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Marine resource management and conservation through sasi customary law: A case study of Namatota Village, Kaimana District, West Papua

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ABSTRACT

The management of marine resources in Indonesia's coastal areas increasingly requires approaches that integrate ecological sustainability with sociocultural contexts. One form of local wisdom that continues to be practiced in eastern Indonesia is sasi, a customary law system that regulates the utilization of natural resources through temporary prohibitions. This study aims to analyze the closing of sasi adat as a mechanism for managing and sustaining marine resources through a case study in Namatota, Kaimana Regency, West Papua. This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach using field observations and a literature review. The findings indicate that tutup sasi adat functions not only as an ecological conservation instrument by providing recovery periods for marine ecosystems but also as a social control mechanism that strengthens community compliance with customary law. The integration of tutup sasi practices with the Sasi Gam Festival further reinforces cultural transmission, documentation, and community awareness of sustainable resource management. The study concludes that closing of sasi adat represents an effective and adaptive form of customary marine resource management rooted in local wisdom, contributing to environmental sustainability and local food security. Strengthening customary institutions and aligning customary practices with formal governance frameworks are essential to ensure the continuity of tutup sasi amid contemporary socioeconomic challenges.

Keywords: local wisdom; marine resource management; sasi customary law; sustainability

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RESEARCH & PUBLISHING



1. INTRODUCTION

The management of marine resources in Indonesia's coastal areas faces serious challenges due to increasing resource exploitation, economic pressures on coastal communities, and declining marine environmental quality. These conditions highlight the need for management approaches that do not rely solely on formal regulations but also recognize local wisdom systems that have long been practiced by indigenous communities. Understanding the existence of fishing communities is rooted in the dialectical relationship between humans, the environment, and culture, which together shape their patterns of life. One form of such local wisdom is *sasi*, an indigenous customary law system that has developed in the Maluku and Papua regions. *Sasi* has long been regarded as an effective traditional practice for maintaining the sustainability of marine resources (Patriana et al., 2016).

Through temporary prohibitions within a defined period, *sasi* regulates the utilization of natural resources with the aim of maintaining ecological balance and preventing overexploitation. The management of fisheries resources, including the establishment of marine conservation areas, must also consider the implications of environmental ethics embedded in local communities (Kinseng, 2017). *Sasi* does not merely function as a conservation rule but also as a value system and belief structure that involves customary rituals and active community participation (Lestari et al., 2025). In the marine context, *sasi* serves as a mechanism for controlling resource use by allowing ecosystems time to recover naturally.

The core element of the *sasi* system is the practice of *tutup sasi* (closing of *sasi*), which represents a phase of prohibition on harvesting marine resources established through customary ceremonies and possessing binding social and legal force under customary law. Customary *sasi* law prohibits the extraction of certain natural resources within customary territories and for specific periods (Pahleviannur, 2024). *Tutup sasi* functions not only as an ecological instrument but also as a mechanism of social control that regulates community behavior in utilizing marine resources based on shared values, norms, and customary agreements.

Kaimana Regency, located in southern West Papua, is approximately 313 km from Manokwari City and comprises seven districts: Kaimana, Teluk Arguni Atas, Teluk Etna, Buruway, Teluk Arguni Bawah, Kambrau, and Yamor (Juliana et al., 2024). In the Kaimana Regency, Namatota Village is one area where *tutup sasi adat* is still practiced in the management of marine resources. This practice is applied to high-economic-value marine commodities that are vulnerable to overexploitation, such as sea cucumbers, trochus shells (*lola*), and *batulaga*. Therefore, examining *tutup sasi adat* in Namatota is important for understanding the role of customary law in sustaining marine resources and its contribution to community-based marine resource management grounded in local wisdom. To date, the utilization of natural resources by the people of Kampung Namatota continues to adhere to their customary practices, known locally as *sasi (nggama)* (Nurmaningtyas, 2013).

One area where *tutup sasi adat* is still practiced is in the management of marine resources. This practice is applied to marine commodities with high economic value and high vulnerability to exploitation, such as sea cucumbers, trochus shells (*lola*), and *batulaga*. Therefore, examining *tutup sasi adat* in Namatota is important for understanding the role of customary law in ensuring the sustainability of marine resources and its contribution to marine resource management based on local wisdom. Customary practices that give rise to legal consequences are referred to as customary law; however, these practices also entail sanctions when violated by members of the community in which they apply (Souhaly, 2016).

Namatota Village in Kaimana Regency provides a compelling case for examining contemporary *sasi* practice. As a coastal village with strong dependence on marine resources, Namatota continues to implement *tutup sasi* to regulate access to specific marine species. At the same time, the community faces increasing economic pressures and exposure to external influences, which pose challenges to the sustainability of customary practices. Investigating *sasi* in this context offers valuable insights into how local communities negotiate conservation objectives, social cohesion, and economic needs.

This study focuses on three main analytical dimensions. First, it examines how the sasi functions as a local governance mechanism in marine resource conservation, particularly in terms of regulating access, enforcing compliance, and providing ecological recovery periods for vulnerable marine species. Through customary rules and temporal prohibitions (*tutup sasi*), the sasi operates as a community-based regulatory system that complements formal conservation approaches.

Second, the study explores the social and institutional dynamics that support the implementation of sasi in Namatota Village. This includes the roles of customary leaders, community members, and cultural institutions in maintaining authority, legitimacy, and collective compliance with customary regulations. Attention is paid to how customary law is reproduced through rituals, festivals, and intergenerational knowledge transmission, as well as how it adapts to contemporary governance contexts.

Third, the research analyzes the broader social implications of sasi for community cohesion and sustainable livelihoods. Beyond its ecological function, sasi strengthens social solidarity, reinforces shared values, and reduces resource-related conflicts within the community. Simultaneously, it sustains local livelihoods by ensuring the long-term availability of marine resources, thereby linking environmental conservation with social resilience and food security.

Based on these considerations, this study examines the practice of sasi customary law in Namatota Village, Kaimana Regency, West Papua, as a form of local governance in marine resource management. The analysis focuses on three key aspects: (1) how sasi functions as a community-based governance mechanism for marine conservation through the practice of *tutup sasi*; (2) the social and institutional dynamics that support the implementation and legitimacy of customary regulations; and (3) the broader social implications of sasi for community cohesion and sustainable livelihoods. By addressing these dimensions, this study seeks to contribute to the discourse on local wisdom-based resource management and highlight the relevance of customary law in strengthening socially grounded and sustainable marine conservation strategies in coastal Indonesia.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the practice of *tutup sasi adat* in Namatota Village within its real socioculture context. A case study allows researchers to investigate complex phenomena in depth while maintaining the natural context of the social setting, including its norms and values (Siregar & Murhayati, 2024). Qualitative research focuses on revealing meanings and patterns without relying on statistical procedures, with the researcher actively involved as a key instrument during data collection. Data were collected through field observations and a literature review and analyzed using descriptive-analytical techniques to connect empirical findings with theoretical concepts of customary law and local wisdom. Triangulation of observations, literature, and community narratives was applied to enhance the credibility and depth of understanding of customary marine governance practice.

To strengthen methodological rigor, this study treated Namatota Village as an instrumental case because it offers a contemporary setting in which customary law, ecological restraint, and livelihood needs intersect in everyday marine governance. In qualitative case study research, bounded cases such as this are appropriate for examining how meaning, institutions, and practices operate in real-life settings rather than under artificially controlled conditions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). Accordingly, observations were directed not only to visible ritual events and patterns of resource use but also to social interactions, symbols, and locally shared interpretations that help explain why *tutup sasi* continues to be regarded as legitimate and effective.

The analysis followed an iterative thematic process in which field notes and literature findings were compared repeatedly to identify recurring themes related to conservation, authority, compliance, and livelihood security. This interpretive process is supported by credibility strategies commonly recommended in qualitative inquiry, including triangulation, analytic memoing, and close attention to transferability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). In addition, the study

sought to maintain qualitative quality by ensuring that interpretations remained closely connected to the research questions and were presented in a coherent and context-sensitive manner (Tracy, 2010).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Sasi as a Local Governance Mechanism for Marine Resource Conservation

A comparative reading of the Namatota case suggests that tutup sasi operates in ways similar to periodically harvested marine reserves discussed in the broader fisheries literature. Temporary closures tend to be most effective when communities can clearly define target species, closure periods, and harvesting rules, particularly for resources with high local value and strong community oversight (Cohen & Foale, 2013; Gnanalingam & Hepburn, 2015). In Namatota, the customary closure is therefore not merely a symbolic pause, but a practical mechanism for reducing extraction pressure during recovery periods. This helps explain why local observations of greater abundance after buka sasi should be taken seriously as situated ecological knowledge, even in the absence of formal stock assessments.

The persistence of sasi in Namatota also reflects institutional resilience rather than simple cultural continuity. Earlier studies of sasi in eastern Indonesia have shown that customary management systems endure when they are repeatedly enacted, socially recognized, and able to adjust to changing local conditions (Harkes & Novaczek, 2002; McLeod et al., 2009). This perspective helps explain why ritual authority remains influential in Namatota: ceremonies, prohibitions, and collective memory work together to reproduce legitimacy over time. Thus, the effectiveness of sasi depends not only on the rules governing resource use but also on the continued social reproduction of the institution itself.

From a governance perspective, the Namatota experience indicates that customary marine management should not be treated as peripheral to formal conservation but as a potentially complementary governance arrangement. Recent work on marine governance in Indonesia argues that community-based and customary practices can contribute meaningfully to conservation outcomes beyond formally designated marine protected areas, including through recognition as other effective area-based conservation measures (Berdej & Armitage, 2016; Estradivari et al., 2022). Interpreted in this way, tutup sasi adat represents a locally legitimate governance instrument that can strengthen conservation fit by aligning ecological objectives with social authority and place-based norms.

In Namatota Village, sasi functions as a locally rooted governance mechanism that regulates access to marine resources through collectively agreed customary rules. The implementation of tutup sasi adat establishes a temporary prohibition on harvesting specific marine commodities within designated customary marine territories. This mechanism provides ecological recovery periods for marine ecosystems, particularly for high-value and vulnerable species such as sea cucumbers (*Holothuria scabra*), trochus shells (*Iola*), and batulaga. Sea cucumbers, particularly *Holothuria scabra*, have high economic value and are therefore prime targets for exploitation (Lewerissa et al., 2023). Unlike formal state-based conservation measures that rely on written regulations and enforcement agencies, sasi operates through customary authority and social legitimacy. The proclamation of tutup sasi by the king and customary elders during ritual ceremonies signals the commencement of a marine resting period that is widely recognized and respected by community members. Compliance is not driven solely by the fear of sanctions, but by shared beliefs, moral obligations, and collective responsibility toward nature.

The findings also suggest that compliance in Namatota is relational and socially embedded rather than purely coercive. Research on fisheries compliance increasingly emphasizes that rule-following is shaped by trust, legitimacy, moral obligation, and shared understandings of fairness, not only by the threat of punishment (Arias & Sutton, 2013; Gómez-Andújar et al., 2024). This helps explain why violations are described as rare, even without continuous formal surveillance. In Namatota, people comply because tutup sasi is perceived as a collectively owned rule tied to community welfare, making disobedience socially costly and morally inappropriate.

Institutionally, the coexistence of customary leaders, village actors, and religious figures shows that sasi is supported by a flexible governance arrangement rather than a rigid traditional hierarchy. Adaptive governance scholarship notes that enduring local institutions often combine continuity in core principles

with flexibility in operational arrangements, allowing communities to respond to new pressures without abandoning foundational norms (Berkes et al., 2000; Datta & Chaffin, 2022). The Namatota case reflects this dynamic. Adjustments in the timing of closures, scope of regulated species, and involvement of multiple moral authorities indicate that *sasi* remains a living institution capable of adaptation.

The Sasi Gam Festival also plays a role beyond ceremonial reinforcement; it functions as a public arena for knowledge transmission, social learning, and cultural visibility. Studies of indigenous knowledge in eastern Indonesian marine settings show that customary practices become more durable when they are communicated across generations and linked to wider forms of recognition, including education and carefully managed cultural tourism (Prasetyo et al., 2020; Ruiz-Mallén & Corbera, 2013). In this sense, the festival helps translate customary law into a collectively remembered and publicly affirmed practice. It supports the continuity of *sasi* by ensuring that younger community members encounter it not only as a rule but also as part of their identity, heritage, and stewardship.

Ecologically, *tutup sasi* serves as a recovery mechanism that allows marine ecosystems to regenerate. Local fishers recognize changes in resource availability before and after the *sasi* period, indicating an experiential understanding of ecological regeneration. Although the community does not employ scientific monitoring tools, their observations of increased size and abundance of marine species after *buka sasi* reflect the ecological effectiveness of temporary closures. This finding supports the argument that indigenous conservation practices can function as effective management tools, even without formal scientific measurement. The implementation of *sasi* constitutes customary law formulated, supervised, and coordinated by customary institutions authorized to establish binding decisions (Saimima & Unity, 2023). Beyond ecological functions, *sasi* in Namatota operates as a social institution that reinforces customary authority and communal cohesion. The enforcement of *sasi* is led by *adat* leaders in collaboration with village elders and religious figures. Violations of *sasi* rules are rare, not primarily due to fear of material sanctions, but because of strong social norms and moral obligations embedded within the community.

Regarding livelihoods, the Namatota findings reflect a familiar tension in small-scale fisheries: short-term harvesting restrictions may reduce immediate income, but they can improve the stability of resource-dependent livelihoods over time. The livelihoods literature on small-scale fisheries argues that sustainability should be assessed not only through present extraction levels but also through the capacity of households and institutions to secure future access, absorb shocks, and maintain viable resource bases (Allison & Ellis, 2001; Faulkner et al., 2018). From this perspective, *tutup sasi* can be understood as a local risk-management strategy because it redistributes access across time so that the benefits of harvesting are not exhausted by immediate demand.

This interpretation is especially important under current coastal transformations in Southeast Asia, where coastal communities face rising market integration, competing maritime uses, and growing pressure on nearshore resources. Regional research shows that small-scale fishing livelihoods are increasingly squeezed by commodification, environmental degradation, and changing access regimes, making locally legitimate governance mechanisms more important rather than less important (Fabinyi et al., 2022; Yanda et al., 2023). A recent synthesis on Sasi Laut in Indonesia argues that indigenous temporary-closure systems can support both fisheries sustainability and livelihood resilience when carefully linked to contemporary blue economy agendas (Ananta & Cabral, 2026). Therefore, the continued practice of *sasi* in Namatota should be seen as a forward-looking governance asset that can help communities negotiate modern pressures without severing the social foundations of conservation.

3.2. Social and Institutional Dynamics Supporting the Implementation of Sasi

Sanctions The sustainability of *sasi* in Namatota is strongly supported by social and institutional arrangements embedded within customary structures. Customary leaders, including the king and elders, play a central role in formulating, enforcing, and legitimizing *sasi* regulations. Their authority is derived not only from lineage and tradition but also from continued recognition by the community as custodians of customary law. Institutionally, *sasi* is reinforced through collective rituals and cultural events, most notably the Namatota Sasi Gam Festival. The festival serves as a medium for reaffirming customary

norms and strengthening community participation in resource governance. The ritual declaration of tutup sasi during the festival transforms customary law from an abstract norm into a visible and shared social commitment. Despite its continued relevance, the practice of sasi in Namatota faces several challenges. Increased exposure to market demand for marine commodities has created economic pressures that sometimes conflict with customary restrictions. Younger generations, in particular, may question the relevance of sasi when faced with immediate economic needs. It represents a form of local wisdom that regulates human–nature relations through rhythms of pause, respect, and limitation in resource utilization (Sitompul, 2025).

Socially, the implementation of sasi relies on strong communal ties and mutual monitoring. Community members actively participate in maintaining compliance, and violations of sasi rules are subject to customary sanctions that have social and moral consequences. These sanctions function as deterrents while simultaneously reinforcing the shared values of respect, restraint, and accountability. The involvement of the younger generations in cultural performances, storytelling, and educational activities during the Sasi Gam Festival illustrates the intergenerational transmission of customary knowledge. This process ensures that sasi remains adaptive and relevant amid social change, rather than becoming a static tradition detached from contemporary realities.

3.3. Social and Institutional Dynamics Supporting the Implementation of Sasi

Beyond its ecological function, sasi has significant social implications for community cohesion and livelihood sustainability in Namatota. By collectively regulating access to marine resources, sasi reduces competition and potential conflicts among community members. The shared acceptance of harvesting restrictions fosters social harmony and strengthens trust in customary institutions. From a livelihood perspective, tutup sasi contributes to ensuring the long-term availability of marine resources, which form the economic foundation of coastal households. Although temporary closures may limit short-term income opportunities, community members recognize sasi as an investment in future productivity and food security. This reflects a local understanding of sustainability that balances immediate needs with long-term welfare.

Furthermore, sasi reinforces a sense of collective identity and moral responsibility toward nature. The perception of marine resources as a shared heritage rather than an individual commodity encourages cooperative behavior and discourages exploitative practices. This social dimension positions sasi not only as a conservation strategy but also as a framework for social resilience in the face of economic and environmental pressures. In this context, sasi strengthens community-based governance by linking environmental stewardship with social values and livelihood security. Its continued practice demonstrates that customary law can play a vital role in addressing contemporary challenges of marine resource management while maintaining social cohesion within indigenous coastal communities.

The adaptability of sasi is evident in how the community negotiates these challenges. Adjustments in the duration of tutup sasi, resource categories, and involvement of religious institutions illustrate the dynamic nature of customary law. Rather than being static, sasi continues to evolve as a living institution that responds to socioeconomic changes while maintaining its core principles.

4. CONCLUSION

The implementation of tutup sasi adat in Namatota Village demonstrates that customary law plays a strategic role not only in marine resource sustainability but also in addressing broader social issues within coastal communities. Through temporary prohibitions on marine resource utilization, tutup sasi supports ecosystem recovery while simultaneously strengthening local food security and economic resilience. From a social perspective, tutup sasi adat reinforces community cohesion, collective responsibility, and respect for customary authority. The practice functions as a social regulation mechanism that shapes community behavior, mitigates resource-use conflicts, and fosters the intergenerational transmission of cultural values. The integration of tutup sasi into the Sasi Gam Festival

further amplifies its social impact by enhancing cultural identity, environmental awareness, and youth participation in customary governance.

The festival functions not only as a cultural celebration but also as a space for representation, education, and the strengthening of cultural documentation and village knowledge systems. Thus, tutup sasi should be understood not merely as a customary tradition but as a sustainable marine resource management instrument relevant to contemporary environmental conservation agendas. Strengthening customary institutions and fostering synergy between customary law and formal policy are necessary to ensure the continuity of tutup sasi amid modernization pressures and economic demands. Sasi has been shown to impact economic aspects through increased production and income, as well as ecological aspects through environmental preservation (Lerebulan et al., 2018). This article is expected to serve as both an academic and practical reference for the development of local wisdom-based natural resource management models in Indonesia's coastal regions.

These findings indicate that tutup sasi adat is not merely a traditional practice but a socially embedded marine management system with significant implications for sustainable development and social harmony. Strengthening customary institutions and fostering synergy between customary law and formal governance frameworks are essential to ensure the continuity of tutup sasi adat in the face of modernization and increasing socioeconomic pressures. This study contributes to the discourse on indigenous resource management by highlighting the relevance of local wisdom-based governance in addressing environmental and social sustainability challenges in coastal regions of Indonesia.

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Ethical Approval

Not Applicable

Informed Consent Statement

Not Applicable

Authors' Contributions

Not Applicable

Disclosure Statement

The authors declare that there are no relevant conflicts of interest related to this research

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to privacy reasons.

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Notes on Contributors

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