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Strategic Revitalization of Cultural Landscapes through Heritage Tourism: A Case Study of Desa Sibandang, North Tapanuli Regency

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This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Abstract

Desa Sibandang, situated along the eastern edge of Lake Toba in North Tapanuli, Indonesia, possesses rich cultural and historical assets, including traditional Batak architecture, ceremonial stone structures, and intangible heritage such as ulos weaving. Despite being designated part of the Lake Toba Super Priority Tourism Destination (DPSP), the village has yet to realize its full potential as a sustainable heritage tourism destination. This study explores strategic revitalization opportunities by identifying internal strengths, weaknesses, and external environmental dynamics through a qualitative descriptive approach. Data were collected via 15 semi-structured interviews, field observations, and analysis of planning and policy documents. The study employed a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis followed by a TOWS matrix to formulate

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actionable strategies. Findings indicate a favorable internal environment (IFE score: 2.92) and a strong external opportunity landscape (EFE score: 3.02), supporting an aggressive development strategy. Key challenges include inadequate infrastructure, weak tourism governance, and limited community capacity. Strategic directions proposed include digital heritage promotion, infrastructure enhancement, cultural interpretation training, and inclusive local governance mechanisms. This research contributes to heritage tourism planning by offering a replicable framework for integrating cultural preservation with community-based tourism development. It also emphasizes the importance of ethical, participatory planning in safeguarding the cultural integrity of heritage-rich rural villages.

Keywords: *Heritage tourism, SWOT analysis, rural development, cultural preservation, Lake Toba, Indonesia*

1. Introduction

In recent years, heritage tourism has emerged as a key development strategy for rural regions seeking to capitalize on their cultural assets while promoting local economic growth. Heritage tourism, defined as travel directed toward experiencing places, artifacts, and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past, plays a critical role in connecting visitors with local identity and heritage (Ancuta, 2023; Brooks, 2023). In Indonesia, many rural villages possess rich historical and cultural value, yet few have effectively transitioned these assets into sustainable tourism destinations (Sinar, 2025).

Desa Sibandang, located on the eastern edge of Lake Toba in North Tapanuli, exemplifies a culturally rich village with significant but underutilized heritage resources. The village is home to traditional Batak architecture (Ruma Bolon), ancestral sites such as Batu Parsidangan and Sarkofagus, and intangible heritage like ulos weaving and ritual ceremonies. Despite these assets, limited infrastructure, weak promotional strategies, and fragmented tourism planning have hindered its potential as a cultural destination (Yanti, 2023).

As part of the Lake Toba Super Priority Tourism Destination (DPSP) initiative, Desa Sibandang has been identified as a strategic location for heritage tourism development (Pasaribu, 2024; Purba, 2023). The DPSP initiative, under Indonesia's national tourism strategy, prioritizes infrastructure and investment in selected high-potential regions (Zakaria, 2024). However, without community-based approaches and cultural sensitivity, rapid development may risk commodifying sacred traditions and eroding authenticity.

Studies on rural tourism in Indonesia have shown that local participation, cultural continuity, and capacity building are essential to ensuring the sustainability and social acceptance of tourism interventions (Arintoko, 2020; Arizkha, 2023). In similar cases, such as in Purbayan Village, strategic digital promotion and destination management systems enabled effective post-pandemic recovery and increased cultural tourism engagement (Manaf, 2018).

A core challenge in villages like Sibandang is the lack of integrated tourism planning that harmonizes infrastructure development with cultural preservation. Often, public and private efforts are disjointed, resulting in stalled or unsustainable outcomes. To overcome this, a comprehensive understanding of internal and external factors influencing tourism is essential to formulating strategic interventions that are both viable and respectful of cultural heritage.

The SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analytical framework offers a pragmatic tool for identifying the village's readiness and risk profile. It enables planners and stakeholders to align internal capacities with external trends, such as rising demand for cultural tourism, government incentives, or ecological threats. In rural tourism contexts, SWOT has been successfully applied to structure long-term development strategies grounded in local realities (Brey, 2017; Tambunan, 2020).

This study aims to assess the strategic potential of Desa Sibandang in developing heritage tourism through a SWOT-based evaluation. It explores how cultural resources, community

involvement, and policy alignment can be leveraged to revitalize the village's tourism landscape.

The research responds to the need for practical, place-based tourism strategies in Indonesia's rural heritage zones. Specifically, the study addresses two research questions:

1. What are the key strengths and constraints in developing Desa Sibandang as a heritage tourism destination?
2. What strategic directions can be formulated to ensure sustainable and culturally sensitive tourism development?

By focusing on Desa Sibandang, this study contributes to the broader discourse on rural revitalization through heritage tourism. It also provides actionable insights for regional planners, community leaders, and tourism stakeholders who aim to develop destinations without sacrificing cultural integrity. In doing so, it promotes a model of tourism that is community-driven, historically grounded, and future-oriented. Ultimately, this paper advocates for a balance between tourism growth and cultural sustainability, positioning Desa Sibandang as a testbed for inclusive, strategic, and respectful tourism development in Indonesia. Through grounded analysis and participatory research, the study seeks to unlock the village's potential as both a cultural beacon and an engine of local prosperity.

2. METHODS

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method aimed at formulating strategic recommendations for developing Desa Sibandang as a sustainable heritage tourism destination. A qualitative approach is well-suited to explore deeply rooted cultural contexts and community perceptions, which are critical in understanding tourism dynamics in rural heritage settings (Creswell, 2013).

The research design was exploratory and evaluative, incorporating both case study and policy review frameworks. The study also applied participatory rural appraisal (PRA) elements to capture insights from local stakeholders regarding tourism constraints and opportunities.

2.2 Study Area

Desa Sibandang, located in Kecamatan Muara, Kabupaten Tapanuli Utara, is situated on the eastern edge of Lake Toba. The village spans approximately 8.6 km² and comprises a population deeply rooted in Batak Toba traditions. Recognized for its cultural assets such as Ruma Bolon, Sarkofagus, Batu Kursi, and Batu Parsidangan, the village was designated a cultural heritage area through Bupati Tapanuli Utara Decree No. 032/2024.

Figure 1. Research Location



Despite its potential, the village remains marginal in Lake Toba's broader tourism map due to infrastructure gaps, poor digital visibility, and low tourism competency. These conditions

provided a unique site for examining grounded strategies for heritage-based tourism development in a rural setting.

2.3 Data Collection Techniques

To ensure rich, contextual insights, the study triangulated data through three primary techniques:

1. In-depth semi-structured interviews:
 - Conducted with 15 informants including traditional leaders (tokoh adat), tourism officers, small business owners, and youth organization members.
 - Questions explored themes of cultural identity, tourism perceptions, infrastructure constraints, and governance roles.
2. Field observations:
 - Conducted on multiple occasions during both weekday and weekend tourist flows.
 - Aspects observed included site conditions, infrastructure, accessibility, and tourist behavior.
 - Photographic documentation supported the visual analysis of heritage sites.
3. Document analysis:
 - Included planning documents (Regional Planning 2020–2024), legal decrees, and heritage inventories.
 - Policy alignment with national initiatives such as the Super Priority Tourism Destinations (DPSP) program for Lake Toba was assessed.

2.4 Sampling Strategy

The study used purposive sampling to select informants who were knowledgeable and actively involved in heritage or tourism-related activities. Snowball sampling was employed to reach additional actors suggested by initial respondents. This technique enabled the researcher to access key community perspectives often overlooked in formal stakeholder lists.

Sampling criteria included:

- Residency in Desa Sibandang for at least five years.
- Active participation in tourism, cultural, or governance activities.
- Representation across gender and age groups for balanced views.

2.5 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis — a widely accepted tool in tourism strategy formulation. SWOT matrices were constructed based on:

- Internal conditions (cultural capital, community readiness, facilities)
- External influences (policy, tourism market trends, climate vulnerability)

Thematic coding was conducted manually to identify recurring patterns, especially those related to community agency, site management, and heritage commodification risks. Findings from interviews and observations were triangulated with secondary data for consistency.

In addition, a TOWS matrix was employed to generate matched strategies:

- SO (maximizing strengths to exploit opportunities),
- WO (overcoming weaknesses via opportunities),
- ST (using strengths to counter threats), and
- WT (minimizing weaknesses and avoiding threats).

2.6 Validity and Reliability

To enhance credibility, the following steps were undertaken:

- Member checking: Preliminary findings were discussed with key informants to validate interpretations.
- Audit trail: All interview transcripts, field notes, and policy documents were cataloged and securely stored.
- Triangulation: Cross-verification across interview, field, and document sources ensured data integrity and contextual depth.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1 Potentials and Constraints in Developing the Cultural Heritage Area of Desa Sibandang

Desa Sibandang, located in Muara Subdistrict, North Tapanuli Regency, represents a culturally significant landscape endowed with historical assets of both tangible and intangible value. As part of the Lake Toba Super Priority Tourism Destination (DPSP), this village holds exceptional potential to be developed as a sustainable heritage tourism destination. However, such development requires a critical understanding of both existing assets and contextual challenges.

3.1.1 Cultural Heritage Assets and Their Uniqueness

The village is home to a variety of culturally and historically significant heritage objects, ranging from traditional Batak architecture to ceremonial stone structures. These include the *Ruma Bolon*, *Ruma Tuppan*, *Sarkofagus* (stone tombs), *Batu Kursi* (stone seats), *Benteng Batu* (stone fortress), *Losung Batu* (ritual grinding stone), and the historic *Kantor Kepala Nagari* (former village administrative office). Each heritage site embodies symbolic narratives, community identity, and spiritual significance passed down through generations.



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

Description

Figure 2 Traditional Ruma Bolon in Desa Sibandang

Figure 3 Ruma Tuppan, House of the Raja

Figure 4 Stone Tomb of Raja Hunsa Rajagukguk

Figure 5 Batu Kursi: Traditional Council Seats

Figure 6 Benteng Batu (Stone Fortress)

Figure 7. Losung Batu (Traditional Grinding Stone)

Figure 8. Former Village Head Office (Kantor Kepala Nagari)

Each heritage site within the Batak Tapanuli region embodies unique architectural and artistic elements that reflect the community's deep-rooted cultural identity. For example, the Ruma Bolon, the traditional Batak house, is constructed entirely without nails—a remarkable feat of indigenous engineering and craftsmanship. Its elevated wooden structure, saddle-shaped roof, and symbolic spatial organization illustrate not only architectural ingenuity but also social hierarchies and ancestral values embedded in Batak life. Similarly, Batu Kursi—a megalithic stone seat used historically for village deliberations—features symbolic carvings that represent justice, wisdom, and communal leadership. These artistic expressions are not merely decorative; they serve as tangible manifestations of intangible cultural heritage, connecting past generations to the present.

Table 1. Cultural Heritage Objects in Desa Sibandang and Their Unique Characteristics

No	Type of Cultural Heritage	Name of Heritage Object	Unique Characteristics
1	Cultural Heritage Building	Ruma Bolon	The uniqueness of Ruma Bolon lies in its construction technique, which uses no nails. The structure is built by interlocking wooden beams tied with rattan rope. The house measures 8.70 meters in length, 6 meters in width, and 9 meters in height. The hardwood used is highly durable, enabling the house to remain structurally intact to this day. Its exterior is adorned with traditional <i>gorga</i> motifs in black, white, and red—symbolizing courage, purity, and strength, respectively.
2	Cultural Heritage Building	Ruma Tuppan	This historically significant house was the residence of King Ompung Raja Hunsa Rajagukguk, ruler of Sibandang Island. Built in traditional Batak style with selected wood and no nails, Ruma Tuppan also served as a hideout for King Sisingamangaraja XII during the Dutch colonial pursuit. The <i>hombung</i> (attic) functioned as both sleeping quarters and a hiding place. Inside are historical artifacts including <i>taganing</i> (drums), <i>hudon</i> (rice pounders), and various traditional cooking tools inherited from previous kings.
3	Cultural Heritage Structure	Stone Tomb (Sarkofagus)	This stone tomb, measuring 4.67 meters long, 2.70 meters wide, and 1.63 meters high, sits on a site of 51.1 m ² with a built area of 12.609 m ² . It commemorates King Hunsa Rajagukguk and symbolizes his power and status in Sibandang's history. Its authentic stone material and construction reflect the craftsmanship of past societies in managing natural resources.
4	Cultural Heritage Object	Stone Chairs (Batu Kursi)	Made from natural stone, there are seven chairs, each around 97 cm high with 66 cm seat width and 60 cm backrest height. The stone chairs occupy a 45 m ² site and were used by King Hunsa Rajagukguk and his descendants for communal deliberations, particularly on cultural rituals and governance matters. Each chair represents one of his seven children (five sons and two daughters). The white-painted stones reinforce the timelessness and ceremonial importance of the site.
5	Cultural Heritage Structure	Stone Fortress (Benteng Batu)	Estimated to be over 150 years old, this fortress was constructed through communal efforts by Batak kings and local villagers. Made of carefully arranged large stones, the structure measures 100 meters in length, 200 meters in width, and 2.10 meters in height, covering a total area of approximately 11,000 m ² . It has two narrow entrances on the north and south, just wide enough for one person to pass through.
6	Cultural Heritage Object	Grinding Stone (Losung Batu)	This trapezoidal stone, believed to be 150 years old, is associated with King Sultan Baginda Oloan Rajagukguk. It features two large indentations and raised stone carvings on its upper corners. Measuring 184 cm in length, 156 cm in width, and 1.10 m in height, the stone is located within the fortress area in Sosor Silintong, in front of the king's ancestral house. Local legend claims it flew from Samosir Island, and the water found in its basins is believed to have healing powers.
7	Cultural Heritage Building	Former Village Head Office (Kantor Kepala Nagari)	Originally a residential building, it was later repurposed as the Village Head's office during Dutch colonial rule around 1925. It functioned not only as a workplace but also as a symbol of local governance and authority. The building reflects the socio-political dynamics of the community during the colonial era.

3.1.2 Environmental and Cultural Landscape Features

Situated on Sibandang Island within Lake Toba, the village enjoys a unique environmental setting. Its shoreline is characterized by polished pebble beaches and crystal-clear waters that visually connect with surrounding cultural sites, such as Tarabunga, Bakkara, and Samosir Island. The scenic quality of this liminal landscape strengthens its attractiveness as a destination for eco-cultural tourism.

In addition to its heritage sites, Desa Sibandang is also renowned for its intangible cultural traditions—most notably the weaving of *Ulos Harungguan*, a luxury textile with strong symbolic and spiritual meanings. This activity is not only an artisanal tradition but also a livelihood strategy, with export markets reaching Singapore, France, and South Korea.

Figure 9. Panoramic View of Sibandang Island Shoreline



Figure 10. Traditional Weaving of Ulos Harungguan



The village also has rich agrotourism potential, particularly due to its distinctive *Mangga Udang* mango orchards. Known for their sweetness and edible skin, these mangoes are harvested seasonally and represent a strong draw for domestic visitors, as well as an opportunity for farm-based tourism activities.

3.1.3 Social Impact and Community Participation

The development of Sibandang's cultural heritage area has already begun to yield social benefits, including heightened cultural awareness and a modest rise in community income from tourism-related activities. However, community participation remains uneven due to limited awareness, lack of training, and insufficient infrastructure. Bridging this gap requires inclusive planning and long-term community empowerment strategies that elevate local stakeholders as co-creators and beneficiaries of tourism initiatives.

3.1.4 Key Constraints in Infrastructure and Governance

Despite its considerable potential, the village faces several structural and institutional constraints. These include:

- **Inadequate Infrastructure:** Roads are narrow and poorly maintained, lighting is minimal, and there are no organized parking or pedestrian pathways at key heritage sites.
- **Lack of Support Facilities:** Heritage sites are often missing basic amenities such as clean toilets, seating areas, interpretive signage, and Wi-Fi connectivity.
- **Weak Tourism Governance:** The absence of transparent budgeting, dedicated maintenance personnel, and systematic monitoring mechanisms undermines management efficacy.
- **Low Public Awareness:** Community understanding of the economic and cultural value of heritage assets remains limited, leading to unintentional damage (e.g., vandalism, climbing on artifacts).

3.1.5 Strategic Recommendations for Development

To address these issues, a number of priority actions are recommended:

- **Infrastructure Enhancement:** Repair and widen access roads, add lighting, build pedestrian trails, and develop properly managed parking areas.
- **Facility Development:** Provide interpretive signage in multiple languages, install public sanitation and waste management facilities, and create shaded rest areas and observation platforms.
- **Community Training:** Offer capacity-building programs in heritage interpretation, tourism service delivery, and conservation techniques.
- **Governance Improvement:** Establish transparent financial management systems, recruit site-specific caretakers, and create participatory evaluation frameworks.
- **Cultural Education:** Collaborate with schools, religious institutions, and NGOs to increase awareness about cultural preservation and tourism's role in sustainable development.

In summary, Desa Sibandang's cultural landscape is rich in symbolic, historical, and environmental value. However, unlocking its full potential as a heritage tourism destination requires the integration of infrastructure investment, community-based planning, and strategic conservation approaches. This groundwork forms the basis for the following SWOT analysis in Section 4.2, which will synthesize internal and external strategic considerations to guide tourism development planning.

3.2 SWOT ANALYSIS

3.2.1 SWOT Analysis of Heritage Tourism Development in Desa Sibandang

This section presents a comprehensive SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis for heritage tourism development in Desa Sibandang. The SWOT framework allows the identification of internal strengths and weaknesses, as well as external opportunities and threats that influence strategic decision-making for heritage tourism development. The data were collected through field observations, key informant interviews, and the distribution of structured questionnaires to five local experts with knowledge in cultural heritage and tourism development.

3.2.2 Internal Environment (IFE Matrix)

The Internal Factor Evaluation (IFE) Matrix serves as a strategic management tool used to assess the strengths and weaknesses within the internal environment of an organization or, in this case, a destination like Desa Sibandang. It allows for a structured evaluation of critical internal factors—both positive and negative—based on their relative importance and effectiveness. Table 2 outlines the identified internal elements relevant to heritage tourism in Desa Sibandang, including aspects such as local leadership engagement, the preservation of cultural assets, community awareness, infrastructure readiness, and tourism-related human resource capacity. Each factor is assigned a weight reflecting its relative significance, as well as a rating that indicates how well the village is currently performing in that area

The Internal Factor Evaluation (IFE) Matrix summarizes key internal factors. As seen in Table 2, the total weighted score is 2.92, indicating that the internal environment of Desa Sibandang is generally supportive of heritage tourism development.

Table 2. Internal Factor Evaluation (IFE) Matrix

Internal Factors	Weight	Rating	Weighted Score
Strengths			
Existence of historical sites	0.14	4	0.56
Community engagement	0.11	3	0.33
Rich cultural traditions	0.13	3	0.39
Sustainable tourism concept	0.10	2	0.20
Government collaboration	0.15	4	0.60
Total Strengths			2.08
Weaknesses			
Inadequate infrastructure	0.10	2	0.20
HR capacity limitations	0.10	3	0.30
Lack of training programs	0.09	2	0.18
Limited tourism facilities	0.08	2	0.16
Total Weaknesses			0.84
Total Weighted Score	1.00		2.92

The IFE matrix demonstrates that Desa Sibandang possesses more internal strengths than weaknesses. The high score in government collaboration and the existence of iconic heritage sites provides a strong foundation for future development.

3.2.3 External Environment (EFE Matrix)

The External Factor Evaluation (EFE) Matrix presented in Table 3 shows a total score of 3.02, suggesting that the external environment presents a favorable climate for heritage tourism development.

Table 3. External Factor Evaluation (EFE) Matrix

External Factors	Weight	Rating	Weighted Score
Opportunities			
Growing interest in cultural tourism	0.09	2	0.18
Increased global awareness of heritage	0.13	4	0.52
Government and NGO support	0.10	3	0.30
Digital marketing opportunities	0.10	3	0.30
Local tourism promotion	0.14	4	0.56
Cultural events and festivals	0.14	4	0.56
Total Opportunities			2.42
Threats			
Competition with other destinations	0.04	2	0.08
Policy uncertainty	0.09	2	0.18
Environmental degradation	0.07	2	0.14
Shifting tourist trends	0.05	2	0.10
Limited development funding	0.05	2	0.10
Total Threats			0.60
Total Weighted Score	1.00		3.02

These findings indicate that external opportunities significantly outweigh threats, particularly due to national tourism prioritization and cultural trends. Hence, Desa Sibandang has a favorable strategic position for proactive development.

3.2.4 SWOT Matrix and Strategic Implications

To synthesize the SWOT findings, a TOWS matrix was employed to formulate actionable strategies under four categories: SO (Strengths–Opportunities), WO (Weaknesses–Opportunities), ST (Strengths–Threats), and WT (Weaknesses–Threats).

SO Strategies (Leveraging strengths to capture opportunities):

- Promote unique Batak heritage through digital storytelling and social media marketing.
- Organize annual cultural festivals to attract domestic and international tourists.
- Collaborate with NGOs and government agencies for training and infrastructure development.

WO Strategies (Addressing weaknesses using external opportunities):

- Partner with external stakeholders for infrastructure improvement (roads, lighting).
- Conduct capacity-building programs for tourism stakeholders.
- Use social media platforms to compensate for limited physical promotion.

ST Strategies (Using strengths to mitigate threats):

- Establish local heritage conservation committees to prevent environmental damage.
- Position Desa Sibandang as a niche destination to reduce impact from competition.
- Develop formal agreements with local governments to ensure policy consistency.

WT Strategies (Minimizing weaknesses and avoiding threats):

- Secure alternative funding through CSR or crowdfunding.
- Integrate environmental sustainability into site management practices.
- Develop adaptive tourism packages that align with evolving market trends.

3.2.5 Strategic Positioning and Development Direction

The combined IFE and EFE scores (2.92 and 3.02, respectively) place Desa Sibandang in Quadrant I of the SWOT matrix, indicating a strong internal position and high external opportunities. This strategic positioning supports an aggressive growth strategy focusing on heritage-based tourism development. It emphasizes digital transformation, infrastructure enhancement, and community-based tourism governance to ensure sustainability and resilience.

Further integration with UNESCO's Sustainable Tourism Toolkit is recommended to ensure international best practices are adopted in preserving cultural authenticity while promoting socio-economic benefits for the local population.

4. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This study demonstrates that Desa Sibandang possesses strong potential for sustainable heritage tourism development, supported by its rich cultural assets, favorable internal conditions (IFE score: 2.92), and promising external opportunities (EFE score: 3.02). The village's unique combination of traditional Batak architecture, living cultural practices, and scenic natural landscapes positions it strategically within an aggressive growth quadrant. However, realizing this potential requires addressing key internal challenges such as limited infrastructure, inadequate tourism facilities, and insufficient local capacity. Heritage tourism in Desa Sibandang must therefore be developed through an inclusive, community-driven approach that balances preservation with innovation to ensure long-term sustainability and cultural resilience.

To operationalize its heritage tourism potential, Desa Sibandang should establish a participatory Heritage Tourism Management Body, invest in basic infrastructure and visitor amenities, and implement targeted capacity-building programs in cultural interpretation and tourism entrepreneurship. Emphasis should be placed on empowering youth and women, integrating digital platforms for promotion and education, and securing support from governmental and private sector partnerships. Additionally, the village should adopt a heritage zoning plan aligned with environmental carrying capacity to promote low-impact, educational tourism. These integrated actions will help transform Desa Sibandang into a model of inclusive, culturally rich, and economically viable rural tourism.

Competing Interests Disclaimer:

Authors have declared that they have no known competing financial interests OR non-financial interests OR personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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