

Green Tourism Branding Strategies to Enhance the Attractiveness of Pematang Johar's Natural Tourism

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The concept of green tourism has emerged as a strategic approach to promoting sustainable destinations while protecting environmental and cultural resources. This community service program was designed to strengthen the branding and promotion of Pematang Johar Village—an emerging natural tourism destination in Deli Serdang Regency—through green and sustainable tourism strategies.

Using a Service-Learning and Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework, the program involved 38 participants, including local tourism managers, MSME owners, and youth volunteers. Activities included workshops on destination branding, eco-friendly tourism practices, and digital marketing for green tourism. The results showed a marked improvement in participants' understanding of green tourism principles and destination branding, with a 60% increase in awareness and active adoption of eco-friendly initiatives. The creation of a unified slogan and digital campaign "Green Pematang Johar: Where Nature Meets Harmony" helped align local tourism and MSME promotion under a single identity.

Keywords:

Community Empowerment; Destination Branding; Green Tourism; Pematang Johar; Sustainability

Introduction

Sustainable tourism, or *green tourism*, plays a vital role in promoting environmentally responsible economic development while preserving local culture and biodiversity. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2023), green tourism not only supports conservation but also enhances local livelihoods through eco-friendly practices and community participation. For rural areas, this model provides a balanced framework for achieving both economic prosperity and ecological preservation (Kotler et al., 2021).

Pematang Johar Village, located in Deli Serdang Regency, North Sumatra, is known for its natural landscapes, agricultural potential, and cultural traditions. Its vast rice fields, eco-farming sites, and river-based attractions provide unique opportunities for nature-based tourism. However, despite its natural beauty, the village has not yet achieved strong recognition as a tourism destination. Most visitors come for short trips, and local promotion still relies on word-of-mouth rather than structured branding or digital outreach (Kementerian Pariwisata dan Ekonomi Kreatif, 2024).

Branding plays a central role in shaping a destination's identity and competitiveness. As noted by Kotler and Keller (2020), successful destination branding requires emotional connection, authenticity, and differentiation. For Pematang Johar, *green tourism branding* can serve as a unifying narrative that emphasizes sustainability, local culture, and harmony with nature. By promoting eco-friendly tourism practices such as waste reduction, local product utilization, and community participation the village can enhance its image and attract environmentally conscious travelers.

To address this potential, a community service program was initiated through collaboration between STIE Eka Prasetya, Universitas Syiah Kuala, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Malaysia, Shinawatra University Thailand, and the University of Economics and Finance (UEF) Vietnam. The project aimed to develop green tourism branding strategies to enhance the attractiveness and sustainability of Pematang Johar's natural tourism. The initiative aligns with SDGs 8, 12, and 13, focusing on inclusive growth, responsible consumption, and climate action through community-based tourism.

Methods

This program employed a Service-Learning and Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach (Afandi et al., 2022), integrating academic knowledge, community participation, and direct field application to achieve sustainable impact. The approach emphasized *learning through community engagement*, where both facilitators and local participants collaboratively identified challenges, generated solutions, and implemented green tourism strategies relevant to the socio-cultural context of Pematang Johar.

The activities were carried out on October 15, 2025, centered at the Pematang Johar Village Hall and surrounding natural tourism sites, including the village's rice field viewpoints and river-based eco-tourism areas. The program engaged 38

participants, consisting of local MSME entrepreneurs, tourism committee members, and youth volunteers. This diverse composition encouraged multi-stakeholder collaboration—ensuring that both economic and environmental aspects were integrated into the training and branding process.

a. Preparation and Assessment

The preparatory phase began with a baseline survey and a series of focus group discussions (FGDs) to map the existing conditions of tourism management and environmental awareness in Pematang Johar. The assessment revealed a striking imbalance between the village's rich natural resources and the community's limited knowledge of sustainable tourism management.

From the survey results, 72% of tourism actors lacked understanding of green tourism principles, and 80% had not yet applied structured branding or promotional strategies. Most MSMEs operated independently without a shared vision or coordinated identity. Furthermore, environmental challenges such as poor waste management, the absence of green signage, and limited access to eco-friendly facilities were identified as key barriers to tourism growth. These findings underscored the need for capacity-building activities that not only addressed technical skills in marketing but also instilled ecological values and a sense of ownership among community members. Thus, the training modules were designed to balance *environmental education*, *creative branding*, and *digital promotion* in a way that was both practical and context-sensitive.

b. Training and Workshops

The training phase consisted of three thematic workshops, each targeting a different but complementary aspect of sustainable destination development:

1. Green Tourism and Environmental Stewardship

This session introduced participants to the foundations of sustainable tourism and environmental management. Topics included waste reduction at tourist sites, conservation ethics, and the economic value of eco-friendly practices. Participants shared local experiences of how natural beauty and agricultural landscapes could be preserved through responsible tourism.

2. Destination Branding and Visual Identity

The second session focused on developing a strong, authentic, and unified identity for Pematang Johar as a green destination. Participants learned how to create visual logos, slogans, and storytelling concepts that reflect the village's ecological and cultural uniqueness. The workshop

encouraged them to think beyond visual aesthetics—considering emotional appeal, local values, and visitor experience as core elements of branding (Kotler & Keller, 2020).



Figure 1. Photo of Educators

3. Digital Promotion and Storytelling

The final session trained participants in using digital tools for promoting the newly developed green brand. Hands-on exercises were conducted on photography, video editing, and social media content creation using platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook. Participants learned to craft eco-friendly marketing narratives through storytelling techniques that highlight local life, culture, and environmental harmony.

The outcome of these workshops was the collective development of a new branding concept and slogan: “Green Pematang Johar Where Nature Meets Harmony.” This slogan captured the essence of the village’s environmental consciousness and hospitality values, becoming a shared symbol for local tourism stakeholders. The workshops also incorporated simulation activities such as mock branding contests, content creation challenges, and collaborative brainstorming to foster creative thinking and teamwork. Participants were encouraged to produce sample posts, short videos, and green tourism posters as part of their learning portfolio.

c. Implementation and Mentoring

Following the workshop sessions, participants entered the implementation stage, applying the knowledge they gained in real-life contexts. Small working groups were formed, each responsible for different tasks such as:

- a. Cleaning and beautifying tourism spots using eco-friendly materials;
- b. Planting trees and ornamental plants to support green landscaping;
- c. Designing banners, brochures, and digital media content featuring the new green tourism brand;
- d. Conducting short educational tours for visiting students and families to showcase sustainable tourism practices.

The mentoring phase was carried out both in person and online over the following weeks. Facilitators provided hands-on guidance in eco-friendly product packaging, photo design, and caption writing for social media. Participants were encouraged to integrate sustainability messages into every aspect of their marketing communication, emphasizing authenticity and environmental respect.

Quantitative data from the pre-test and post-test surveys demonstrated a significant improvement across all indicators (see Table 1). Participants' understanding of green tourism principles increased from 35% to 90%, while knowledge of branding and promotion rose from 40% to 85%. Notably, the application of eco-friendly tourism practices improved by 52%, indicating behavioral change beyond conceptual learning. Similarly, social media utilization for promotion increased from 30% to 82%, showing enhanced digital competence. The level of collaboration among tourism actors experienced the highest growth, from 32% to 88%, reflecting strengthened partnerships and mutual engagement.

Table 1. Improvement of Green Tourism and Branding Competence Among Participants

Indicator	Before (%)	After (%)	Increase (%)
Understanding of green tourism principles	35	90	+55
Knowledge of branding and promotion	40	85	+45
Application of eco-friendly tourism	28	80	+52

Indicator	Before (%)	After (%)	Increase (%)
practices			
Use of social media for promotion	30	82	+52
Collaboration among tourism actors	32	88	+56

These results demonstrate that the program was not only effective in transferring knowledge but also in cultivating a shared *green mindset* among community members. Participants reported increased confidence in promoting their tourism products online and greater motivation to maintain cleanliness and order at tourism sites. Moreover, several participants initiated independent activities after the program, such as developing eco-friendly homestay services, organizing tree-planting campaigns, and launching social media pages under the hashtag #GreenPematangJohar. These self-driven initiatives illustrate the sustainability of the intervention and its potential to transform Pematang Johar into a model of *community-based green tourism development* in North Sumatra.



Figure 2. Group Photo Session After Training

Results

The *Green Tourism Branding Program* in Pematang Johar produced significant social, environmental, and economic outcomes. The findings, derived from field observations, post-training surveys, and follow-up mentoring, demonstrate that

community-based branding, when coupled with sustainability education, can accelerate both behavioral change and local tourism development. Participants displayed improved understanding of ecological responsibility, enhanced creative skills in branding, and strengthened collaborative capacity. This transformation aligns with Schumpeter's (1934) notion of innovation as a driving force for development—where local creativity, when nurtured through participatory education, generates long-term socio-economic value.

Strengthening Environmental Awareness and Green Practices

One of the most notable outcomes of the program was the substantial increase in environmental awareness and proactive engagement among tourism stakeholders. Before the intervention, waste management practices in Pematang Johar were largely informal, and environmental responsibility was seen as an individual rather than collective duty. Following the workshops and mentoring sessions, however, participants initiated several *green actions* that represented a clear behavioral shift.

Among the initiatives implemented were waste segregation systems at major tourist entry points, tree planting along the riverside eco-tourism route, and reductions in single-use plastic through the use of biodegradable food packaging. Local youth groups organized “Clean and Green Tourism Days,” inviting visitors to participate in site cleaning and awareness campaigns. These community-led activities strengthened environmental stewardship and encouraged a shared sense of responsibility for preserving the village's natural assets echoing UNWTO's (2023) recommendations for community-based sustainable tourism (CBST), where conservation is integrated into local livelihood systems.

Moreover, MSME owners began incorporating green practices into their business operations. Many replaced conventional plastic packaging with bamboo containers, woven palm boxes, or reusable cloth bags, transforming sustainability into a visible part of the village's identity. This adoption supports Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 12: Responsible Consumption and Production, reinforcing that environmental consciousness can coexist with commercial success. Beyond its ecological impact, these efforts also improved the perceived authenticity of local products, enhancing Pematang Johar's reputation as a village committed to eco-ethical tourism.

Field observations also revealed intangible benefits: participants developed a sense of pride in presenting their village as a “model for green tourism.” This pride catalyzed ongoing maintenance efforts participants continued planting greenery, managing visitor waste, and monitoring river cleanliness weeks after the formal program ended. Such persistence indicates that awareness has evolved into intrinsic

motivation, which is essential for sustaining environmental change.

Building a Unified Green Tourism Brand

A key milestone of the project was the creation of a unified tourism identity, encapsulated in the slogan “Green Pematang Johar: Where Nature Meets Harmony.” This brand identity embodies the village’s dual commitment to ecological preservation and community well-being. The slogan was developed collaboratively through design-thinking workshops, where participants explored how local culture, agriculture, and hospitality could be integrated into a coherent narrative.

Participants co-created logos and brand materials that visually communicated the “green harmony” theme utilizing earth tones, leaf motifs, rice field imagery, and minimalist design principles. These visuals reinforced the village’s natural landscape while appealing to eco-conscious travelers. Branding exercises also included storytelling activities where participants learned to articulate the “story behind the place,” connecting tourists emotionally with the people and environment of Pematang Johar. This approach aligns with Kotler and Keller’s (2020) framework of *holistic marketing*, where destination branding combines emotional appeal, social values, and experiential authenticity to build long-term loyalty.

The implementation of this unified branding strategy resulted in measurable visibility improvements. After the launch of the Green Pematang Johar campaign, participants reported notable increases in social media engagement and visitor inquiries. The collective Instagram page gained over 500 followers within the first month, and local tour guides received more requests for village tours and eco-activities. Offline, the branding materials posters, banners, and packaging were displayed across village entry points, enhancing consistency in the village’s visual identity.

By aligning all tourism and MSME actors under one shared brand, the community moved from fragmented promotion toward *collective identity marketing*. This collective approach not only amplified Pematang Johar’s visibility but also fostered unity, pride, and cooperation among diverse stakeholders. Such cohesion is a defining element of successful destination branding and is consistent with Porter’s (1990) argument that regional competitiveness is rooted in local collaboration and shared values.

Enhancing Collaboration and Digital Promotion

Collaboration and digital innovation became the backbone of the program’s sustainability. The establishment of the Green Tourism Forum of Pematang Johar created a formalized structure for communication, joint planning, and monitoring. This forum—comprising representatives from MSMEs, youth

organizations, and the tourism committee—enabled ongoing coordination and accountability. Members held bi-weekly meetings to evaluate progress, plan social media content, and prepare for upcoming tourism events.

The involvement of local youth was particularly transformative. Acting as digital ambassadors, young participants managed the village's online presence across Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook. They produced storytelling videos highlighting eco-friendly practices, culinary experiences, and scenic landscapes. This youth-led approach enhanced intergenerational collaboration—where older MSME owners contributed traditional knowledge, while younger members introduced modern digital skills. The synergy reflects Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, where knowledge is reinforced through shared practice and reflection.

Digital promotion not only increased Pematang Johar's exposure but also connected the village to wider regional and national tourism networks. Posts featuring the #GreenPematangJohar hashtag were reshared by regional tourism offices and local influencers, significantly expanding the campaign's reach. Within two months, several MSMEs reported improved online engagement, and some received new business collaborations from nearby eco-tourism villages.

Through these collective efforts, Pematang Johar demonstrated that digital transformation can be effectively localized, serving as both a promotional tool and a platform for knowledge exchange. This aligns with the vision of Marketing 5.0 (Kotler et al., 2021), where technology empowers human-centered experiences and strengthens community connection rather than replacing it.

Challenges and Adaptive Strategies

Despite the program's success, several challenges emerged during implementation. The most persistent issue was limited technical capacity among some participants, particularly in graphic design and content editing. Older MSME owners found digital applications difficult to navigate, while younger participants occasionally lacked access to stable internet or devices. Additionally, green infrastructure such as waste bins, directional signage, and information boards was insufficient to support the village's eco-tourism image.

The program addressed these limitations through a series of adaptive strategies. Facilitators collaborated with the local government and environmental NGOs to provide basic equipment, design templates, and follow-up maintenance. Offline materials such as printed design guides and storytelling scripts were distributed to ensure that participants without internet access could continue learning. Mentoring sessions paired tech-savvy youth with senior MSME owners in a "buddy system," promoting peer learning and inclusivity.

To further strengthen sustainability, the program initiated discussions with local authorities on integrating green infrastructure into the village's annual budget and exploring small grants for eco-friendly improvements. These steps ensured that the outcomes would not remain temporary but evolve into a continuous development process.

Through these adaptive approaches, the community maintained strong engagement and inclusivity. Every participant—regardless of age or digital skill—was able to contribute to the shared goal of establishing Pematang Johar as a leading example of *green tourism in North Sumatra*.

Summary of Findings

Overall, the program achieved both tangible and intangible impacts. Tangibly, it improved the community's capacity in environmental management, destination branding, and digital marketing. Intangibly, it fostered new attitudes of cooperation, responsibility, and innovation. The synergy of these outcomes demonstrates that *green tourism branding* can function as a comprehensive development model—one that empowers local communities to manage their natural assets while creating sustainable economic opportunities.

These findings reinforce the theoretical frameworks of Porter (1990) on competitive advantage and UNWTO (2023) on sustainable tourism, confirming that innovation, collaboration, and environmental ethics are central to building resilient rural destinations. The case of Pematang Johar thus provides an inspiring example of how community-driven branding and education can transform rural tourism into an inclusive, environmentally conscious movement that benefits both people and the planet.

Conclusion And Recommendations

The Green Tourism Branding Program implemented in Pematang Johar Village has demonstrated that a well-designed combination of community-based branding and sustainability education can serve as a powerful catalyst for rural development. The initiative effectively bridged the gap between local potential and global sustainability trends by integrating environmental stewardship, creative marketing, and digital promotion within a single strategic framework. As a result, Pematang Johar was not only able to enhance its tourism attractiveness but also build a solid foundation for long-term ecological and economic resilience.

The program's outcomes revealed a multidimensional transformation among participants. Local stakeholders—comprising MSME owners, tourism committee

members, and youth volunteers—exhibited substantial improvements in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to green tourism and branding. Awareness of sustainable tourism principles increased by over 50%, accompanied by tangible behavioral changes such as waste management initiatives, tree planting, and the adoption of eco-friendly materials in product packaging and tourism services. These findings affirm the concept proposed by Kotler and Keller (2020) that destination branding succeeds when it connects emotional value, cultural authenticity, and environmental ethics. Through the slogan “*Green Pematang Johar: Where Nature Meets Harmony*,” the community succeeded in articulating a coherent identity that blends natural beauty, local creativity, and ecological responsibility.

Moreover, the establishment of the Green Tourism Forum of Pematang Johar stands as one of the program’s most sustainable outcomes. This community-driven institution functions as a coordination hub for planning, monitoring, and promoting tourism activities. It also embodies the participatory spirit of Service-Learning and Participatory Action Research (Afandi et al., 2022), in which local people are not merely beneficiaries but co-creators of change. The forum’s collaborative structure enhances social capital by fostering trust, mutual support, and a shared vision for sustainable growth. This aligns closely with Porter’s (1990) theory of competitive advantage, suggesting that communities capable of collective innovation can sustain differentiation and resilience even in competitive markets.

In a broader context, the Pematang Johar case exemplifies how green tourism branding can be positioned as a strategic model for sustainable rural development. By embedding ecological values into the destination identity, the village redefines tourism not merely as an economic activity but as a vehicle for environmental education, cultural preservation, and inclusive participation. This holistic transformation directly contributes to several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

- a. SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth): by generating income opportunities for MSMEs and local youth through tourism-related enterprises;
- b. SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production): through the promotion of eco-friendly materials and sustainable business operations; and
- c. SDG 13 (Climate Action): by encouraging community-led conservation practices such as reforestation and carbon footprint reduction.

To maintain and expand these achievements, several strategic recommendations are proposed. Firstly, the village government, in collaboration with academic institutions and private partners, should establish a permanent Green Tourism Information and Resource Center. This center would serve as a hub for education, branding coordination, and environmental monitoring ensuring that

sustainable tourism practices are continuously implemented and improved. Secondly, capacity-building programs should be institutionalized, offering regular workshops on digital marketing, eco-innovation, financial management, and responsible tourism for both new and existing entrepreneurs. Such programs can strengthen the adaptive capacity of the community to face market dynamics and technological changes.

In addition, cross-sector partnerships must be deepened to link local MSMEs with environmental organizations, tourism associations, and government agencies. These partnerships can facilitate access to green financing, infrastructure improvement, and joint promotional campaigns at regional and national levels. Encouraging academic institutions—such as STIE Eka Prasetya, Universitas Syiah Kuala, and UiTM Malaysia—to conduct follow-up research and mentorship will ensure evidence-based policy development and knowledge continuity.

Finally, the integration of green innovation and environmental ethics should remain at the heart of Pematang Johar's tourism strategy. Promoting eco-certification for homestays, organizing clean tourism festivals, and developing low-carbon tourism packages can further enhance the village's image as a sustainable and competitive destination. These initiatives not only attract environmentally conscious tourists but also foster a sense of pride and identity among local residents.

In conclusion, the experience of Pematang Johar provides a compelling example of how community empowerment, creative branding, and environmental responsibility can coexist harmoniously to create a resilient rural tourism ecosystem. The *Green Tourism Branding Program* proved that when education, collaboration, and innovation converge, rural communities can transform into living models of sustainable development. Pematang Johar now stands as a symbol of how local wisdom and global sustainability principles can unite to create a future where economic prosperity and environmental harmony are mutually reinforcing.

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