

Sequencing Halal Tourism Development in Merangin Jambi Geopark: An ASOCA Assessment

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Abstract

Halal tourism has become an instrument of destination competition across Muslim-majority regions, yet the question of how a newly designated geological heritage site should order its development priorities has received little attention. This study examines the potential, readiness, obstacles and strategic priorities for halal tourism development in Merangin Jambi UNESCO Global Geopark, Jambi Province, Indonesia. A qualitative field design was applied with ten purposively selected informants drawn from the Regional Tourism Office, the Office of Cooperatives, Small and Medium Enterprises, Trade and Industry, the village government of Air Batu, and local tourism operators. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a structured questionnaire, field observation and document review, then analysed with the ASOCA framework, which combines ability, strength, opportunity, culture and agility, followed by a Litmus test that scored fifteen strategic issues on a range from ten to thirty. The geopark holds substantial natural and geological capital together with a religiously observant host society, while readiness remains uneven in certified facilities, workforce capability and inter-agency coordination. Obstacles are primarily institutional, including burdensome certification, weak regulatory synchronisation, passive community participation, and the absence of a permanent stakeholder forum. Litmus scoring placed prayer and ablution facilities highest at twenty-eight, followed by halal lodging and dining at twenty-seven, workforce training with certification and community involvement at twenty-six, while culture-oriented strategies clustered between eighteen and twenty-two. Opportunity-facing strategies averaged 24.56 against 21.33 for culture-facing strategies. The study concludes that halal tourism readiness follows a sequenced logic where service foundations precede cultural differentiation, and proposes a three-phase development pathway for regency policy.

Keywords: Halal Tourism, ASOCA Analysis, Destination Readiness, Strategic Sequencing

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INTRODUCTION

Faith-sensitive travel has grown into one of the more consequential segments of the global tourism economy. Mastercard and CrescentRating recorded one hundred and seventy-six million international Muslim arrivals during 2024, a volume approximately one quarter larger than the preceding year, and projected that the segment would approach two hundred and forty-five million arrivals by 2030 with associated expenditure near two hundred and thirty billion United States dollars (CrescentRating, 2025). The subsequent edition of the same index counted one hundred and ninety-six million Muslim arrivals during 2025 and assessed one hundred and fifty destinations against a common readiness framework (CrescentRating, 2026). Volumes of this magnitude have

moved halal tourism from a marketing niche towards an object of deliberate industrial policy across Southeast Asia. What began as a set of accommodations offered by individual hotels and restaurants has become a question of destination governance, since the services that Muslim travellers evaluate are distributed across many independent providers. Destinations consequently compete less on the appeal of single attractions and more on the coherence of the service system that surrounds those attractions.

Indonesia holds a strong position in this market alongside an uneven record in converting that position into local capability. The country ranked first in the Global Muslim Travel Index during several editions before moving to fifth place in the 2025 assessment, even though its aggregate score remained largely stable (Kementerian Pariwisata et al., 2025). National standing of this kind conceals considerable variation among provinces, because readiness is produced at the level of individual destinations rather than at the level of the state. The Indonesia Muslim Travel Index was designed to address that problem by scoring provincial readiness against access, communication, environment and service criteria, and its 2025 edition placed West Java, West Sumatra and West Nusa Tenggara at the head of the provincial ranking. Provinces that lie outside the established tourism corridors, among them Jambi in central Sumatra, therefore enter a market whose expectations have been set by destinations with far longer investment histories. The practical question for such provinces concerns not the desirability of halal tourism but the order in which the components of readiness should be built.

Scholarship on halal tourism has expanded rapidly during the past decade and remains weighted towards the demand side of the market. A substantial body of work models how Islamic attributes of a destination shape image, perceived value, satisfaction and behavioural intention among Muslim travellers (Hamdy et al., 2024; Suryawardani et al., 2024; Wibawa et al., 2023). Related studies examine how religiosity conditions word of mouth and loyalty, and how gender differences alter the weight that travellers assign to particular halal-friendly attributes (Abror et al., 2021; Jumani, 2024). Hotel-level research has traced the influence of halal product quality on guest loyalty in ways that connect attribute provision directly to commercial return (Jung et al., 2024). Social media research adds that destination image among Muslim travellers is now shaped as much by user-generated content as by official promotion (Wijaya et al., 2025). Bibliometric mappings confirm the overall pattern and report that satisfaction, attributes and intention dominate the keyword structure of the field (Fauzi & Battour, 2024; Supardin et al., 2025). The cumulative message of this work is that Muslim travellers respond to service attributes in reasonably predictable ways, which makes the supply of those attributes the more pressing research problem.

A smaller literature turns to the supply side and to the institutions that must deliver those attributes. Hennida et al. (2024) show that belief systems held by local elites in Yogyakarta and Lombok produced opposing misperceptions of halal tourism and slowed policy implementation in both settings. Huda et al. (2021, 2022) construct a strategic model for Aceh and identify stakeholder success factors in Makassar, and both studies place coordination and workforce capacity above physical assets. Research on certification examines the regulatory acceleration of halal product assurance in Indonesia together with the administrative burden that small enterprises carry (Rofi'ah et al., 2024; Zulfa et al., 2023). Sofyan and Pasyah (2022) describe the wider difficulties of the Indonesian halal industry during a period of digital transition, while Adinugraha et al. (2023) analyse the interaction between state law and religious law in halal tourism governance. Integrative reviews have begun to consolidate these strands and call for research that treats halal tourism as a system rather than as a bundle of separate services (Abdullah et al., 2025; Timur et al., 2025). The financing layer of that system has attracted separate attention, since evidence on Islamic banking shows that credit and market risk conditions shape operating efficiency and

therefore the capital available to sharia-compliant enterprises (Kamilah et al., 2025), while portfolio research demonstrates how limited sharia-compliant funds are allocated among competing assets under an explicit risk and return criterion (Rinaima et al., 2025).

A parallel literature addresses geoparks as instruments of conservation, education and regional development. Studies of Indonesian geoparks report that community participation determines whether geological assets translate into local welfare, and that such participation depends on training, organisational support and a visible distribution of benefits (Helmi et al., 2024; Hendratno et al., 2024; Wiramatika et al., 2021). Research on community-based tourism in the archipelago reaches similar conclusions regarding livelihood diversification and community resilience (Praptika et al., 2024; Praptiwi et al., 2021; Sardiana & Sarjana, 2021). Broader analyses connect tourism development to poverty reduction and to the ecological limits within which such development must remain (Firman et al., 2023; Priatmoko et al., 2023). What this literature rarely examines is the religious service dimension of the visitor experience, even in locations where the host population is overwhelmingly Muslim. Geopark scholarship and halal tourism scholarship have therefore developed with limited contact, despite the fact that many Indonesian geoparks sit inside Muslim-majority regencies. Evidence from Indonesian Islamic institutions points to a related requirement, indicating that local capability accumulates where organisations adopt learning organisation practices and adaptive routines instead of relying on isolated training events (Manaf, Novita, et al., 2026).

Three gaps follow from this division of scholarly labour. Studies of destination readiness seldom take a UNESCO Global Geopark as the unit of analysis, so the tension between geological conservation obligations and service expansion remains largely unexamined. Strategic analyses of Indonesian halal tourism rely heavily on the SWOT framework, which sorts factors into internal and external categories without separating present capability from the capacity to adapt, and without treating the cultural setting as an external condition in its own right. The ASOCA framework proposed by Suradinata (2013) addresses both limitations by distinguishing ability, strength and agility on the internal side while placing opportunity and culture on the external side, and applications in Indonesian settings have shown that the resulting matrix generates more differentiated strategy sets than conventional SWOT analysis (Delawa & Yuliawan, 2024; Indrawijaya et al., 2023). A third gap concerns the question of priority among competing strategies. Strategy inventories are commonly presented as undifferentiated lists, which offers little guidance to a regency government operating under budget constraints, whereas the Litmus test attached to the ASOCA procedure assigns a measurable strategic weight to every candidate issue.

Merangin Jambi UNESCO Global Geopark offers an instructive case for examining these questions. The area received UNESCO Global Geopark designation in May 2023, covers 4,832.31 square kilometres across twelve sub-districts and one hundred and thirty-one villages, and contains an exposed Early Permian plant fossil assemblage known as the Jambi flora that dates to approximately 296 million years (UNESCO, 2023). Its landscape includes the Masurai caldera, karst cave systems, waterfalls and highland lakes, while the resident population of Merangin Regency is predominantly Muslim and numbered 366,081 people in 2022. Tourism support facilities remained modest at the time of designation, with sixty-six lodging establishments, one hundred and twenty-nine eating places and six travel agencies recorded for 2021, alongside approximately thirty-eight thousand domestic visitors during that year. This study accordingly pursues three objectives: to assess the potential and readiness of the geopark for halal tourism development, to identify the obstacles that constrain that development, and to formulate and rank strategies through the ASOCA framework. The unit of analysis is the destination understood as a governed system rather than the individual tourist or the individual firm.

The remainder of the article proceeds in four parts. The next section explains the research design, the informant structure, the instruments and the three-stage analytical procedure. The results section reports the potential and readiness profile, the obstacles described by government and community informants, and the scored strategic issues. The discussion interprets the score distribution against existing scholarship and proposes a sequencing framework for halal tourism development in geological heritage destinations. A concluding section states the answers to the research questions and outlines directions for subsequent work.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study applied a qualitative field design supported by a structured scoring instrument, an arrangement suited to research questions that ask how actors interpret a policy direction and which actions they judge most consequential. The design follows the interpretive tradition in which the researcher operates as the principal instrument and recovers meaning from participants within their ordinary settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Field research was appropriate here because the term halal tourism carries contested meanings in Indonesian regencies, and those meanings could not be recovered from official documents alone. A library component accompanied the fieldwork and supplied the conceptual vocabulary, the regulatory references and the comparative evidence drawn upon during interpretation (Sugiyono, 2019). The researcher introduced the purpose of the study before every session, obtained verbal consent for recording and note taking, and assumed no operational role in the destination during the study period. Participation was voluntary throughout, and informants retained the right to withdraw any statement before analysis began.

Fieldwork was carried out in Merangin Regency, Jambi Province, during 2025. Air Batu Village in Renah Pembarap sub-district served as the principal community site because the exposed fossil section of the Merangin River lies within its territory and because the village has functioned as the flagship community of the geopark since national designation. Observation extended to lodging and eating establishments in Bangko, the regency capital, and to prayer facilities at selected geosites, which allowed reported conditions to be checked against visible provision. Documentary material comprised regency tourism statistics, the geopark management reports and the national regulatory instruments governing halal product assurance. The combination of interview, observation and document evidence gave the analysis three independent lines of access to the same phenomenon.

Informants were selected purposively on the criterion of direct involvement in tourism governance or tourism operation within the geopark area. The population from which the sample was drawn consisted of officials and community actors holding that involvement, and because this population did not exceed one hundred people the study applied saturated sampling in which every eligible member was included. Ten informants participated in total, and their institutional distribution appears in Table 1. Two officials from the Regional Tourism Office contributed the policy perspective on destination positioning, and two officials from the Office of Cooperatives, Small and Medium Enterprises, Trade and Industry addressed enterprise development and certification support. The head of Air Batu Village supplied the community government perspective, while five local tourism actors described operational conditions at the level of individual businesses and guiding services. This composition was intended to place government intention and field reality in direct comparison rather than to produce a statistically representative sample.

Table 1. Composition of Research Informants

No	Institution or group	Number	Perspective contributed
1	Regional Tourism Office of Merangin Regency	2	Destination policy, positioning and promotion

2	Office of Cooperatives, Small and Medium Enterprises, Trade and Industry	2	Enterprise development and certification support
3	Village government of Air Batu, Renah Pembarap sub-district	1	Community governance and implementation obstacles
4	Local tourism actors, including lodging, dining and guiding operators	5	Operational conditions and service capability

Table 1 shows that half of the informants hold governmental positions and half operate within the destination, which allowed policy intention and field experience to be compared directly during analysis. Two instruments were used during the data collection stage. The first was a semi-structured interview protocol organised around three domains: the basis and direction of halal tourism policy in the regency, the current condition of supporting facilities and workforce capability, and the obstacles encountered during implementation. Interviews with tourism office informants concentrated on potential and readiness, while the interview with the village head concentrated on obstacles as experienced at community level, and the two sets were subsequently read against each other. The second instrument was a structured questionnaire containing fifteen items, each corresponding to one candidate strategic issue generated from the ASOCA matrix, on which every informant assigned a score of one, two or three. Both instruments were reviewed by two academic assessors in regional economics before administration, and the interview protocol was piloted with one local operator whose responses were excluded from the analysis. Interviews lasted between forty and seventy minutes and were conducted in Indonesian, after which the relevant passages were translated for reporting.

Analysis proceeded through three stages, presented in Figure 1. The first stage identified internal and external factors from the transcripts using the sequence of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing with verification (Miles et al., 2020). Reduction condensed the transcripts into thematic statements about capability, assets, adaptive behaviour, market conditions and cultural setting. Display arranged those statements into the five ASOCA categories so that relationships among them became visible. Verification returned provisional conclusions to informants and to the documentary record before they were accepted, and codes were revised whenever a statement resisted the category initially assigned to it (Saldaña, 2021).

The second stage constructed the ASOCA matrix from those categories. Ability refers to the internal capacity of an organisation or a community to execute tasks, and it includes skills, knowledge, technology and technical expertise. Strength refers to the positive attributes that confer advantage, such as distinctive resources, reputation or capabilities that competitors cannot easily reproduce. Agility refers to the speed with which actors adjust to changing conditions and to their willingness to innovate under uncertainty. Opportunity refers to external conditions that may be exploited for development, including market trends, regulatory change and unmet demand. Culture refers to the values, norms and behavioural patterns of the surrounding society, which the framework treats as an external condition because a destination inherits rather than designs the cultural setting in which it operates (Suradinata, 2013). Crossing the three internal dimensions with the two external dimensions yields six cells, denoted Ab/O, S/O, Ag/O, Ab/C, S/C and Ag/C, and each cell was populated with strategies that combine the relevant internal and external factors.

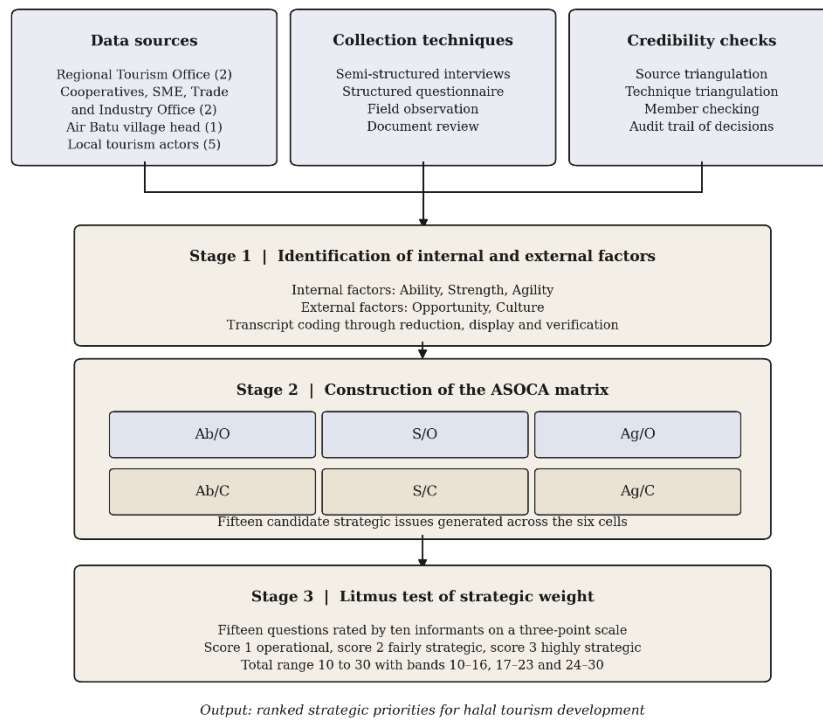


Figure 1. Three-Stage ASOCA Analytical Procedure Applied

Figure 1 sets out the sequence from data collection through factor identification and matrix construction to the Litmus test. The credibility procedures shown at the top of the diagram operated throughout the sequence rather than at a single point.

The third stage evaluated the strategic weight of every candidate issue through a Litmus test, a screening procedure that separates genuinely strategic questions from operational ones by scoring each issue against a fixed set of criteria (Bryson, 2018; Suradinata, 2013). Fifteen questions were posed for each issue, covering time horizon, breadth of institutional involvement, financial consequence, sensitivity to public interest and the degree of novelty required in the response. Each informant assigned one point to an issue judged operational, two points to an issue judged fairly strategic, and three points to an issue judged highly strategic. With ten informants the possible total for any issue ranged from ten to thirty. The scale interval was obtained by dividing the range of possible totals by the number of response alternatives, which produced an interval of approximately seven points and the three categories shown in Table 2. An issue scoring between ten and sixteen was classified as less strategic, an issue scoring between seventeen and twenty-three as fairly strategic, and an issue scoring between twenty-four and thirty as highly strategic.

Table 2. Classification of Litmus Test Total Scores

No	Category	Range of total scores
1	Less strategic issue	10 to 16
2	Fairly strategic issue	17 to 23
3	Highly strategic issue	24 to 30

Table 2 presents the score bands derived from a three-point scale administered to ten informants, which produces a possible total between ten and thirty for every strategic issue.

Several procedures supported the credibility of the findings. Source triangulation compared statements from tourism officials, enterprise officials, the village government and operators, which exposed differences between institutional intention and operational experience. Technique triangulation set interview material against field observation and documentary records, and this

comparison mattered particularly for claims about facility provision, since observation could confirm or qualify what informants reported. Member checking returned summarised interpretations to five informants for confirmation, and two summaries were amended after that consultation. An audit trail recorded coding decisions, category revisions and score tabulations so that the path from raw material to conclusion remains traceable. Dependability was further supported by the use of a single interviewer across all sessions, which kept probing style consistent.

Three limitations should be stated at the outset. The informant group is small and concentrated in one village and one regency capital, so the findings describe this destination rather than Indonesian geoparks in general. The Litmus test records the judgements of informed local actors rather than an objective measure of strategic value, and those judgements may reflect present institutional priorities as much as long-term consequence. Visitor perspectives were not collected, which means the study reports readiness as producers understand it and not as travellers experience it. These limitations shape the claims advanced in the discussion and inform the research directions proposed at the close of the article.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Potential and readiness for halal tourism development

The geopark holds natural and geological capital of a kind that few Indonesian destinations can match. Informants from the Regional Tourism Office described the exposed fossil section of the Merangin River, the Masurai volcanic complex and the karst cave systems as assets whose scientific value distinguishes the destination from competing nature attractions in Sumatra. Waterfalls, highland lakes and forest areas across the twelve sub-districts extend that base and support activity ranging from short family visits to multi-day exploration. Officials repeatedly connected these assets to a market argument: nature-based experience carries no inherent conflict with Islamic norms, which allows the destination to serve Muslim travellers without redesigning its core product. One official summarised the position by noting that the regency does not need to change what it offers, only the services arranged around what it offers. This reading of the asset base is consistent with research showing that halal tourism development in nature destinations proceeds through service adaptation rather than through product substitution (Abdullah et al., 2025).

The religious character of the host society constitutes a second element of potential. Merangin Regency recorded 366,081 Muslim residents in 2022, and informants presented this demographic fact as an operational advantage rather than as a matter of identity alone. Local hospitality practices, dietary conventions and the rhythm of daily prayer already align with the expectations of Muslim visitors, which reduces the behavioural adjustment required of service providers. Village-level informants observed that residents extend hospitality to visitors as a matter of custom, and that this disposition provides a foundation on which formal service standards can be built. The advantage should not be overstated, because custom and certified service are different things, and the gap between them emerged clearly in the obstacle analysis reported below.

Government commitment was evident in policy statements and in several concrete measures. The Regional Tourism Office reported training sessions and seminars for hotel owners, restaurant operators and tour guides on the principles of halal service, together with cooperation with the Indonesian Council of Ulama on certification for lodging and dining establishments. A tourism information function has been established to direct visitors towards facilities that meet Muslim travellers' requirements, and promotional plans include participation in halal tourism exhibitions and cooperation with travel agents. Officials also described intentions to expand digital promotion through social media channels. These measures indicate an administrative direction that is settled at the level of intent, which distinguishes Merangin from destinations where halal tourism

remains politically contested.

Readiness, understood as the actual availability of the services that Muslim travellers require, presents a more qualified picture. Prayer facilities exist at several geosites and in the regency capital, yet informants and observation agreed that provision is uneven across the twelve sub-districts and that condition and accessibility vary considerably. Eating establishments serving food prepared according to Islamic requirements are numerous, but formal certification remains the exception rather than the rule, so visitors from outside the region cannot verify compliance through any public marker. Lodging shows the same pattern in sharper form, since the sixty-six establishments recorded for 2021 were classified as budget accommodation and only a small number have adopted documented halal service standards. Accessibility constitutes a further constraint, because road conditions to several highland geosites lengthen travel time and discourage visitors who lack their own transport. Readiness therefore rests on informal compliance supported by a religiously homogeneous environment rather than on a verifiable service system.

Taken together, the potential and readiness profile displays a consistent asymmetry. Assets, host society disposition and administrative intent all sit at a high level, while certified facilities, workforce credentials and physical access sit considerably lower. This asymmetry is not unusual among destinations at an early stage of halal tourism development, and it corresponds to the pattern that Huda et al. (2021) identify in Aceh, where strategic priority attached to institutional and human resource development rather than to attraction development. The distinctive feature of the Merangin case is that the asset side received international recognition before the service side had been built, which reverses the sequence found in destinations whose halal tourism reputation grew alongside their attraction inventory.

Obstacles to halal tourism development

Five obstacles emerged consistently across the interviews, and the village government perspective proved particularly informative because it reports conditions at the point where policy meets practice. The first obstacle concerns conceptual literacy among residents and operators. Informants stated that many residents and tourism operators understand halal tourism as a requirement to transform existing attractions rather than as an adjustment of the services surrounding them. This misreading generates resistance, since operators fear that the designation will restrict the activities they may offer and reduce their creative latitude. The consequence is a slower acceptance of the policy direction than officials had anticipated, and the effect compounds because uninformed operators do not seek the certification support that is available to them. Comparable dynamics have been documented elsewhere in Indonesia, where locally held beliefs about what halal tourism entails shaped implementation more strongly than the formal policy content did (Hennida et al., 2024).

The second obstacle concerns the facility and certification gap. Prayer rooms exist but are not uniformly comfortable or conveniently located relative to visitor circulation, and several are situated at a distance from the points where visitors actually gather. Restaurants offering compliant food are common, yet formal certification remains rare, and the same holds for lodging establishments. Operators explained their reluctance in terms of cost, time and an incomplete understanding of the certification procedure, with several describing the process as administratively burdensome. Technical accompaniment from the responsible agencies has been limited, so many operators do not know which step to take first. This account matches national-level analysis of certification acceleration, which finds that procedural complexity and weak assistance suppress uptake among small enterprises even when regulatory intent is supportive (Rofi'ah et al., 2024; Zulfa et al., 2023).

The third obstacle lies within the structure of government itself. Informants described a clear vision accompanied by weak synchronisation among the agencies responsible for its execution. The tourism office, the office responsible for cooperatives and small enterprises, and the certification authority operate on different timetables and different assumptions about sequence. Budget constraints compound the difficulty, since halal tourism competes with other development priorities for a limited regency allocation. A shortage of officials with technical knowledge of halal tourism standards slows the supervision and mentoring that operators require. Governance capacity rather than resource endowment therefore constitutes the binding constraint, a conclusion that aligns with stakeholder analysis of halal tourism in Makassar, where coordination emerged as the dominant success factor (Huda et al., 2022).

The fourth obstacle concerns the quality of community involvement. Residents are not opposed to the policy, according to village-level informants, but many do not perceive a direct benefit and therefore participate passively. Some hold the view that halal standards will complicate ordinary tourism activity, which returns the analysis to the literacy problem described earlier. Service readiness at community level also requires specific competences in cleanliness, courtesy and attention to the privacy and comfort expectations of Muslim visitors, and these competences are unevenly distributed. Informants emphasised that changing settled habits requires sustained education rather than isolated socialisation events. Research on Indonesian geoparks reports the same requirement, finding that participation follows visible benefit and structured training rather than exhortation (Helmi et al., 2024; Wiramatika et al., 2021).

The fifth obstacle concerns the absence of a standing coordination forum. No regular meeting brings the tourism office, the enterprise office, the certification authority, operators and community representatives into the same room, so communication proceeds bilaterally and intermittently. Operators reported uncertainty about which agency to approach first when seeking certification or technical assistance. Programmes consequently run in parallel without integration, and evaluation of progress occurs without a shared platform. Informants identified several risks that follow if these obstacles persist: the loss of a growing Muslim visitor market to better prepared regencies, reputational damage to a destination that has recently gained international recognition, competitive disadvantage for local enterprises, and a reduction in the economic benefit that residents might otherwise obtain. The risk framing matters analytically because it shows that local actors understand the obstacles as time-sensitive rather than as permanent structural conditions.

ASOCA matrix and strategic issue scoring

Factor identification produced three internal categories and two external categories. On the internal side, strength comprises the landscape and geological uniqueness of the area, the existing distribution of prayer facilities, and the presence of lodging and dining establishments that have begun to apply halal service standards. Ability comprises the training and education activity already delivered to local operators, the incremental improvement of access infrastructure, and the working relationships established with certification bodies and industry partners. Agility comprises the recognition among officials and operators that halal tourism is a growing market, the flexibility shown in adjusting services such as prayer space and menu composition, and the capacity to design new products that combine geological education with spiritual content. On the external side, opportunity comprises rising global and domestic demand for Muslim-friendly travel, increasing public awareness of the segment, supportive national and provincial programmes, and continuing infrastructure investment. Culture comprises the diversity of local custom, the religious observance of the host society, and the potential to preserve local traditions through their incorporation into visitor experience.

Crossing these dimensions generated fifteen candidate strategies distributed across the six cells of the ASOCA matrix, presented in Table 3. The Ab/O cell contains strategies that use existing capability to capture market opportunity, namely operator training and certification, continued improvement of roads, transport and public facilities, and deeper partnership with halal certification bodies. The S/O cell converts distinctive assets into market position through promotion of the natural attractions as halal destinations, expansion of halal lodging and dining alongside improved prayer facilities, and targeted marketing to domestic and international Muslim markets. The Ag/O cell applies adaptive capacity to the same opportunity set through geological education tours framed by spiritual content, provision of prayer rooms and ablution facilities at visitor sites, and promotional adaptation including halal festival programming. The Ab/C cell links capability to cultural setting through tour programmes that introduce local custom and hospitality, and through the incorporation of crafts and local products into halal packages. The S/C cell combines assets with culture by developing itineraries that join landscape with Islamic cultural content and by involving residents in destination management. The Ag/C cell applies adaptive capacity to culture through packages built on spiritual values and through service scheduling that respects prayer times.

Table 3. ASOCA Matrix of Halal Tourism Development Strategies

Internal External	Ability	Strength	Agility
Opportunity	(Ab/O) 1. Strengthen training and certification for local tourism operators. 2. Continue improvement of roads, transport and public facilities. 3. Deepen partnership with halal certification bodies.	(S/O) 4. Promote waterfalls, hills and caves as nature-based halal attractions. 5. Expand halal lodging and dining and upgrade prayer facilities. 6. Market the destination to domestic and international Muslim travellers.	(Ag/O) 7. Develop geological education tours framed by spiritual content. 8. Provide prayer rooms and ablution facilities at visitor sites. 9. Adapt promotion to halal market trends through festival programming.
Culture	(Ab/C) 10. Design tour programmes that introduce local custom and hospitality. 11. Incorporate crafts and local products into halal tourism packages.	(S/C) 12. Combine landscape with Islamic cultural content in itineraries. 13. Involve residents directly in destination management.	(Ag/C) 14. Build packages on spiritual values, courtesy and hospitality. 15. Schedule services so that prayer times are respected.

Table 3 distributes fifteen candidate strategies across the six cells formed by crossing three internal dimensions with two external dimensions. Cells combining internal factors with opportunity contain nine strategies, while cells combining internal factors with culture contain six.

Litmus scoring produced a mean of 23.27 across the fifteen issues with a standard deviation of 2.79, and the full distribution appears in Table 4 and Figure 2. Seven issues reached the highly strategic band at twenty-four points or above, eight issues fell within the fairly strategic band between seventeen and twenty-three points, and no issue was classified as less strategic. The highest score of twenty-eight attached to the provision of prayer rooms and ablution facilities at visitor sites. Expansion of halal lodging and dining alongside improved prayer facilities followed at twenty-seven. Operator training with certification and community involvement in destination management each scored twenty-six. Marketing to domestic and international Muslim markets scored twenty-five, while access infrastructure and promotion of the natural assets as halal attractions each scored twenty-four. At the lower end, culture-led packages built on spiritual values scored eighteen and prayer-sensitive service scheduling scored twenty.

Table 4. Litmus Test Results for The Fifteen Strategic Issues

No	Strategic issue	Total score	Category
A	Strategy Ab/O (Ability × Opportunity)		
1	Strengthen training and certification for local tourism operators	26	Highly strategic
2	Continue improvement of roads, transport and public facilities	24	Highly strategic
3	Deepen partnership with halal certification bodies	23	Fairly strategic
B	Strategy S/O (Strength × Opportunity)		
4	Promote waterfalls, hills and caves as nature-based halal attractions	24	Highly strategic
5	Expand halal lodging and dining and upgrade prayer facilities	27	Highly strategic
6	Market the destination to domestic and international Muslim travellers	25	Highly strategic
C	Strategy Ag/O (Agility × Opportunity)		
7	Develop geological education tours framed by spiritual content	22	Fairly strategic
8	Provide prayer rooms and ablution facilities at visitor sites	28	Highly strategic
9	Adapt promotion to halal market trends through festival programming	22	Fairly strategic
D	Strategy Ab/C (Ability × Culture)		
10	Design tour programmes that introduce local custom and hospitality	22	Fairly strategic
11	Incorporate crafts and local products into halal tourism packages	21	Fairly strategic
E	Strategy S/C (Strength × Culture)		
12	Combine landscape with Islamic cultural content in itineraries	21	Fairly strategic
13	Involve residents directly in destination management	26	Highly strategic
F	Strategy Ag/C (Agility × Culture)		
14	Build packages on spiritual values, courtesy and hospitality	18	Fairly strategic
15	Schedule services so that prayer times are respected	20	Fairly strategic
Mean score across the fifteen issues		23.27	Fairly strategic

Table 4 reports that seven issues reached the highly strategic band and eight remained within the fairly strategic band, with no issue falling into the less strategic band. The concentration of high scores among facility, workforce and market strategies indicates where local actors locate the immediate development task.

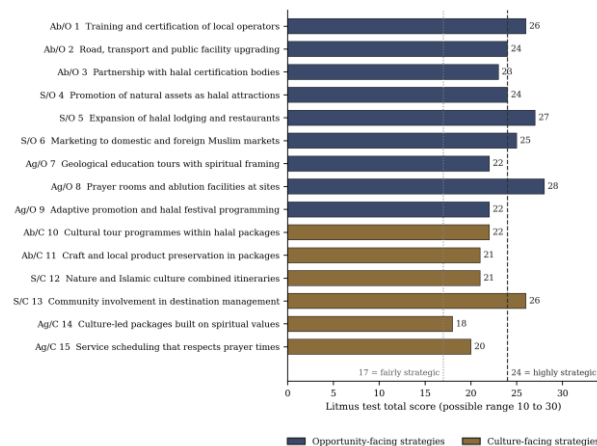


Figure 2. Distribution of Litmus Test Scores Across The Fifteen Strategic Issues

Figure 2 arranges the strategic issues in matrix order and distinguishes opportunity-facing from culture-facing strategies. Every opportunity-facing strategy except three exceeded the highly strategic threshold, whereas only community involvement did so among the culture-facing strategies.

The distribution reveals a systematic difference between the two external dimensions. The nine strategies oriented towards opportunity averaged 24.56 points, whereas the six strategies

oriented towards culture averaged 21.33 points, a difference of 3.23 points on a scale whose observed range spans ten points. Cell means confirm the pattern, since S/O reached 25.33, Ab/O reached 24.33 and Ag/O reached 24.00, while S/C reached 23.50, Ab/C reached 21.50 and Ag/C reached 19.00. Informants thus assigned greater strategic weight to actions that respond to market conditions than to actions that mobilise cultural resources, even though the same informants described local culture as one of the destination's advantages during the interviews. The apparent inconsistency dissolves once the scoring criteria are considered, because the Litmus questions ask about breadth of institutional involvement, financial consequence and urgency, and cultural programming scores lower on each of those criteria at the present stage of development.

The internal dimensions display a further pattern worth reporting. Strength averaged 24.60 points, ability averaged 23.20 points and agility averaged 22.00 points, which suggests that informants regard the mobilisation of existing assets as more consequential than either capability building or adaptive innovation. Dispersion tells a more interesting story than the means. Agility recorded a standard deviation of 3.74 against 2.30 for strength and 1.92 for ability, and the agility group contains both the highest score in the study at twenty-eight and the lowest at eighteen. Adaptive capacity is therefore not judged uniformly: where adaptation means installing prayer facilities to meet an evident need it carries the greatest strategic weight of any action considered, while where adaptation means designing culturally distinctive spiritual products it carries the least. The single culture-facing strategy that entered the highly strategic band, community involvement in destination management at twenty-six points, reinforces this reading, since community participation functions as an operational requirement for service delivery rather than as a form of cultural programming.

Discussion

The first research question asked about potential and readiness, and the evidence supports a clear answer with an important qualification. Potential is substantial and rests on three foundations: geological assets of international standing, a landscape suited to nature-based and educational visitation, and a host society whose ordinary practices already correspond to the expectations of Muslim travellers. Readiness is partial and rests on informal compliance rather than on verified provision. The distinction matters because Muslim travellers evaluating an unfamiliar destination rely on signals they can check before departure, and an uncertified restaurant offers no such signal regardless of how it actually prepares food. Research on destination image among Muslim travellers finds that verifiable attribute provision drives perceived value and subsequent behaviour, which means that informal compliance does not substitute for documented compliance in the decision process (Hamdy et al., 2024; Jung et al., 2024). The Merangin case therefore illustrates a destination whose product is ready and whose proof is not.

The second research question concerned obstacles, and the findings locate them predominantly within institutions rather than within resources. Conceptual misunderstanding, certification burden, weak inter-agency synchronisation, passive community participation and the absence of a standing forum are all coordination problems, and none of them would be resolved by additional physical investment alone. This conclusion converges with several strands of recent scholarship. Hennida et al. (2024) demonstrate that locally held interpretations of halal tourism can obstruct implementation even where formal policy is settled, which corresponds directly to the literacy obstacle reported here. Rofi'ah et al. (2024) and Zulfa et al. (2023) show that certification uptake among small enterprises depends on procedural simplification and technical accompaniment, which corresponds to the certification obstacle. Huda et al. (2022) identify coordination as the leading success factor in a comparable Indonesian setting, which corresponds

to the governance obstacle. Research on Indonesian pesantren reaches a convergent conclusion from a different institutional field, reporting that institutional support ranks among the strongest predictors of stakeholder satisfaction while technology operates as an enabler rather than as a primary driver (Manaf, Mulazid, et al., 2026). Read against the Merangin evidence, that finding suggests that promotional technology cannot substitute for the institutional support that operators require. The Merangin evidence adds that these obstacles interact: low literacy suppresses demand for certification support, which limits the case for building coordination capacity, which in turn leaves literacy unaddressed.

The third research question asked which strategies carry the greatest weight, and the Litmus distribution produces the study's principal finding. Priority attaches to service foundations rather than to cultural differentiation. Prayer facilities, halal lodging and dining, workforce certification, community involvement, market promotion and access infrastructure all reached the highly strategic band, whereas the strategies that would give the destination a distinctive cultural identity clustered near the lower boundary of the fairly strategic band. Local actors evidently regard the destination as occupying an earlier position on a development pathway, where the task is to satisfy a threshold of expectation rather than to differentiate against competitors. Figure 3 formalises this reading as a readiness sequencing framework comprising three phases: a service foundation phase built on the seven highest-scoring strategies, a system consolidation phase built on the strategies scoring between twenty-one and twenty-three, and a cultural differentiation phase built on the remaining strategies. A feedback loop returns visitor experience and certification outcomes to the foundation phase, since readiness requires maintenance as much as construction.

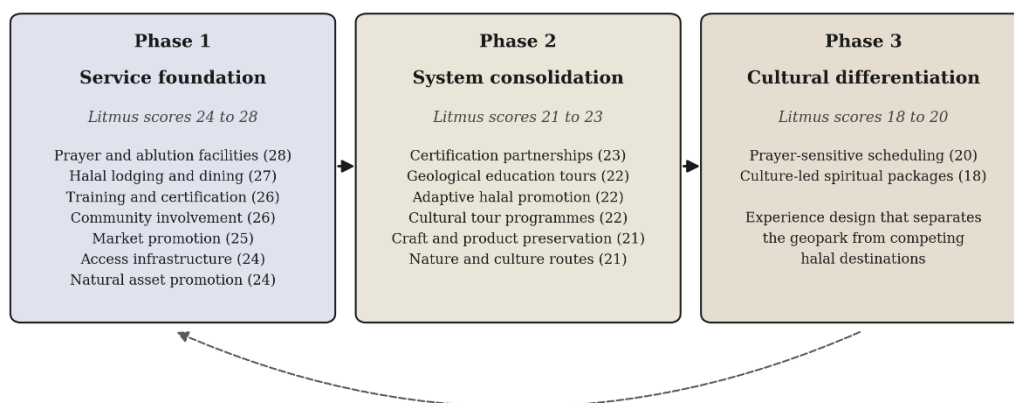


Figure 3. Readiness Sequencing Framework for Halal Tourism Development

Figure 3 orders the fifteen strategies into three development phases according to their Litmus scores. The feedback arrow indicates that visitor experience and certification outcomes should revise foundation priorities rather than leaving them fixed once established.

This sequencing framework contributes to the ASOCA literature in a specific way. Existing applications treat the five dimensions as simultaneously available inputs to strategy formulation, so the resulting matrix presents six cells of equivalent standing (Delawa & Yuliawan, 2024; Indrawijaya et al., 2023; Suradinata, 2013). The Merangin evidence indicates that the dimensions are not equally mobilisable at a given stage of destination maturity. Culture functions as a latent resource that becomes strategically productive only after service capacity has been established, because cultural programming presupposes visitors who are already willing to travel to the destination and staff who are already competent to serve them. Agility divides rather than aggregates, with adaptation towards evident service gaps scoring at the top of the distribution and adaptation towards experiential innovation scoring at the bottom. A sequenced reading of the ASOCA matrix

therefore offers more practical guidance than a flat reading, and it suggests that strategic frameworks applied to emerging destinations should incorporate maturity as an explicit variable.

The finding also speaks to the geopark literature. Studies of Indonesian geoparks consistently identify community participation as the determinant of whether geological assets generate local benefit (Helmi et al., 2024; Hendratno et al., 2024; Praptika et al., 2024). The present study confirms that judgement from an unexpected direction, since community involvement was the only culture-facing strategy to enter the highly strategic band, and it did so because informants understood participation as an operational necessity for delivering services rather than as an expression of cultural value. This reframing carries a practical consequence for programme design. Programmes that recruit residents into halal service provision, guiding and enterprise activity are likely to produce faster returns than programmes that ask residents to perform cultural identity for visitors, and the two are frequently conflated in regional tourism planning. Community participation understood as labour and enterprise carries different design requirements from community participation understood as cultural display.

Several implications follow for regency policy over the coming years. The first concerns certification, where the evidence indicates that a facilitation scheme covering procedural guidance and part of the direct cost would address the binding constraint more efficiently than promotional expenditure would. The second concerns coordination, where a standing forum with a published meeting schedule and a single entry point for operators would resolve the confusion that informants described, at negligible cost. The third concerns prayer facilities, whose position at the top of the distribution justifies a mapped provision plan covering the principal geosites rather than incremental construction at individual locations. The fourth concerns training, which should be linked to certification outcomes rather than delivered as standalone seminars, since informants valued credentials that visitors can verify. Design evidence from Islamic education strengthens this recommendation, because programme development that begins with a structured needs analysis of learners and their working conditions produces materials better matched to actual gaps than format-driven design does (Zh et al., 2024). Applied to halal service training, that finding favours programmes which first diagnose what operators cannot yet do and which pair face-to-face sessions with materials operators can revisit at their own pace. The fifth concerns promotion, which the sequencing framework places after rather than before the facility and certification work, because promotion that outruns provision generates visitor disappointment and reputational cost.

The study carries a further implication for the relationship between conservation and service development. A UNESCO Global Geopark accepts obligations regarding geological heritage protection, and facility construction at geosites must respect those obligations (UNESCO, 2023). The sequencing framework is compatible with this constraint, since the highest-priority interventions concern prayer and sanitation facilities, lodging and dining capacity, and workforce credentials, none of which requires intervention in the fossil-bearing formations themselves. Facilities can be concentrated at visitor gathering points and settlement edges rather than at the geosites, an approach consistent with the geotrail planning literature that separates interpretation zones from fragile exposure zones. Halal tourism development and geoconservation are therefore not in conflict at this stage of the destination's development, although the compatibility would require re-examination if visitor volumes rose substantially.

Three limitations qualify these conclusions and indicate directions for further work. The informant group is small and the Litmus test records local judgement rather than an external measure of strategic value, so the score distribution should be read as a structured account of local priority rather than as a definitive ranking. Visitor perspectives were not collected, which leaves open the question of whether Muslim travellers to geological heritage destinations weight service

attributes in the same order that local producers do. Subsequent research might test the sequencing framework against destinations at different maturity levels, examine whether the opportunity and culture gap narrows as service capacity accumulates, and incorporate demand-side data to establish whether the readiness threshold that producers perceive corresponds to the threshold that travellers apply. Comparative work across Indonesian geoparks would also establish whether the pattern reported here reflects the geopark context specifically or the early stage of halal tourism development more generally.

CONCLUSION

This study assessed halal tourism development in Merangin Jambi UNESCO Global Geopark using the ASOCA framework and Litmus weight test. Three main findings emerged. The geopark holds strong natural and sociocultural potential, yet readiness remains partial due to uncertified compliance, uneven facilities, and limited workforce and access across subdistricts. Obstacles are primarily institutional, including weak regulatory coordination, burdensome certification, passive community participation, and the absence of a permanent stakeholder forum. Litmus scores clearly rank priorities, with prayer and ablution facilities scoring twenty eight, halal lodging and dining twenty seven, workforce training with certification and community involvement twenty six, market promotion twenty five, access infrastructure and natural asset promotion twenty four, while culture oriented strategies scored between eighteen and twenty two. The gap between opportunity facing strategies averaging 24.56 points and culture facing strategies averaging 21.33 points underpins the study's principal contribution, a three phase sequencing framework that places service foundations first, system consolidation second, and cultural differentiation third, with a feedback loop returning visitor and certification outcomes to the foundation phase. For the regency government, immediate actions include certification facilitation, a one stop coordination forum, mapped prayer facilities at visitor gathering points, and training programmes tied to verifiable credentials. Future research should test this sequence across other destinations, incorporate demand side measurement, and conduct longitudinal observation in Merangin to validate whether the gap narrows as certified capacity accumulates.

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