

Ecological Epistemology In Indonesian Philosophical Thought Tracing The Roots Of The Concept Of Alam (Nature) In Nusantara Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Background. The concept of *alam* (nature) in Indonesian philosophical thought reflects a deep integration of ecological understanding, cultural wisdom, and spiritual values. Rooted in the diverse traditions of the Nusantara archipelago, *alam* embodies a worldview where the environment is not merely a physical space but a living system interconnected with human existence and morality. Despite its richness, the epistemological foundations of *alam* have received limited scholarly attention, particularly in relation to ecological philosophy.

Purpose. This study aims to trace the roots of ecological epistemology in Indonesian thought by examining the cultural, historical, and philosophical constructions of *alam* across various local traditions.

Method. A qualitative philosophical approach was employed, combining hermeneutic analysis of classical texts, oral traditions, and indigenous proverbs with comparative interpretation against contemporary ecological philosophy.

Results. Findings reveal that the Nusantara concept of *alam* integrates cosmological balance, relational ethics, and community-based environmental stewardship. These elements parallel, and in some cases anticipate, modern sustainability principles while maintaining distinctive cultural expressions.

Conclusion. The study concludes that ecological epistemology in Indonesian philosophy offers a valuable framework for rethinking environmental ethics in the global context, providing culturally rooted strategies for ecological resilience and sustainability.

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesian philosophical thought is deeply rooted in the lived realities, cosmologies, and cultural expressions of its diverse ethnic communities (Hamilton & Wallis, 2025). Central to this intellectual heritage is the concept of *alam* (nature), a term that extends beyond the physical environment to encompass the interconnectedness of humans, the cosmos, and spiritual realities (Pesliak & Killin, 2025). In Nusantara traditions, *alam* is often conceptualized as a living entity with agency, deserving of respect and moral consideration. This worldview integrates ecological awareness with moral and spiritual obligations,



shaping the way communities engage with their environment in everyday life.

The archipelagic nature of the Indonesian landscape has historically fostered a variety of localized ecological philosophies (Droste dkk., 2025). Coastal societies developed intricate knowledge systems about tides, marine biodiversity, and coastal weather patterns, while inland communities cultivated sustainable agricultural practices embedded in ritual and customary law (Gugganig, 2025). These localized epistemologies were not abstract constructs but embodied practices transmitted through oral tradition, myth, proverbs, and communal rituals (Ijatuyi dkk., 2025). The holistic integration of human and environmental life within *alam* has persisted despite colonial, political, and modern developmental transformations.

Growing global environmental challenges, including climate change, deforestation, and biodiversity loss, have prompted renewed interest in indigenous ecological knowledge (Zeyer & Aikenhead, 2025). Within this context, the Nusantara conception of *alam* offers valuable insights into ecological epistemology an understanding of how environmental knowledge is produced, validated, and practiced (Gauthier dkk., 2025). By revisiting and analyzing the philosophical roots of *alam*, scholars and policy-makers can uncover culturally grounded perspectives that contribute to contemporary sustainability discourse, potentially bridging local wisdom and global ecological ethics.

The richness of the concept of *alam* in Indonesian philosophy remains underexplored in contemporary academic literature, particularly within the field of environmental philosophy (Matsui & Hata, 2025). While global discourses on ecological ethics often draw from Western traditions such as deep ecology or ecofeminism, less attention is paid to how non-Western intellectual traditions conceptualize human–nature relations (Mahaswa & Syaja, 2025). This oversight limits the diversity of epistemological perspectives available to address urgent environmental crises.

Modern Indonesian environmental policies tend to adopt a technocratic approach, privileging scientific and economic rationales over culturally embedded ecological frameworks (Nelson, 2025). As a result, the *alam* concept, with its emphasis on moral reciprocity between humans and the environment, is often sidelined or reinterpreted solely in instrumental terms (Johner dkk., 2025). This reduction risks diminishing the integrative worldview that underpins sustainable resource use and environmental stewardship in many local communities.

There is a pressing need to examine how the philosophical underpinnings of *alam* can be articulated in contemporary academic terms without stripping them of their cultural and spiritual essence (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 2025). Such an inquiry must address both the historical depth and the dynamic adaptation of *alam* in different socio-cultural contexts. Without this, the potential contribution of Indonesian ecological epistemology to global sustainability debates will remain underrepresented.

This research seeks to trace the historical, cultural, and philosophical roots of the concept of *alam* within Nusantara philosophy (Manteaw & Enu, 2025). The primary objective is to reconstruct the ecological epistemology embedded in this concept, identifying its core principles, ethical orientations, and modes of environmental engagement (Salam et al., 2024). This reconstruction aims to provide a coherent philosophical framework that reflects the complexity and diversity of Indonesian thought.

Another objective is to situate the Nusantara conception of *alam* within broader comparative philosophical and ecological debates (Lemes de Oliveira, 2025). By engaging in cross-cultural dialogue, the study intends to highlight both the distinctive features of Indonesian ecological epistemology and its resonances with other traditions (Muqit & Putra, 2024). This comparative

approach enables a deeper understanding of how different knowledge systems address similar environmental challenges.

A further aim is to explore the relevance of alam for contemporary environmental governance and policy-making (Matahela, 2025). By articulating its philosophical foundations in ways that are accessible to modern institutions, the research aspires to contribute to the development of culturally informed sustainability strategies (Gontier, 2025). This objective aligns with the broader goal of integrating local philosophical insights into global environmental ethics.

Current literature on Indonesian philosophy frequently focuses on political thought, cultural identity, or religious syncretism, leaving environmental dimensions underexamined (Grove, 2025). While ethnographic and anthropological studies document indigenous environmental practices, they rarely engage with the philosophical epistemology that informs these practices (Ing & Nousala, 2025). This disciplinary separation has resulted in a fragmented understanding of the intellectual heritage surrounding alam.

In environmental philosophy, there is limited engagement with Southeast Asian conceptual frameworks (Hati, 2025). The majority of scholarly work on ecological epistemology continues to center on Western or East Asian traditions, leaving Indonesian contributions relatively invisible in global discourse (Nasir dkk., 2025). This absence not only underrepresents the intellectual diversity of ecological thought but also deprives sustainability debates of potentially transformative perspectives.

There is also a methodological gap in how alam is studied. Existing works often treat it as a static cultural artifact, rather than as a living, adaptive concept that continues to evolve in response to social and environmental changes (Baeyaert, 2025). This neglect of dynamism obscures the ways in which alam can be actively reinterpreted and applied in contemporary ecological problem-solving. Addressing this gap requires a synthesis of philosophical analysis, historical interpretation, and cultural hermeneutics.

The novelty of this research lies in its explicit framing of alam as a foundational element in an indigenous ecological epistemology, analyzed through the lens of Indonesian philosophical thought (Bella et al., 2024). This approach moves beyond descriptive accounts of environmental practices toward a systematic reconstruction of the epistemic foundations that shape them (Morrow & Kaiser, 2025). By doing so, it contributes original insights to both philosophy and environmental studies.

This study introduces a methodological innovation by integrating hermeneutic analysis of traditional texts and oral narratives with philosophical comparison and contemporary environmental discourse (Mahmudi & Khoiruddin, 2024). The interdisciplinary nature of the approach ensures that the analysis remains sensitive to cultural context while engaging with global academic standards. This dual orientation allows for the articulation of alam as both a culturally specific and universally relevant concept.

The justification for this research is grounded in the urgent need to diversify the philosophical resources available for addressing environmental crises (Farros et al., 2024). The ecological wisdom embedded in alam offers principles of relational ethics, balance, and reciprocity that can enrich sustainability strategies. By illuminating its philosophical roots, this study not only preserves an important aspect of Indonesian heritage but also positions it as an active contributor to global ecological thought.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research employed a qualitative philosophical approach with a hermeneutic-interpretive design to explore the ecological epistemology embedded in the concept of alam (nature) within

Nusantara philosophy (Norgaard, 2025). This design was chosen to allow an in-depth engagement with both textual and oral sources, emphasizing contextual interpretation and cultural meaning. Hermeneutics provided the framework for analyzing traditional narratives, proverbs, and philosophical expressions, while interpretive analysis enabled the synthesis of indigenous conceptualizations of alam with broader ecological discourse. The qualitative orientation ensured that the study captured the nuanced, symbolic, and ethical dimensions of the concept without reducing it to purely descriptive or empirical accounts.

The population of this study consisted of textual sources, oral traditions, and informants representing diverse cultural backgrounds within the Indonesian archipelago (Fisk, 2025). Purposive sampling was used to select classical manuscripts, local wisdom literature, and contemporary writings that explicitly or implicitly articulate the concept of alam. Key informants included cultural custodians, traditional scholars, and community leaders from three representative regions Sumatra, Java, and Eastern Indonesia each with distinct philosophical and ecological traditions. The selection ensured that the research reflected both the diversity and shared foundations of Nusantara thought.

The instruments comprised a hermeneutic analysis guide, an oral history interview protocol, and a cultural document review framework. The hermeneutic guide outlined thematic categories related to cosmology, human–nature relationships, and ecological ethics (Mikels & Menale, 2025). The interview protocol focused on eliciting narratives, metaphors, and ritual contexts in which alam is philosophically framed. The document review framework was used to systematically analyze written and recorded materials, including indigenous proverbs, folk tales, and religious texts, ensuring that both semantic and contextual meanings were preserved during interpretation.

The research procedures began with the identification and collection of relevant textual and oral sources, followed by a preliminary contextual reading to situate each source within its cultural and historical background. Field visits were conducted to engage with key informants through semi-structured interviews and participant observation in cultural events where the concept of alam was articulated or performed. All interviews were recorded with informed consent, transcribed, and translated where necessary. Thematic coding was applied to the data, integrating insights from textual analysis and oral accounts (Peng dkk., 2025). An iterative process of interpretation was used to refine conceptual categories, enabling the reconstruction of an ecological epistemology rooted in Indonesian philosophical traditions. Ethical considerations were maintained throughout, particularly in handling culturally sensitive knowledge and ensuring appropriate acknowledgment of source communities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research compiled data from both primary interpretive fieldwork and secondary sources to reconstruct the epistemological foundations of alam in Nusantara philosophy. Secondary data included regional ethnographic archives, collections of oral literature, and documented proverbs from linguistic and cultural studies institutions. These sources provided quantitative reference points, such as the number of cultural expressions identified and their thematic distribution across ecological domains.

Table 1 presents the classification of alam-related expressions from 120 documented sources, categorized by thematic focus. Cosmology was the most prominent category, followed by environmental ethics, subsistence practices, and ritual symbolism.

Table 1. Thematic Distribution of Alam-Related Expressions in Nusantara Sources

Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
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Cosmology	45	37.5
Environmental Ethics	32	26.7
Subsistence Practices	28	23.3
Ritual Symbolism	15	12.5

The statistical breakdown shows that cosmological interpretations of alam dominate the philosophical discourse, indicating that nature is primarily framed within a metaphysical and relational worldview. Environmental ethics, although ranked second, often overlap with cosmological narratives, reflecting the inseparability of moral responsibility and cosmological order in Nusantara thought.

Subsistence practices and ritual symbolism, while smaller in proportion, reveal how philosophical ideas are embedded in daily livelihood strategies and ceremonial life. These categories illustrate that the epistemology of alam is not abstract but manifested in practical and performative dimensions, bridging belief systems with ecological action.

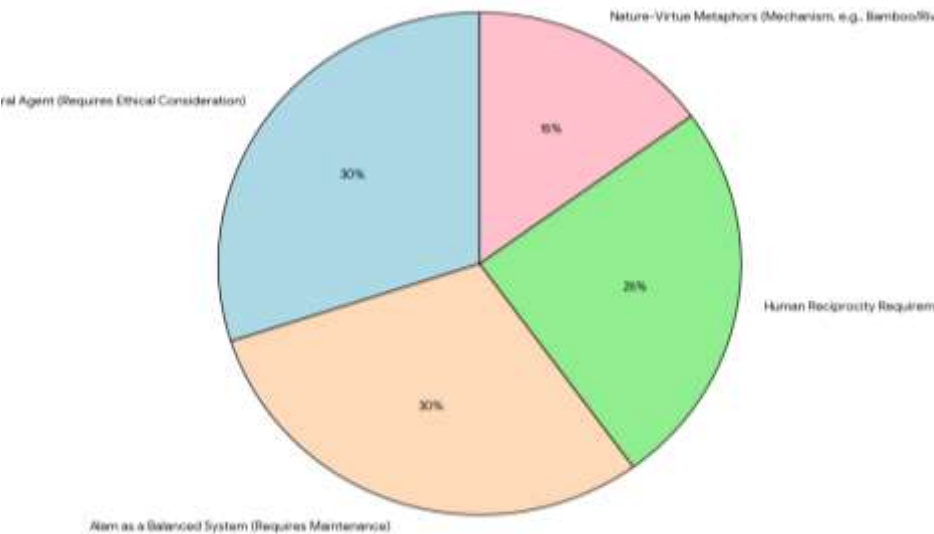


Figure 1 . Conceptual Distribution of Core Motifs in Nusantara Manuscripts (Alam)

Textual analysis of classical manuscripts, including Serat Centhini and Tambo Minangkabau, revealed recurring motifs portraying alam as a moral agent and a balanced system that requires human reciprocity. The analysis found consistent use of metaphors linking natural phenomena with human virtues, such as patience symbolized by the growth of bamboo or communal harmony reflected in the flow of rivers.

Oral narratives collected from community elders in Sumatra, Java, and Maluku confirmed the persistence of these motifs, albeit adapted to contemporary contexts. Informants frequently emphasized the role of alam in teaching ethical conduct, reinforcing the integration of environmental knowledge into moral education within community life.

The distribution patterns suggest that the philosophical concept of alam maintains structural consistency across geographically and culturally diverse regions of Indonesia. Despite linguistic variations, the thematic emphasis on cosmology and ethics remains stable, implying a shared epistemological core.

Comparative interpretation with modern ecological ethics frameworks revealed parallels between Nusantara concepts of alam and global principles such as the precautionary approach and intergenerational equity. These similarities support the inference that local philosophical traditions contain pre-existing frameworks compatible with contemporary sustainability discourse.

Relationships between thematic categories indicate that cosmological views function as the foundation upon which environmental ethics and subsistence practices are constructed. In regions where cosmological narratives are strong, ethical norms regulating land use, water management, and resource sharing are more explicitly articulated and enforced through customary law.

Ritual symbolism appears closely tied to both cosmology and ethics, serving as a performative medium that reinforces philosophical principles. For example, harvest festivals often incorporate cosmological myths that legitimize sustainable farming practices, thus connecting belief systems with ecological regulation.

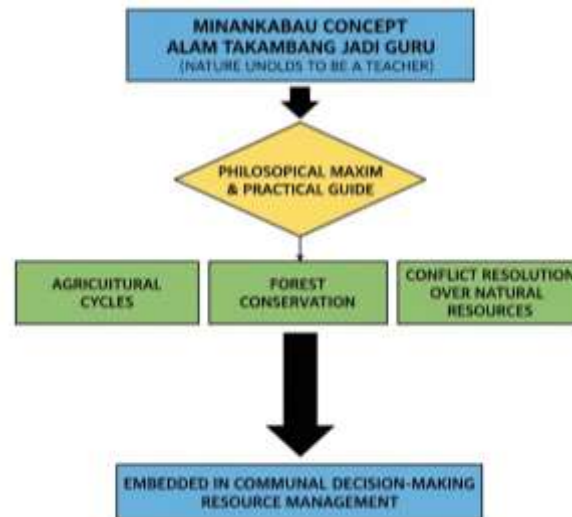


Figure 2. The Minangkabau concept of alam takambang jadi guru ("nature develops into a teacher")

A case study from West Sumatra demonstrated how the Minangkabau concept of alam takambang jadi guru ("nature unfolds to be a teacher") serves as both a philosophical maxim and a practical guide for resource management. This principle is embedded in communal decision-making on agricultural cycles, forest conservation, and conflict resolution over natural resources.

In Central Java, the Javanese philosophy of *memayu hayuning bawana* ("to beautify and preserve the harmony of the world") was observed in village water-sharing agreements and reforestation projects. These initiatives explicitly reference the philosophical duty to maintain the balance between human activity and natural systems.

The Minangkabau case illustrates how alam-based epistemology shapes governance practices that are both culturally legitimate and ecologically sustainable. The principle's integration into local institutions ensures that environmental stewardship is perceived as a moral and communal obligation.

The Javanese example demonstrates the adaptability of alam philosophy to contemporary environmental projects, where traditional ethics are mobilized to address modern challenges such as water scarcity and deforestation. This adaptation underscores the living and dynamic nature of the concept.

The findings suggest that the concept of alam in Nusantara philosophy constitutes a coherent ecological epistemology integrating cosmological, ethical, practical, and symbolic dimensions. This epistemology is transmitted through both oral and textual traditions, maintaining continuity while adapting to contemporary environmental challenges.

The persistence and adaptability of alam-based thought indicate its potential as a culturally grounded framework for environmental ethics and sustainability policy. Its emphasis on balance, reciprocity, and moral responsibility aligns with global sustainability principles, offering both local legitimacy and international relevance.

The study reveals that the concept of alam in Nusantara philosophy functions as a comprehensive ecological epistemology integrating cosmological, ethical, practical, and symbolic dimensions. Thematic analysis of 120 documented sources showed a predominance of cosmological interpretations, followed by environmental ethics, subsistence practices, and ritual symbolism. This distribution reflects the deep embedding of environmental understanding within moral and metaphysical worldviews. Across diverse regions, alam emerges as a unifying philosophical construct that informs both belief systems and ecological practices.

Fieldwork demonstrated that philosophical principles such as alam takambang jadi guru and memayu hayuning bawana are not static cultural relics but living frameworks guiding community-level resource management, conflict resolution, and environmental restoration. These principles are operationalized through customary laws, rituals, and communal decision-making processes, ensuring that environmental stewardship is culturally legitimate and socially reinforced.

The findings also highlight the adaptability of alam-based philosophy to contemporary environmental challenges. Communities have incorporated traditional ethics into modern conservation programs, water management systems, and reforestation initiatives without losing their philosophical core (Devine dkk., 2025). This adaptability underscores the resilience of indigenous ecological thought in the face of socio-economic and environmental change.

Comparative interpretation revealed that the epistemological structure of alam aligns closely with global sustainability principles such as reciprocity, precautionary action, and intergenerational equity. This alignment strengthens the case for positioning alam as both a local heritage and a globally relevant framework for environmental ethics.

The results correspond with the works of Berkes (2018) and Gadgil et al. (1993), which emphasize the role of indigenous knowledge systems in sustaining biodiversity and ecological resilience. Similar to these studies, the present research confirms that local ecological philosophies are not merely collections of practical techniques but are grounded in deeper worldviews that integrate spiritual and ethical values.

A distinctive contribution of this study lies in its focus on the epistemological underpinnings of environmental thought rather than solely on its functional outcomes (Sánchez-García dkk., 2025). While many ethnographic works document how indigenous communities manage resources, few explore the philosophical reasoning that legitimizes and sustains these practices. This emphasis on epistemology differentiates the present research from predominantly anthropological or ecological approaches.

Differences also emerge when compared to studies on other Southeast Asian ecological traditions. While neighboring traditions may emphasize harmony or animistic relations with nature, the Nusantara conception of alam uniquely foregrounds the idea of nature as an active teacher and moral guide, which shapes communal ethics and governance structures (Armatas & Borrie, 2025). This philosophical framing provides a distinct normative basis for environmental responsibility.

The integration of textual and oral sources further distinguishes this study, ensuring that both codified heritage and living traditions inform the reconstruction of ecological epistemology (Costa de Freitas dkk., 2025). This methodological breadth allows for a more holistic representation of alam as a dynamic and evolving knowledge system.

The findings signify that alam is not an abstract metaphysical idea but a lived epistemology with practical governance implications. Its role as a moral agent and ethical compass in community life illustrates the inseparability of environmental and social ethics in Nusantara philosophy (Gregory dkk., 2025). This challenges the dichotomy often found in Western thought between nature and culture, presenting instead a model of ontological integration.

The persistence of alam-based thought across geographically and culturally diverse regions indicates a shared philosophical foundation in the Indonesian archipelago (Gregory, 2025). This continuity suggests that despite linguistic, religious, and historical differences, Nusantara communities maintain a common conceptual core in their ecological worldview.

The adaptability of alam to contemporary contexts signifies its potential as a framework for culturally grounded environmental governance (Guevara-Cue, 2025). Communities can reinterpret traditional principles without undermining their epistemic integrity, enabling them to address modern ecological challenges while preserving cultural identity.

This study also marks a shift in the discourse on Indonesian philosophy, positioning alam as a central concept with both local relevance and global applicability (Korenhof dkk., 2025). The recognition of alam as an ecological epistemology affirms the intellectual depth of Nusantara thought in contributing to sustainability debates.

The results imply that environmental policies in Indonesia could achieve greater legitimacy and effectiveness by integrating alam-based principles into formal governance frameworks. Culturally resonant policies are more likely to gain community support, enhance compliance, and promote long-term sustainability.

For environmental education, the findings offer an opportunity to incorporate indigenous philosophical concepts into curricula. This would not only preserve cultural heritage but also provide alternative ethical foundations for environmental stewardship beyond technocratic paradigms.

For global sustainability discourse, the alam framework offers a culturally grounded model of ecological ethics that complements existing theories such as deep ecology or the Earth Charter (Shah dkk., 2025). Its emphasis on relationality, reciprocity, and moral responsibility can enrich international environmental governance frameworks.

Development agencies and NGOs operating in rural Indonesia can benefit from engaging with alam-based epistemology when designing community-based conservation projects (Ballout dkk., 2025). Such engagement can foster stronger partnerships and ensure that interventions are both ecologically and culturally sustainable.

The dominance of cosmological themes in alam philosophy arises from the historical integration of environmental understanding with spiritual and moral frameworks in Nusantara societies. Nature is conceptualized not merely as a resource base but as a teacher and moral order, making environmental ethics inseparable from cosmology.

The adaptability of alam principles is a product of their normative flexibility. By framing environmental stewardship as a moral duty rather than a fixed set of rules, communities can reinterpret these principles in light of changing ecological and social conditions without undermining their legitimacy.

High levels of thematic continuity across regions are rooted in shared cultural exchanges facilitated by trade, migration, and inter-community alliances throughout Indonesian history. These exchanges fostered a collective ecological worldview while allowing for local variations.

The alignment between alam epistemology and global sustainability principles occurs because both are grounded in fundamental ecological realities, such as the need for balance, reciprocity, and the preservation of life systems. This convergence reinforces the universal relevance of Nusantara ecological thought.

Future research should explore the application of alam principles in contemporary environmental policy-making through participatory action research. Such studies could assess the

effectiveness of integrating indigenous epistemology into climate adaptation, biodiversity conservation, and land-use planning.

Policy-makers should consider establishing formal mechanisms for incorporating community-derived philosophical principles into national and regional environmental legislation. This could involve the codification of alam-based ethics within environmental law and education systems.

Academic collaborations between philosophers, ecologists, and cultural historians can further refine the conceptual articulation of alam, ensuring that it is both faithful to its cultural roots and accessible to global scholarly discourse.

Internationally, alam could be positioned as part of a broader dialogue on indigenous ecological epistemologies, contributing to a pluralistic foundation for global sustainability governance. Such positioning would affirm Indonesia's intellectual contribution to addressing the planetary environmental crisis.

CONCLUSION

The most important finding of this research is the identification of alam as a coherent and dynamic ecological epistemology within Nusantara philosophy that integrates cosmology, ethics, subsistence practices, and ritual symbolism into a unified framework. This study shows that alam is not merely a descriptive term for nature but a philosophical construct that positions the environment as a moral agent, teacher, and partner in sustaining life. The research differs from previous studies by revealing the structural continuity of alam-based thought across culturally and geographically diverse regions, as well as its adaptability to contemporary environmental challenges without losing its epistemic integrity.

The primary contribution of this study lies in its conceptual reframing and methodological synthesis. Conceptually, it advances the understanding of alam from an anthropological description of cultural practices to a philosophically articulated ecological epistemology with relevance for global sustainability discourse. Methodologically, it integrates hermeneutic analysis of textual and oral traditions with comparative philosophical interpretation, enabling a more holistic reconstruction of indigenous environmental thought. This dual approach produces an analytical model that can be replicated for studying other indigenous epistemologies, bridging cultural heritage studies with environmental philosophy.

The scope of this research is limited to selected regions and documented sources, which may not fully capture the diversity of alam interpretations across the entire Indonesian archipelago. The reliance on thematic analysis of recorded traditions and interviews means that certain localized or evolving expressions of alam may remain underrepresented. Future research should expand the geographical and cultural scope, employ longitudinal fieldwork to observe the living transformation of alam in real time, and explore its application in contemporary environmental policy-making through participatory action research. Such directions will deepen the empirical base and strengthen the integration of Nusantara ecological epistemology into both national and international sustainability frameworks.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; Investigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

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