

Ecoregions : Sustainability at the heart of Development

Imagine an island paradise with beautiful beaches and pristine waters, where people live in such a way that not only respects the environment around them but actively preserves and sustains it.

A place where tourists can escape the stress of their everyday lives, while at the same time helping to support local communities that occupy a central position in the area's development.

This is the vision of EcoRegions Indonesia (ERI), a company founded three years ago in Mataram, the capital of West Nusa Tenggara (NTB) province, on the island of Lombok.

EcoRegions Indonesia CEO John Higson explained the basic premise behind the company's approach.

"A lot of development in Asia doesn't take care of the environment and it doesn't cooperate with the local people. So there's a window here to go in and make sure that Indonesia's natural assets – its land and marine biodiversity and people – benefit from development," he said.

ERI has a master plan to develop 400 hectares of land on a 3,200-hectare ecoregion in Tanjung Ringgit, a cape on the Pemongkong Peninsula in East Lombok regency, while work is under way to produce a master plan for a second ecoregion – covering between 25,000 and 35,000 hectares – on the neighboring island of Sumbawa.

The Tanjung Ringgit master plan comprises ecotourism villages that will include hotels and resorts, retail outlets, restaurants, a marina, leisure and sporting facilities, day spas and medical services, as well as cultural centers and educational facilities.

The ambitious plan also includes renewable energy systems, eco-friendly waste management, mangrove regeneration, sustainable fisheries and animal husbandry programs.

"You need a large area if you want to make a difference," Higson said. "You need a large platform to draw in all those actors that today have the technology and desire to operate in a place that is protected and runs along sustainability laws."

Higson is a well-known figure in Sweden – where he lived and worked for 30 years – for creating such platforms, which bring together like-minded people and experts to build sustainable, green economies that besides generating revenue, also promote and protect the well-being of local communities and the environment.

One of ERI's founders, Mataram native and civil rights lawyer I Gusti Putu Ekadana, stressed the need to adopt a new kind of development model. "Since the Gili islands first began to be developed 20 years ago, much of the coral in their waters has been damaged," he said, referring to the three resort islands off Lombok's northwest coast. "If we don't change our approach toward tourist development right now, the environment in Lombok will be destroyed."

In the past three years, ERI has focused on getting the necessary legislation in place at local, regional and national levels, and building joint ventures with the local people to help them achieve their goals and strengthen their livelihoods. One joint venture in Tanjung Ringgit is an agro-forestry program on a third of the ecoregion's total area, while another is The Ladies of Telone, a restaurant run by a group of local fishermen's wives, whom ERI will provide with funding and training to establish the business.

Expansion of Indonesian Economic Development (MP3EI) and in March, ERI was invited to travel with the government's delegation to attend the Berlin Tourism Trade Fair (ITB) in Germany.

The Tourism and Creative Economy's tourism investment head, Henky Manurung, told The Jakarta Post that the government wanted to attract more foreign tourists – especially from Europe – to visit areas in the country besides Bali.

“Indonesia has so much to offer but there are still many remote areas that need to be developed. The best way to develop them is to support the ecoregion model and set up ‘eco-playgrounds’ for everyone to enjoy,” Henky said, adding that if the Lombok and Sumbawa projects were a success, the government would be keen to see further ecoregions established in other parts of the country.

With the legislative framework and joint ventures in place, ERI's task now is to start building the first ecovillage in Tanjung Ringgit, the Friends' Village, to provide, as Higson put it, “a concrete, living example of environmental, economic and social sustainability best practice for future partners to follow”.

Higson expressed his confidence that what ERI had achieved in terms of laying the legislative foundation would enable the timely establishment of other ecoregions based on the same model.

“Most other ecoregions in the world evolved slowly over time,” he said. “Green-minded folk move in and start doing cool things regarding the environment, which attracts businesses, large and small, to move in also. But then 15 to 25 years down the line, they figure they need some rules and regulations.

“We've turned the whole thing on its head. We put the rules and regulations in first. [...] In this way, everything can be fast-tracked within three years.”

Only time will tell if Higson's optimism is realized in the creation of a number of sustainable, eco-friendly, socially inclusive ecoregions across Indonesia – and possibly elsewhere in Asia. But the need for a radically different approach to development is not in question.

“Nature reserves and areas that should not be touched are great, but we can't rely on those to change the direction we're taking on the planet. If we truly want to make change, it's sustainable development that we need to look at,” he concluded.