. Petkuq Mehuey, which means a forest patrol, is a group of Wehea Dayak people who were confirmed by the customary head of the Dayak Wehea in Nehas Liah Bing Village to guard the Wehea Forest area. They take turns guarding the Wehea Forest by staying in the forest area for a month to three months. They toured the Wehea forest to prevent the entry of illegal loggers and gold miners and helped collect data on flora and fauna in the Wehea forest area. In addition, they also carry out animal surveillance and accompany tourists or researchers who come to the Wehea forest (Yovanda, 2017).

Administratively, East Kutai is a part of East Kalimantan Province, and has formed the Wehea Forest Management Agency (BP Huliwa) to save the Wehea forest area so that its sustainability is maintained. SK (Surat Keputusan) of East Kutai Regent No. 44/02.188.45/HK/II/2005 of 2005, which was later revised through SK No. 227/02.188.45/HK/V/2007 of 2007; which was amended again by SK No. 660/K.472/2014 of 2014, the Wehea Protected Forest Management Agency was confirmed as an institution authorized to maintain and plan areas under the name Protected Forest Management Agency Letaah Las Wehea Long Sekung-Metguen. The East Kutai government, through BP Huliwa, manages the Wehea Forest, assisted by the local Wehea Dayak community. Activities have been carried out jointly, starting from Strengthening Traditional Institutions, Petkuq Mehuey. The Dayak Wehea community is a group of people who are still very much attached to their culture. From one generation to the next, they pass on values to stick to the history of their origins and the importance of the environment for them. Petkuq Mehuey, which is still led by the Dayak Wehea chief and elders, is successful in protecting the Wehea forest. It has been proven that since 2004, logging in the Wehea forest area has decreased (Kementerian Lingkungan Hidup dan Kehutanan Republik Indonesia, 2015).

Ecocentrism believes humans are not the center of the universe, but part of the universe. So that humans also have ethics and apply them to the environment. The

course of these values is expected to maintain the balance of nature. Basically, these values live in every indigenous community. The dependence of indigenous peoples on nature is higher than other groups. Technological developments and digitalization affect the dynamics of human life. Several groups of people, especially those living in urban areas, are already very dependent on this technology. This can be different from the conditions of rural community groups. Even though technology has fully entered rural areas, rural communities tend not to necessarily abandon their lifestyle. They can be in a transitional situation, enjoying the technology, but still holding on to their ancestral values. They can still believe in certain myths or ceremonies. In contrast to indigenous peoples, whose lives are still dominated by ancestral values.

Dayak Wehea people live in areas that are administratively developing. Technology and modernization have entered their homes, and they do not reject them. However, the values are still maintained. For the Dayak Wehea people, the forest is a storehouse of life as well as their group identity. From generation to generation, they protect the Wehea forest and have been made to maintain their existence. The Dayak Wehea ancestors believed that the forest provided all the necessities they needed to sustain life. Nature gives life to humans, and humans maintain the continuity of nature. This can be seen in the daily life of the Dayak Wehea; their way of life cannot be separated from nature. Almost all rituals in Dayak Wehea are inseparable from nature, and this has existed since previous generations.

To protect the Wehea forest, the Dayak Wehea people really use all their resources. The Adat council forms are confirmed using a customary oath and under the customary law of Wehea. Petkuq Mehuey is basically a forest patrol activity with local wisdom. The implementation of customary law in Petkuq Meheuy in protecting the Wehea forest is successful. As a protected forest, Wehea is home to a variety of flora and fauna. Among them are endangered species such as orangutans. In 2018, the Wehea forest area was protecting orangutans by becoming an important area for ecosystem management outside the nature reserve area and nature conservation area (Dwinanto, 2018).

The customary law in the area shows the strong commitment and hard work of the Dayak Wehea people. The collaboration between the East Kutai Government and the Wehea people in managing the Wehea forest has received international attention. The Wehea Protection Forest won third place in the 'Schooner Prize Award 2008' in Vancouver, Canada, as one of the third-best conservation areas in the world. One thing that makes Wehea Forest unique is that, apart from being protected by the state and local government, Wehea Protection Forest is protected by customary law. In 2015, Dayak Wehea tribe chief, Ledjie Taq, was a speaker at the Global Landscape Forum (GLF) in Paris in the Indigenous Peoples' Rights and Land Tenure session. In this forum, Ledjie Taq shared stories about the Dayak Wehea people's initiatives by trying to protect the Wehea Forest as part of their lives and the habitat of flora and other fauna such as orangutans.

East Kutai district has an area of 3,574,700 hectares with a forest area of 2,784,024 hectares, or around 80% of its area. The Wehea Protection Forest is a 38,000-hectare rainforest area, a former HPH Gruti III forest area that stopped operating in 2002. The



Wehea Forest is vulnerable to illegal logging activities, forest encroachment, and other disturbances because there is no manager in that area (Kementerian Lingkungan Hidup dan Kehutanan Republik Indonesia, 2015). The Wehea Forest is home to wild endemic animals such as orangutans (*Pongo pygmaeus*), Bornean gray gibbons (*Hylobates funereus*), red langurs (*Presbytis rubicunda*), and clouded leopards (*Neofelis diardi borneensis*). The strategic value of the Wehea Forest for the sustainability of biodiversity and people's lives encourages them to protect the sustainability of the Wehea Forest. This forest is rich in natural resources, which are used as a source of food, water, and a living pharmacy for the local community (Yayasan Konservasi Alam Nusantara, 2022).

The existence of these strategic values also presents challenges. The East Kutai Government and the Dayak Wehea community face challenges in maintaining the Wehea Forest face challenges. The recommendation to make the Wahea area a conservation or protected area was only granted by the central government in 2013. In 2015, the Wehea Forest became an Essential Ecosystem Area, which is a protected area with management using sustainable principles. However, the Wehea Forest is still overshadowed by mining companies and oil palm plantations. Although they have received support from the district government to consistently maintain the Wehea Forest. The activities of mining companies in the Wehea area also worry the Dayak Wehea people and several NGOs, such as Protection of Forest & Fauna (PROFAUNA). They reject new mining business permits and also the opening of oil palm plantations. This is the challenge faced by the Dayak Wehea people in relation to the Wehea Forest.

One of the ways that can be made by the Dayak Wehea people to legally protect the Wehea forest is to gain recognition as a customary law community (MHA). However, due to the lack of information about procedures for recognition and protection from the government, the Wehea people have not received this recognition. One of the initial requirements for the Wehea Indigenous People to receive recognition and protection from the Government is the preparation of identification of the origins of the existence of the Wehea people, such as aspects of indigenous people groups, aspects of customary assets, aspects of historical origins, aspects of customary territory, aspects of customary law and aspects of customary institutions (Maulana, 2022). In the future, issues related to protecting Wehea Forest from a cultural and legal perspective can be research issues to support the acceleration of the recognition of the Dayak Wehea people as a customary law community.

## **CONCLUSION**

Ecocentrism wants a balanced life between humans and nature. Ethics and Norms do not only apply to humans but also apply to the natural environment. Within the local knowledge and wisdom of the Dayak Wehea people, maintaining a harmonious relationship with nature is a must. Their commitment to protecting one of Indonesia's tropical forests is demonstrated by the establishment of Petkuq Mehuey. Not only do they conduct forest patrols, but the Petkuq Mehuey group also expands its knowledge of Wehea Forest by assisting in scientific activities and imparting ecocentric values that are present within their group. For the Dayak Wehea people, the forest is their source of life. The forest becomes their identity. And this value has been passed down from

generation to generation, which protects the forest is protects future generations

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