

Deconstruction of the Benoa Bay Reclamation Project Controversy in Bali

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Abstract

The growth of tourism in Bali has brought a variety of positive results for the island, creating jobs for the local community and generating revenue for the development of public facilities. At the same time, however, the virtually unrestricted growth of tourism has put additional pressures on the island's precious ecosystem and the local community's spiritual sentiments. The ongoing Benoa Bay reclamation project is just one example of how tourism can cause problems for the local community. Given the problem, this article is a modest academic attempt to deconstruct and analyze the debates around the Benoa Bay reclamation project. Crosschecking the initial research findings with secondary research, this article argues ultimately that the local community rejects the reclamation project because it jeopardizes the bay's ecosystem, encroaches on the religious sentiments of the people, and diminishes any decision-making power of the local people.

Deconstruction of The Benoa Bay Bali Reclamation Polemic

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Abstract

The growth of tourism in Bali has brought a variety of positive results for the island, creating jobs for the local community and generating revenue for the development of public facilities. At the same time, however, the virtually unrestricted growth of tourism has put additional pressures on the island's precious ecosystem and the local community's spiritual sentiments. The ongoing Benoa Bay reclamation project is just one example of how tourism can cause problems for the local community. Given the problem, this article is a modest academic attempt to deconstruct and analyze the debates around the Benoa Bay reclamation project. Crosschecking the initial research findings with secondary research, this article argues ultimately that the local community rejects the reclamation project because it jeopardizes the bay's ecosystem, encroaches on the religious sentiments of the people, and diminishes any decision-making power of the local people.

Keywords: Bali, Benoa Bay, Reclamation, Polemic, Ecosystem

Introduction

There is no doubting the fact in academic quarters that the rapid growth of tourism in Bali in the last several decades has contributed to the socio-economic development of the island. Surely, profits reaped

from the growing inflows of tourists have often been used to improve public facilities in the island, as the authorities have channeled the funds into infrastructure development, health, education, and multiple other community projects (Kandari, 2004; Bendesa, 2017). In the same vein, tourism has created a multitude of job opportunities for local people, who would otherwise face problems finding adequate employment. At the same point, there is no gainsaying that tourism has been as much a liability as it has been an asset for Bali, as the crowds of tourists have strained the island's environmental resources. Prompted by a desire to increase their profits, the stakeholders involved in the tourism industry of Bali often disregard the need of developing the island's tourist potential at a sustainable step and without destroying its fragile ecosystem or its valuable cultural heritage. In these circumstances, the essentially unrestricted growth of tourism in Bali has contributed to its environmental degradation and encroachments on the sacred areas of the Balinese people. The ongoing reclamation activities in the Benoa Bay of Bali in spite of the resistance mounted by locals demonstrate this point. Given the dilemma, this brief article seeks to deconstruct the debates regarding Benoa Bay reclamation, focusing on the arguments of both sides. The article argues ultimately that the groundswell of opinion in the Benoa Bay area is against the reclamation project, as people reject it because it poses ecological risks and disrupts the spiritual balance of the island.

Methodology

To understanding the reasons why some stakeholders support and others oppose Benoa Bay reclamation, this article will employ qualitative methodology. More specifically, the author collects both primary and secondary data, cross-referencing the findings of primary research with the findings from secondary research. The author collects primary data, by the interview with native chosen purposively. Given space and time constraints of the article, its focus is on secondary research. Therefore, the author will scrutinize multiple books and articles in both scholarly sources and mass media to extract some common threads from the existing scholarship.

Results

It is essential at the outset of this article to briefly explain what is at stake in the intense and polarized polemics in Bali. Thus, the Benoa Bay is locating near the Ngurah Rai international airport in the south of Bali. Until recently, the bay had enjoyed an undisputed status as a conservation area, often regarded by people as a symbol of mangrove conservation. Natalia (2016) accords with this judgment, further adding:

Although Bali is a serene place with sparkling sunrises, picturesque beaches, and spiritually enlightened culture, the island of a thousand temples currently has a storm brewing. The Benoa Bay reclamation project is the source of an increasingly polarized public in Bali (p. 1).

For indigenous people, the Benoa Bay was and continues to be a place of spiritual significance. It is only logical, therefore, that the first aspect of the heated debates between the proponents and opponents of the Benoa Bay reclamation project relates to the status of the Benoa Bay as a sacred area of the indigenous Balinese people. Thus, whereas the notorious presidential regulation 51/2014 redesigned the Benoa Bay as a bonafide business site, many indigenous people insist that the bay is a sacred area (Tedja 2014; Erviani, 2015).

Replacing an earlier 2011 decree that protected the Benoa Bay as a conservation area, Presidential Regulation 51/2014 earmarked approximately 838 hectares of the Benoa Bay area for hotels, theme parks, golf courses, bars, nightclubs, cafes and other entertainment facilities (Khamdevi & Bott, 2018). For indigenous, the Benoa Bay is a place where their temples and some other sacred sites are locating. For environmentalists, the Benoa Bay is a critical mangrove ecosystem that needs to be supporting. Overall, debating the status of the Benoa Bay are native people and environmentalists on the one hand and Tomy Winata's property

unit and sympathetic officials on the other (Suriyani, 2018; Wardana, 2018). In essence, the support for the Benoa Bay reclamation project stems as much from the government's willingness to expand Bali's tourism potential as it stems from the lobbying activities of Tomy Winata's property development interests.

Those who are in favor of reclaiming and developing the Benoa Bay raise several arguments in favor of their idea. The main defense of the project is continuing on the assumption that the project will yield economic benefits to the local community (Ardhana & Farhaeni, 2017; Topsfield & Rosa, 2016; Hunt, 2018). There are other arguments too. More specifically, those in favor of the project argue that the area of Pudut Island in Tanjung Benoa and the Benoa Bay area, in general, are already endangered, as natural erosion, dredging, and mining of the nearby coral reef have contributed to its environmental degradation (Natalia, 2016). The proponents of the reclamation project maintain that the reclamation works by Tomy Winata's property unit will, in fact, help to protect the area by expanding its land mass and constructing environmentally friendly facilities (Natalia, 2016; Neef & Grayman 2018). Additionally, the advocates of the reclamation project contend that the developers could create disaster mitigation infrastructure in this part of Bali, which is susceptible to tsunamis and some manifestations of climate change (Citrinot, 2017; Suryantala, 2018). The resident of Tanjung Benoa interviewed for this article agrees that the Benoa Bay is vulnerable to degradation from climate change, but he does not believe that the reclamation project by Tomy Winata's property unit will be conducive to the resolution of the existing projects. On the contrary, the interviewee is adamant in his belief that any reclamation works could only exacerbate the situation.

Ecologists and environmentalists oppose the Benoa Bay reclamation project because it has the potential to destroy a critical mangrove ecosystem, which supports large classes of fish (Adityo, 2014; Wibawa 2015). The resulting waning of fish stocks could, in turn, diminish the capacity of the local fishing community to sustain proper diets, as many locals rely on fishing in the Benoa Bay area. Christensen (2012) agrees with the idea that the Benoa Bay reclamation project can worsen the lives of the local community, which includes 12 villages and some 150,000 residents. Additionally, feasibility studies conducted by independent analysts have found that the creation of Dubai-style artificial islands in the Benoa Bay could lead to rising sea levels, flooding and, therefore, economic losses for locals (Bell, 2016). In this sense, the opponents of the reclamation project reject this project due to its potential impact on the environment and, subsequently, quality of life for the local community.

For many Balinese people, however, the debate around the Benoa Bay is not as much about space and environment as it is about the beliefs and spiritual life of the indigenous people (Erviani, 2015). Indeed, a common thread from the reviewed literature suggests that the Benoa Bay is a source of spiritual tranquility for locals (Lewis & Lewis, 2009; Srinivasan, 2014; Erviani, 2016). There are about 70 Hindu landmarks in the Benoa Bay area (Natalia, 2016). Apart from temples, multiple estuaries and small islands appearing in the Benoa Bay during low tide are also considered sacred by many locals (Budianta, Budiman, Kusno & Moriyama, 2017). Locals regard the bay itself as a sacred site in its own right (Margaretha, 2016). These landmarks need to be protecting for the sake of maintaining religious tradition and continuity in Bali. As the incumbent governor of Bali, Wayan Koster has commented on the matter, and there is a strong need for a "conducive, comfortable and safe atmosphere" in the Benoa Bay (cited in Rastini, 2018, p. 1). Regardless of what exactly Koster's ambiguous statement implied, it is essential to understand that a "conducive, comfortable and safe atmosphere" in the Benoa Bay can only be established by abandoning the plan to reclaim and develop the Benoa Bay area.

Conclusions

Overall, this article has shown that the Benoa Bay reclamation project is tenable from the standpoint of Indonesian law, as the government has issued a decree authorizing the project. From the standpoint of common sense, environmentalism and cultural heritage, the project appears to be less feasible. Indeed, this article

has shown that the project threatens to ruin the fragile ecosystem, diminish indigenous rights by rejecting any decision-making power to the local community and infringe on the spiritual sentiments of local people. As long as feasibility studies, environmental risk assessments are conducted, and development permissions issued without any consultation with the local community, the Benoa Bay reclamation project will lack legitimacy and feasibility. The lack of official attention to the public outcry of the local community allows one to be speaking of the manipulation, maneuvering and hegemonic decision-making by the government, much to the detriment of the spiritual sentiments and other interests of the local community.

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