



ECO-FATWAS AND THE CHALLENGES FOR LOCAL ‘*ULAMA*’ IN ADDRESSING ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN INDONESIA: EVIDENCE FROM RIAU PROVINCE

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Yudi Latif

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*Ansori, Muhammad Iqbal Juliansyahzen, &
Hijrian Angga Prihantoro*

Eco-Fatwas and the Challenges for Local ‘*Ulamā*’ in Addressing Environmental Issues in Indonesia: Evidence from Riau Province

Abstract: *Despite its abundant natural resources, Riau Province confronts significant challenges, notably forest fires attributed to agricultural practices and land conversion for palm oil cultivation. This article seeks to examine the difficulties encountered by local ‘ulamā’ in addressing environmental issues within Riau Province. The study employs a socio-legal framework to elucidate the responses of local ‘ulamā’ to these challenges, particularly through the application of religious teachings, referred to as eco-fatwas, to comprehend and address the environmental problems prevalent within the region. Utilizing a methodological approach that incorporates in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis, the study concludes that the eco-fatwas disseminated by local ‘ulamā’ confront complex challenges, including economic competition, political interests, sectoral egos, and power hegemony. Consequently, this research emphasizes the necessity for the concurrent implementation of cross-community and cross-policy da’wah strategies to effectively mitigate environmental degradation in Riau Province.*

Keywords: Eco-Fatwas, Local ‘*Ulamā*’, Environmental Issue, Riau Province, Indonesian Context.

Abstrak: Meskipun memiliki sumber daya alam yang melimpah, Provinsi Riau menghadapi persoalan yang serius, terutama kebakaran hutan yang disebabkan oleh praktik pertanian dan alih fungsi lahan untuk budidaya kelapa sawit. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji kendala-kendala yang dihadapi oleh ulama lokal dalam menangani masalah lingkungan di Provinsi Riau. Penelitian ini menggunakan kerangka sosio-legal untuk menjelaskan bagaimana respons ulama lokal terhadap tantangan-tantangan tersebut, terutama melalui penerapan ajaran agama yang disebut fatwa ekologis (eco-fatwas). Dengan pendekatan metodologis yang menggabungkan wawancara mendalam, observasi lapangan, dan analisis dokumen, penelitian ini menemukan bahwa fatwa ekologi yang didesiminasikan oleh ulama lokal menghadapi berbagai tantangan kompleks, seperti persaingan ekonomi, kepentingan politik, ego sektoral, dan hegemoni kekuasaan. Secara praktis, penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya penerapan strategi dakwah lintas komunitas dan lintas kebijakan secara bersamaan untuk dapat secara efektif menanggulangi degradasi lingkungan di Provinsi Riau.

Kata kunci: Fatwa Ekologis, Ulama Lokal, Isu Lingkungan, Provinsi Riau, Konteks Keindonesiaan.

ملخص: على الرغم من الموارد الطبيعية الوفيرة التي تتمتع بها، تواجه مقاطعة رياو (Riau) تحديات كبيرة، لا سيما حرائق الغابات الناتجة عن الممارسات الزراعية وتحويل الأراضي لزراعة نخيل الزيت. تهدف هذه المقالة إلى دراسة الصعوبات التي يواجهها العلماء المحليون في معالجة القضايا البيئية في مقاطعة رياو (Riau). تعتمد الدراسة على إطار اجتماعي - قانوني لتوضيح استجابات العلماء المحليين لهذه التحديات، خصوصاً من خلال تطبيق التعاليم الدينية المعروفة بالفتاوى البيئية، لفهم ومعالجة المشاكل البيئية السائدة في المنطقة. باستخدام منهجية تجمع بين المقابلات المتعمقة، والملاحظات الميدانية، وتحليل الوثائق، توصلت الدراسة إلى أن الفتاوى البيئية التي يصدرها العلماء المحليون تواجه تحديات معقدة، تشمل المنافسة الاقتصادية، المصالح السياسية، الأثنية القطاعية، وهيمنة السلطة. وبالتالي، تؤكد هذه الدراسة على ضرورة تنفيذ استراتيجيات دعوية عبر المجتمعات والسياسات بشكل متزامن للتخفيف من تدهور البيئة في مقاطعة رياو (Riau) بفعالية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الفتاوى البيئية، العلماء المحليون، القضايا البيئية، مقاطعة رياو (Riau)، السياق الإندونيسي.

Indonesia, known for its abundant natural resources, is regarded as one of the most resource-diverse countries. However, the 2022 Environmental Performance Index (EPI) report indicates that Indonesia's environmental conservation efforts are insufficient on a global scale, within the Asia-Pacific region, and even among ASEAN nations. Globally, Indonesia ranks 164th out of 180 countries evaluated. In the Asia-Pacific region, it ranks 22nd out of 25 countries, and within ASEAN, it holds 8th position out of 10 member states (Environmental Performance Index 2022, 2022). Located in the Sumatra region, Riau Province is recognized as one of areas in Indonesia rich in natural resources. Despite its substantial natural potential, Riau faces significant environmental challenges, particularly concerning escalating environmental degradation. Riau is among the wealthiest provinces in Indonesia, covering an area of 87,023.66 square kilometers and possessing abundant natural resources, including petroleum, rubber, palm oil, natural gas, and fiber plantations (Rahmatullah 2012). It is distinguished for its extensive tropical forests and valuable peatland ecosystems. These forests provide essential habitats for numerous endangered species and are integral to the regulation of both regional and global climates. Regrettably, in recent years, they have experienced significant degradation, primarily due to deforestation and widespread forest fires (W. Utami et al. 2018). Such practices not only jeopardize wildlife conservation and the sustainability of ecosystems but also contribute to greenhouse gas emissions that exacerbate global climate change. This province is particularly susceptible to forest fires, with over 135,000 hectares identified as fire-prone areas (Ramadhi et al. 2023).

The phenomenon of environmental degradation in Riau Province has been the subject of extensive research conducted from various perspectives and dimensions. Initially, several case studies have been undertaken to delineate the causes of environmental degradation in this region (Mulyadi 2002). These investigations have identified primary factors contributing to environmental degradation in Riau, including deforestation resulting from forest fires, illegal logging activities, and the conversion of peatlands for oil palm cultivation and other agricultural purposes. Subsequently, socio-economic studies have explored the ramifications of environmental degradation on the social fabric of the Riau community (Anhar, Mardiana, and Sita 2022; Devita and Tarumun 2012; Riyanto 2015). The findings from these studies

indicate that environmental degradation, manifested through the loss of wildlife habitats, deteriorating water quality, and recurrent forest fires, has precipitated social conflicts related to human resources and has adversely affected the livelihoods of local populations. Furthermore, normative research has evaluated environmental degradation in Riau from a policy and regulatory standpoint (Johar, Daeng, and Manihuruk 2022; Nisa and Suharno 2020; Ukas 2019). These works scrutinize the efficacy of local government policies and regulations aimed at mitigating environmental degradation, with particular emphasis on identifying deficiencies in policy implementation and proposing potential enhancements. Lastly, research focusing on the right to a healthy environment underscores the necessity for local communities in Riau to actively engage in the realization of their right to a healthy environment (Dinie, Imamulhadi, and Yulinda 2019; P. N. Utami and Primawardani 2021).

In contrast to the previous studies, this research adopts a socio-legal approach to examine the involvement of local *‘ulamā’* in addressing environmental degradation in Riau Province. The objective of this approach is to elucidate how local ulama utilize Islamic legal discourse, particularly in relation to environmental fatwas, to respond to and navigate environmental challenges in the region. The selection of a socio-legal framework is justified as it enables a critical analysis of the obstacles encountered by the Indonesian Ulema Council in Riau (MUI Riau) and the strategies employed to disseminate environmental fatwas within public spheres, thereby facilitating effective communication and fostering acceptance among local communities in Riau Province. By employing a socio-legal perspective, this study aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of the role of local ulama in addressing environmental degradation through environmental fatwas, highlighting the influence of religious values on environmental conservation efforts. Additionally, the findings of this research may offer valuable insights into potential strategies for enhancing environmental conservation initiatives.

This study employed a qualitative methodology, interpreting the collected data through a socio-legal lens. In addition, an interpretive paradigm (Creswell and Poth 2018) was used to elucidate how local *‘ulamā’*, as social actors, navigated multidimensional constraints, particularly in relation to selected case studies concerning their ecological

fatwas. The socio-legal approach was utilized to examine several dimensions within the context of this research. Firstly, it demonstrated the relationship discourse between eco-fatwas and environmental degradation in Riau Province. Secondly, it analyzed the perspectives of local *'ulamā'* regarding Islamic jurisprudence paradigm in addressing environmental issue in Riau Province. Lastly, the study elucidated the challenges faced by environmental fatwas disseminated by local *'ulamā'* in raising awareness among the Riau community about the significance of environmental preservation and the avoidance of actions detrimental to the environment in Riau Province.

Data for this study were collected through a multifaceted approach that included observation, interviews, and documentation (Mack et al. 2005). The researchers conducted direct observations in the field by visiting Riau Province for several days in August 2023, as detailed in the observation notes. Furthermore, in-depth interviews were conducted, consisting of eight questions directed at various individuals. To mitigate potential conflicts of interest with informants, we employed coding as an ethical safeguard in this research, categorizing participants as the Chairman of the MUI for Riau Province (CMR), the Chairman of the Fatwa Commission (CFC), regional officials (RO), scholars (SC), traditional leaders (TL), and members of the local community (MLC). Documentation efforts were also undertaken to collect materials that substantiate the primary focus of the study, including images, academic journals, and interview notes.

Data analysis in this study employed triangulation, which encompasses data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Santos et al. 2020). Data reduction involved a rigorous selection process, concentrating on information that was directly pertinent to the core topic of the study. The presentation of data was executed in the form of narratives, direct quotations, and the inclusion of images obtained throughout the research process. Finally, the conclusions drawn in this study were formulated objectively through inductive reasoning. The objectivity of the conclusions is grounded in critically analyzed data, which is narrated hierarchically from general to specific aspects.

Eco-Fatwas and Environmental Degradation in Riau Province

The term *eco-fatwas* is a neologism that combines the concepts of ecology and fatwa (Begon, Townsend, and Harper 2012). Ecology, in

its simplest definition, refers to the study of the interactions between living organisms and their environment, as well as the reciprocal influences among them. This field encompasses the interactions of organisms with various abiotic factors, such as soil, water, air, and weather, as well as biotic components, including plants, animals, and microorganisms within an ecosystem. Understanding ecology is crucial for comprehending the functioning of ecosystems, assessing the impacts of environmental changes on organisms, and promoting sustainable human interactions with nature (Orr 2002). Consequently, ecology is a vital area of study for maintaining ecosystem balance and supporting the conservation of natural resources. As for *fatwa* (s.: *fatwā*; p.: *fatāwā*), etymologically, it means explanation or clarification (*al-ibānah*). The origin of the word *fatwa* comes from Arabic, rooted in the letters ف ت ي, which convey the notion of making a decision or providing an assessment. In a literal sense, a *fatwa* can be understood as an explanation or a legal decision (Agrama 2010). Within the context of religious terminology, a *fatwa* refers to a legal decision (*iftā*) issued by an authorized authority in response to inquiries (*istiftā*) posed by individuals seeking guidance. The authority responsible for issuing a *fatwa* is termed a *muftī*, while the individual who requests a *fatwa* by posing questions is referred to as a *mustaftī* (Ash-Shalah 1986). In the domain of Islamic jurisprudence, a *mufti* is recognized as an expert in religious sciences, particularly those pertaining to Islamic law.

In light of the aforementioned definition, eco-fatwas are religious edicts promulgated by Islamic scholars that address environmental and ecological issues. These fatwas offer guidance on the conduct of Muslims concerning environmental conservation and sustainable practices, in alignment with Islamic principles and teachings (Foltz, Denny, and Baharuddin 2003). Environmental fatwas encompass a broad spectrum of topics, including the conservation of natural resources, the protection of wildlife, responsible land use, and the ethical treatment of animals. Additionally, they may tackle issues related to pollution, waste management, and sustainable agriculture from an Islamic perspective. The significance of these fatwas lies in their ability to integrate environmental concerns with Islamic ethics, thereby providing a framework for Muslims to make environmentally responsible decisions in their daily lives and activities (Jenkins 2005). Furthermore, environmental fatwas are often perceived as a means to

foster ecological awareness and action within the Muslim community, while simultaneously aligning environmental management with Islamic values. Typically, these fatwas are issued by religious authorities or esteemed scholars who possess expertise in the domains of fiqh and environmental studies.

In the classical era, a mufti was typically regarded as an individual possessing extensive knowledge of Islamic law and capable of representing the viewpoint of a specific school of Islamic jurisprudence (*madhab*) (Masud, Messick, and Powers 1996). However, with the emergence of the nation-state concept, the role of the mufti transitioned from being embodied by a singular figure to being institutionalized within religious organizations comprised of various experts (Awass 2023). This evolution not only signifies a shift from an individualistic to an institutional framework but also reflects a transformation in the methodology of issuing fatwas between the classical and modern periods. In the classical era, a fatwa could be issued directly by an expert based on personal reasoning (*al-ijtihād al-fardī*). Conversely, in the contemporary era characterized by nation-states, the issuance of fatwas involves a collaborative effort among experts from diverse backgrounds and academic disciplines (*al-ijtihād al-jamā'ī*). This collective approach seeks to facilitate a more comprehensive and consensus-driven decision-making process to effectively address the intricate contemporary issues within the context of Islamic jurisprudence (Ad-Dardiriy 2015).

In Indonesia, the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) serves as an institution that offers protection, guidance, and responses to religious and socio-cultural issues, including those pertaining to the environment (Bagir 2015). Historical analyses by Mangunjaya and Praharawati provide a comprehensive overview of the advocacy efforts and struggles undertaken by the Indonesian Muslim community in addressing pressing environmental concerns. They assert that the Muslim community has been actively engaged in environmental movements since the 1980s. The participation of *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) leaders in motivating their communities, alongside the involvement of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in community empowerment, particularly in the areas of environmental restoration and agriculture, has proven to be highly significant. Following the declaration of the Bogor Muslim Action for Climate Change in 2010, the MUI established the Environment and Natural Resources Institute (PLHSDA) in 2011

during its National Conference. The role of this unit within the MUI is crucial, as it is specifically tasked with addressing various critical environmental issues, thereby providing Muslims with authoritative responses to environmental challenges (Mangunjaya and Praharawati 2019).

As a clerical body in a country with the largest Muslim population in the world, the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) serves as a significant institution with the authority to issue fatwas. MUI has demonstrated a strong commitment to environmental issues through various fatwas pertaining to environmental conservation in Indonesia (Gade 2015). At the time of this research, there were at least eight fatwas addressing environmental themes. These fatwas encompass a diverse array of pertinent topics, including water recycling (MUI Fatwa No. 02/2010), environmentally sustainable mining practices (MUI Fatwa 2011), the improper use of formalin and other hazardous substances in fish handling and management (MUI Fatwa No. 43/2012), the conservation of endangered species to maintain ecosystem balance (MUI Fatwa No. 04/2014), waste management to mitigate environmental damage (MUI Fatwa No. 47/2014), the allocation of *zakat*, *infak*, *sedekah*, and *waqf* funds for the development of clean water and sanitation infrastructure for communities (MUI Fatwa 01/Munas-IX/MUI/2015), the legality and regulation of forest and land burning (MUI Fatwa No. 30/2016), and guidelines for organizing tourism in accordance with sharia principles (Fatwa No. 108/DSN-MUI/X/2016) (Izmuddin et al. 2022). Nevertheless, the practical implementation of environmental conservation measures and the preservation of Indonesia's natural resources continue to encounter significant challenges in practice.

One of the significant ecological challenges confronting the inhabitants of Riau Province is deforestation. Forest and land fires represent a type of disaster that may be instigated by either natural phenomena or anthropogenic activities. The primary causes of these fires can be classified into two categories: ignition sources and contributing factors. Natural ignition sources may include phenomena such as lightning strikes, volcanic eruptions, or the friction of dry branches. However, such occurrences are infrequent in Indonesia, primarily due to the presence of humid tropical rainforests (Anhar, Mardiana, and Sita 2022; Ramadhi et al. 2023). The majority of forest and land fires that frequently transpire in Indonesia are, in fact, attributable to

human actions or intentional motives (W. Utami et al. 2018). In the context of Riau Province, the prevalence of these fires is often linked to entities wielding considerable power, which complicates efforts to address the issue effectively. The extensive and rapid expansion of land by corporations through the burning of forests and peatlands has dire and catastrophic implications for the stability of ecosystems (observation notes 2023).

A study conducted by the International Council on Clean Transportation (ICCT) suggests that by 2030, oil palm plantations in Riau Province are projected to encompass approximately 23% of the total peatland area. However, empirical evidence indicates that the actual expansion of oil palm plantations has surpassed this estimate, particularly within Riau Province. An analysis performed by Pantau Gambut reveals that approximately 1.5 million hectares of the total 4.7 million hectares designated for Land Use Rights (HGU), along with a 1 km buffer zone, are predominantly occupied by oil palm plantations (W. Utami et al. 2017). Consequently, the actual coverage of HGU areas by oil palm plantations has reached around 33% of the total peatland area in Riau Province, exceeding the ICCT's predictions. Furthermore, there are concessions associated with Timber Forest Product Utilization Business Permits (IUPHHK) and a 1 km buffer zone that covers an area of 1.8 million hectares, representing approximately 39% of the total peatland area in Riau Province. This extensive area positions Riau Province as one of the regions with the largest IUPHHK concessions in Indonesia, particularly within the Industrial Plantation Forest (HTI) category, which is the most significant category in the country (Ramadhi et al. 2023, 20). The substantial increase in palm oil production in Indonesia and Southeast Asia has raised considerable concerns, as this growth is frequently linked to deforestation and other detrimental environmental impacts, thereby posing challenges to the sustainability of the region for future generations (Saxon et al. 2011).

The persistent issue of forest fires, particularly during the dry season, has prompted initiatives aimed at the early detection of potential fire outbreaks. The Riau region is characterized by extensive peatland, encompassing approximately 4.04 million hectares, which constitutes around 56.1% of the total peatland on the island of Sumatra. Consequently, this area is highly susceptible to fire risks. The forest and land fires that occurred in 2015, including those in Riau, represented

the most severe fire incidents in the past 18 years, leading to significant air pollution levels across several Southeast Asian nations. In response to this challenge, various strategies have been implemented to detect fires by utilizing multiple parameters, including fire presence, temperature, air humidity, smoke, and soil moisture. This detection system can be integrated with the Internet of Things (IoT) framework and connected to a web server, thereby enabling users to monitor land conditions in real time (Irawan, Muzawi, and Alamsyah 2022).



Figure 1. The portrayal of forest fires and the visual documentation of their impacts captured through a drone (personal documentation of the research team).

Religious Perspectives of Local ‘*Ulamā*’ on Environmental Issues in Riau Province

Environmental fatwas, according to CMR, represent a practical initiative that has emerged from the discourse surrounding Islamic ecological law, or *fiqh al-bi’ah*. This concept pertains to an approach within Islamic jurisprudence that specifically addresses environmental concerns. It aims to apply Islamic religious principles to tackle environmental challenges and to establish guidelines for how Muslims should engage with nature and ensure the sustainability of existing ecosystems. The development of ecological *fiqh* can be understood as the interpretation of Islamic principles by scholars in relation to

environmental issues. This scholarly discourse serves as a response to the necessity for Muslim scholars to reconcile religious teachings with the urgent environmental challenges faced in contemporary society (Schuler 2014).

In the context of this discourse, contemporary scholars, including Jamaluddin 'Athiyyah, recognize environmental issues as significant challenges. The preservation of the environment is deemed a critical objective of sharia, which must be operationalized within the frameworks of state and local governance ('Athiyyah 2001). In this regard, the role of ulama, as articulated by CFC, involves the formulation of ecological fatwas through established fatwa institutions. The *maqāṣid* approach serves as a comprehensive and pertinent methodology for addressing ecological challenges in Indonesia. This framework can function as a guiding or analytical structure for the development of ecological fatwa. Mufid posits that the ecological fatwa, which is derived from the *maqāṣid* framework, is referred to as *maqāṣidī* fatwa. This model underscores the integration of inductive and deductive methods, which may also be characterized as integrative-holistic *ijtihād* reasoning (Mufid 2022).

The ecological *fiqh* articulated by contemporary Muslim scholars presents a specific framework that focuses on addressing and analyzing issues related to environmental degradation. However, from the perspectives of CMR and CFC, ecological *fiqh* is regarded as a derivative component of the broader theory of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, particularly concerning the preservation of life (*ḥifẓ al-nafs*). The concept of *ḥifẓ al-nafs* is associated with one of the five primary objectives (*maqāṣid*) within Islamic law (*sharī'ah*). *Maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* serves as an extensive framework in Islamic legal thought, emphasizing sustainability and human well-being as central tenets of the law (Qaḥṭhānī 1436). Alongside the objectives of preserving religion (*ḥifẓ al-dīn*), progeny (*ḥifẓ al-nasl*), reason (*ḥifẓ al-'aql*), and property (*ḥifẓ al-māl*), *ḥifẓ al-nafs* constitutes one of the five fundamental objectives (Al-Ghazālī 2011). Through the articulation of *ḥifẓ al-nafs*, Islamic jurisprudence seeks to underscore that the preservation and protection of human life is a fundamental spiritual and ethical principle that must be prioritized (Nur, Adam, and Muttaqien 2020). This concept positions the safeguarding of human life as a paramount concern within the framework of Islamic law.

In the context of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, the concept of *ḥifẓ al-nafs* pertains to the objective of preserving and safeguarding human life.

Within the framework of ecological *fiqh*, *ḥifẓ al-naḥs* encompasses several dimensions. Firstly, it addresses health-related issues. The sustainability of the environment and the protection of ecosystems significantly contribute to human health, as individuals cannot maintain a healthy existence without a sound natural environment (Mohidem and Hashim 2023). Secondly, it involves protection from dangers and threats. Environmental degradation and pollution represent behaviors that can directly jeopardize human life, as their consequences pose a threat to human survival (Bsoul et al. 2022). Thirdly, it pertains to the fulfillment of human rights. Environmental harm and pollution can obstruct the realization of fundamental human rights (P. N. Utami and Primawardani 2021). Actions that damage the environment adversely affect the right to a healthy environment, which is crucial for human well-being. Lastly, it relates to crime prevention. Environmental destruction constitutes a form of criminal behavior that contravenes the fundamental principles of Islamic law; therefore, such actions are intolerable and must be met with stringent penalties (Ouis 1998).

Malay society, as articulated by TL and RO, is guided by a social motto encapsulated in the phrases “a bundle of three ropes” and “a three-legged furnace,” which symbolize social cohesion through the concept of “three.” This triad comprises Muslim scholars (*‘ulamā*), rulers (*umara’*), and traditional leaders (*ninik mamak*). As emphasized by the CFC, these three entities must collaborate effectively in disseminating ecological fatwas to address the pressing issues of environmental degradation in Riau Province. To gain insights into the perspectives of local *‘ulamā*, the research team posed a conceptual inquiry regarding the Riau MUI’s interpretation of the aforementioned Environmental Performance Index (EPI) report through the lens of *maqāṣid al-sharī‘ah*. Specifically, the inquiry sought to determine whether the Riau MUI considers the matter of environmental preservation in contemporary Indonesia to be of urgent significance (*ḍarūri*). In addressing this inquiry, CMR categorized the issue into two dimensions: general and specific.

The first dimension pertains to environmental issues on a national scale. Based on the research findings reported by the EPI, CMR asserts that the report’s explicit mention of all environmental problems occurring across various regions of the country. Through textual analysis, CMR concurs that environmental issues in Indonesia can be

regarded as urgent (*darūri*). This designation implies that these issues represent a collective concern that necessitates critical and serious attention from all stakeholders, ranging from the central government to local communities. In a discursive context, mapping the status of *darūri* environmental issues in Indonesia aims to enhance public awareness regarding the potential negative impacts on future generations if ecological issues are not promptly addressed. The natural wealth and sustainable environment currently observed may face threats of extinction, thereby depriving future generations of their benefits. The second dimension focuses on environmental issues specific to the Riau region. CMR emphasizes that these issues must be distinguished and assessed separately from the broader environmental concerns affecting Indonesia as a whole. According to CMR, the environmental issues in the Riau region do not warrant the classification of urgency (*darūri*). This assertion is supported by the observation that the Riau provincial government, in collaboration with religious leaders and traditional figures, has made significant strides in mitigating environmental damage in Riau Province in recent years (interview notes 2023).

The explanation of CMR presented above is corroborated by CFC and TL which highlight that the environmental degradation experienced in Riau in recent years, particularly in the form of forest fires, has been effectively addressed and managed. The issue of forest fires in Riau Province, which previously garnered national and international attention, has not recurred in recent years. This improvement can be attributed to the collaborative efforts of various stakeholders, including local governments, religious organizations, traditional leaders, and local communities, who have effectively united in their response to and management of environmental damage in Riau Province. SC and RO assert that one of the key factors contributing to the absence of large-scale forest fires in Riau Province is the implementation of a program and the utilization of technological tools capable of detecting hotspots, thereby facilitating early intervention to prevent potential forest fires (interview notes 2023).

Ecological fatwas underscore the significance of environmental preservation as a religious obligation, associating the safeguarding of nature with the principle of *maṣlahat*, or the common good. Within the framework of Islamic law, CFC asserts that the concept of *maṣlahat* highlights the necessity of preventing harm (*mafsadat*) and fostering

benefits for all living entities. Consequently, environmental degradation, including deforestation, pollution, and climate change, is perceived not merely as economic or social challenges but also as ethical and spiritual transgressions that disturb the equilibrium of God's creation (Bacchus 2020). CMR states that fatwas addressing environmental issues play a crucial role in educating individuals about their responsibilities toward the Earth. For instance, numerous fatwas issued by international scholars explicitly prohibit the waste of natural resources and advocate for a reduction in excessive consumption of energy and plastic, considering their detrimental effects on long-term environmental sustainability. These fatwas not only promote modifications in individual behavior but also encourage the formulation of public policies grounded in the principles of sustainability and environmental justice (Mohamed 2012). This approach underscores the notion that environmental preservation constitutes a form of reverence that fosters a closer relationship with the divine by honoring His creation (Kamali 2012). Within the context of the common good, actions aimed at safeguarding the environment, such as minimizing pollution, conserving forests, and promoting recycling, are framed as moral and collective responsibilities. Ecological fatwas serve to remind individuals of their duty to advocate for the common good, which transcends mere material interests and encompasses the enduring welfare of future generations (interview notes 2023).

In addressing environmental damage in Riau Province, CMR believes that the implementation of eco-fatwas can play a crucial role in raising public awareness about the importance of environmental protection. This belief stems from the societal norms in Riau that are deeply influenced by religious values encapsulated in the adage, "*adat basandi syara, syara' basandi kitabullah*." This phrase highlights the close connection between local customs and Islamic teachings, where societal traditions are always grounded in Islamic law, which in turn is derived from the book of Allah, the Qur'an (Wimra 2017). For the people of Riau, this principle is not merely symbolic but represents a guiding philosophy that shapes their daily behavior and decision-making, including matters related to the environment. As emphasized by CFC and MLC, this adage functions not only as a religious guide but also as a reflection of the harmony between social norms and Islamic values that permeate all aspects of communal life. According to RO, this principle plays a key role in establishing a strong socio-religious framework and

serves as the primary reference for everyday conduct. Consequently, eco-fatwas, which are rooted in these religious values, have significant potential to be widely accepted and effective in tackling the challenges of environmental degradation in Riau, encouraging greater community engagement in environmental sustainability.

In the context of the relationship between religious leaders, traditional leaders, and the government, the people of Riau adhere to a life philosophy expressed in the adage “*seikat tiga tali*” or “*setungku tiga kaki*,” as stated by TL and SC. This saying refers to three main actors who play crucial roles in organizing the region’s diverse and multicultural social life: ulama (religious scholars), traditional leaders, and the government. The ulama represent the religious dimension, traditional leaders embody the cultural dimension, and the government reflects the governance dimension. These three actors are seen as pillars that maintain the balance and harmony of society. According to local ulama, environmental degradation in Riau Province can only be effectively addressed through intensive collaboration between these three parties. The ulama, traditional leaders, and the government must commit to working together synergistically to tackle and resolve environmental issues. This collaboration involves drafting policies, raising public awareness, and monitoring violations. In this regard, their joint efforts are deemed essential for creating sustainable solutions to preserve the environment. Thus, the philosophy of “*seikat tiga tali*” or “*setungku tiga kaki*” serves as a strong foundation for collective efforts in addressing the environmental challenges in Riau Province (interview notes 2023).

Local ‘Ulamā’ and the Challenges of Eco-Fatwas Implementation: A Socio-Legal Analysis

In the realm of socio-religious life, religious authorities frequently encounter the predominance of more powerful economic and political entities. This illustrates that power dynamics in contemporary society are increasingly influenced by the possession of economic resources and political authority (Lambek 1990). In practical terms, those who wield economic power and can exert political influence tend to have a greater impact on social decisions and public policies, including those pertaining to religious values (Bozeman 2017). Consequently, this situation results in the marginalization of religious authorities, who are traditionally regarded as custodians of community morals, often relegating them

to a role of formal legitimacy without substantial authority in shaping policies and influencing daily practices. This condition illustrates that economic power significantly influences the formulation of social norms within society. With the advancement of capitalism and globalization, economic authorities possess the capacity to shape societal preferences, lifestyles, and values, frequently at the expense of traditional values upheld by religious institutions (Martikainen and Gauthier 2013). In numerous instances, critical societal decisions tend to prioritize economic interests over moral guidance offered by religion. Consequently, society frequently encounters a dilemma between embracing economic values that yield material benefits and adhering to religious values that emphasize spirituality and social virtue (interview notes 2023).

The implementation of environmental fatwas, or eco-fatwas, in Riau Province encounters a range of intricate challenges, particularly when analyzed through the lens of socio-legal studies. The environmental fatwas issued by the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) address several critical issues, including waste management, the conservation of endangered species, and the prohibition of forest burning. While these fatwas are intended to promote environmentally responsible behavior within the community, activities that are detrimental to the environment, such as land clearing for oil palm plantations, are frequently perceived as more financially advantageous. Consequently, various community groups and business actors exhibit reluctance to embrace the sustainability principles outlined in the fatwas. Moreover, the influence of politics plays a significant role in the implementation of environmental fatwas, as local government policies often intersect or even conflict with the environmental conservation ethos advocated by local *'ulamā'*. Additionally, sectoral influences and power hegemony further complicate the situation. Stakeholders in specific sectors may possess divergent interests, prioritizing profit over a commitment to environmental sustainability. As a result, the efforts to implement eco-fatwas face considerable challenges, as they must navigate sectoral interests and entrenched practices. Ultimately, the implementation of eco-fatwas in practice is frequently obstructed by a multitude of factors that extend beyond normative considerations, being profoundly shaped by economic, political, sectoral dynamics, and the hegemony of power.

RO and CMR assert that one of the primary challenges in the implementation of eco-fatwas is the presence of intense economic competition, particularly within the palm oil industry and other sectors involved in natural resource extraction. Riau Province stands as one of Indonesia's foremost economic centers reliant on natural resources, hosting numerous large corporations engaged in mining, agriculture, and forestry. These entities possess significant economic incentives to exploit natural resources for profit maximization (van der Enden 2013). Such practices frequently conflict with the objectives of environmental preservation as outlined in the fatwas disseminated by local *'ulamā'*. A prevalent example of this conflict is the practice of forest burning to clear land for agricultural purposes, which, while deemed more cost-effective for the palm oil sector, inflicts considerable harm on the environment. Economic pressures stemming from the global demand for commodities such as palm oil, rubber, and timber have led many industry stakeholders to overlook critical aspects of environmental sustainability (Sheil 2009). The escalating competition within the economic landscape has prompted these stakeholders to prioritize immediate financial returns over long-term environmental stewardship. The influence of international markets can either promote the adoption of more sustainable practices or intensify environmental degradation, contingent upon market demand and the relevant regulatory frameworks (Colombijn 1998). Consequently, the commitment to enforcing environmental fatwas that emphasize sustainability principles has diminished in the face of overwhelming economic interests.

Political interests significantly impede the implementation of eco-fatwas, particularly in Riau Province. Within the framework of socio-legal studies, it is evident that laws and policies do not operate in isolation; rather, they are shaped by the political dynamics involving various actors with distinct agendas (interview notes 2023). Ideally, according to TL and MLC, local and central governments should serve as the primary facilitators in the enforcement of environmental fatwas; however, they frequently encounter diverse political pressures. In political contexts, stakeholders and local governments may exhibit varying levels of knowledge and commitment, which can lead to reluctance in enforcing stringent environmental policies (Pirard et al. 2017). This hesitance is often influenced by economically motivated entities that possess robust political networks. The political interests,

predominantly originating from industrial sectors such as palm oil plantations and mining, wield considerable political power that can sway government policy decisions (Rahmatullah 2012). Furthermore, political events, such as general elections at both local and national levels, often reveal how politicians may be compelled to negotiate with environmental offenders to secure financial backing or votes from specific constituencies. Both environmental and business interests have borne substantial costs directly attributable to the delays caused by extended environmental litigation and regulatory reviews (Susskind and Weinstein 1980). Consequently, this dynamic undermines the effectiveness of environmental policies grounded in fatwas, as governments tend to prioritize politically expedient actions over the enforcement of regulations that could potentially diminish their political support.

The phenomenon of egosectoralism, for CFC and SC, represents a significant barrier to the effective implementation of eco-fatwas in Riau Province. The term of various sectors, whether governmental, industrial, or societal, to prioritize their individual interests without regard for the broader environmental implications. Frequently, government agencies tasked with the management of natural resources exhibit poor coordination in the execution of eco-fatwas. However, local *'ulamā'* comprehend that fatwas do not possess absolute legal authority and are not necessarily binding for absolute enforcement in the public sphere (interview notes 2023). For instance, according to RO and TL, the forestry sector may hold divergent perspectives and interests compared to the agriculture or energy sectors concerning the management of natural resources. This divergence results in a lack of coherence in the execution of environmental policies. Consequently, eco-fatwas disseminated by local *'ulamā'* pertaining to environmental conservation face challenges in achieving effective implementation (interview notes 2023). Each sector's distinct priorities and agendas often conflict with the overarching objectives of nature conservation. The pursuit of sectoral ego interests aimed at achieving short-term profits may lead to environmentally harmful practices, including the extensive conversion of forests into agricultural land for oil palm plantation (Eyes on the Forest 2016). Such actions can precipitate fires and cause substantial environmental degradation (Juniyanti and Situmorang 2023). Therefore, in accord with CMR's view, without strong harmonization and

collaboration among sectors, the implementation of eco-fatwas is likely to be obstructed and suboptimal.

Additionally, the hegemony of power constitutes a critical element in the socio-legal analysis concerning the implementation of eco-fatwas in Riau Province. This hegemony, in alignment with RO and CFC experiences, denotes the dominance exerted by specific groups or individuals in shaping policies that significantly affect society. In Riau, the influence of political and economic elites is particularly pronounced in determining the trajectory of policy, including those pertaining to the environment (Amri and Rianto 2018). Despite the clear moral foundation and conservation objectives of the eco-fatwas issued by the local *'ulamā*', their implementation frequently encounters obstacles posed by prevailing economic and political forces (interview notes 2023). Elites with access to power often leverage their influence to perpetuate practices that are detrimental to the environment, justifying such actions as essential for economic development and regional advancement (Root 2016). In this context, decisions regarding natural resource management are frequently driven by short-term interests that favor specific groups, rather than by considerations of long-term environmental and societal repercussions (Shipman, Edmunds, and Turner 2018). Consequently, the strong hegemony of power complicates the optimal realization of eco-fatwas, as environmental concerns are often marginalized in favor of the greater economic and political advantages sought by the ruling elite (Newell 2012).

The primary principle articulated by the informants is that the environmental degradation observed in Riau Province is not a manifestation of divine will, but rather a consequence of human activities (interview notes 2023). Consequently, they assert that tangible efforts are required, rather than merely invoking prayers for rain (*istisqā'*). The phenomenon of ecological damage, as supported by the quantitative data presented in the preceding sub-theme, is predominantly attributed to the presence of large palm oil corporations. Addressing this power dynamic is challenging unless it involves entities that possess similar influence. This assertion is underscored by CMR, who states that:

“Power must be challenged by those who possess it. In this context, the president, as the individual holding the highest authority in the nation, plays a crucial role. Following President Joko Widodo's (referred to as Jokowi) visit to the forest, there was a notable absence of significant forest fires. This observation supports the assertion made by non-governmental

organizations (NGOs) that the occurrence of these fires is attributable to 'individuals in power.' Therefore, it is imperative that those in positions of authority are confronted by others who also wield power."

CMR and MLC recognize that the comprehension of environmental issues is not uniformly distributed throughout various societal strata. Diverse educational backgrounds and interests results in groups holding differing perspectives on environmental matters. CFC and TL elucidate that challenges emerge when certain factions oppose ecologically sustainable viewpoints, frequently asserting that fatwas lack legally binding authority (Johnston 2012). RO highlights that restricted access to information in underdeveloped or remote regions of the province poses a significant challenge. In instances where local communities lack the requisite knowledge or resources to manage their land in an environmentally responsible manner, degradation may ensue (Riyanto 2015). The implementation and dissemination of ecological fatwas present significant challenges, primarily due to the divergent perceptions that stem from varying interpretations of religious teachings and the cultural values upheld by different communities. Such differences in perspective can impede efforts to achieve consensus on critical environmental matters (Gade 2012). On one hand, religious teachings offer moral and ethical guidance to adherents regarding environmental protection; on the other hand, the interpretation of these teachings can differ markedly based on an individual's cultural background, education, and personal experiences. Certain groups may prioritize economic interests and rapid development (Dethier 2017), whereas others may underscore the significance of conservation and sustainability. This complexity is particularly pronounced in Riau Province, which, while rich in natural resources, grapples with severe environmental issues often exacerbated by irresponsible societal elements.

Fatwa, as a significant instrument of religious authority, is frequently perceived merely as advice or moral recommendations due to its non-legally binding nature (Agrama 2010). A fatwa is a religious opinion issued by a mufti, cleric, or a collective body, typically providing guidance on matters that have not been addressed by positive law. Fundamentally, a fatwa is a product of theological reasoning; however, it lacks binding power because it does not constitute a legal rule recognized by the state (Masud, Messick, and Powers 1996). According

to An-Na'im, fatwas and similar religious instruments are regarded as components of *da'wah*, or moral appeal, rather than as laws that govern societal conduct (An-Na'im 2008). As a result, for CMR and SC, fatwas often receive limited attention in public policy discussions and are perceived merely as forms of *da'wah* that exert no direct influence on the daily lives of individuals. This is evident in the numerous social decisions that are predominantly driven by economic and political interests (Benavides and Daly 1989), even when they contradict the values advocated by fatwas or religious authorities. For instance, in matters pertaining to trade, industry, or social policy that involve moral considerations, economic factors frequently take precedence over the ethical or moral principles proposed by religious institutions (interview notes 2023).

In discussions concerning political matters that may inflict moral harm or economic practices that adversely affect society, religious authorities frequently issue fatwas to offer guidance to the community (Ahmad 2013). These fatwas are intended to serve as ethical frameworks for addressing the moral dilemmas posed by specific economic activities. However, due to their non-binding nature, many stakeholders tend to disregard these fatwas in favor of pursuing economic advantages deemed more materially rewarding (Hamid 2014). This phenomenon illustrates the often limited influence of religious authorities when confronted with formidable economic forces, particularly when such economic activities are bolstered by substantial political power (Riaz 2010). The disparity between religious, economic, and political authority underscores the growing imbalance present in contemporary society. Religious authorities encounter significant challenges in maintaining their relevance in the face of the prevailing influence of robust economic and political forces (interview notes 2023). This situation prompts critical inquiries regarding the role of religion in upholding the moral and ethical standards of a society that is increasingly fragmented by materialistic interests. A considerable number of individuals and groups appear to prioritize economic considerations over the moral guidance traditionally offered by religious institutions. This trend prompts a critical examination of the role of religion as a moral compass in a society increasingly influenced by economic competition and materialistic pursuits (Herbert 2017). These tensions highlight the necessity for religious authorities to develop more effective strategies to

mitigate the rising impact of economic forces on the social values and norms embraced by society.

Conclusion

Local *'ulamā'* in Riau Province play a significant role in addressing issues related to environmental degradation. However, these local *'ulamā'* encounter several challenges that may impede the effective implementation of the ecological fatwas they promote in response to environmental concerns in the region. Among these challenges are economic competition among entrepreneurs, political interests among rulers, sectoral egos among elites, the hegemony of power often involving capital owners, and a general lack of understanding of environmental issues within the community. To mitigate these challenges, local *'ulamā'* in Riau Province have actively engaged in socialization efforts through a *da'wah* strategy that emphasizes education and awareness. In practice, these *'ulamā'* utilize their pulpits, religious events, and the compilation of literature to inform the community about the significance of environmental conservation as an integral aspect of Islamic teachings. Furthermore, although their efforts are not yet fully optimized, local *'ulamā'* in Riau Province also seek collaboration with environmental organizations and local governments to address environmental issues effectively. The *da'wah* approach adopted by local *'ulamā'* in Riau Province primarily prioritizes a persuasive strategy through the dissemination of ecological fatwas.

This research highlights the discursive implications that the development of eco-fatwa studies in Indonesia must consider factors beyond the content of ecological fatwas. These external matters present challenges in the effective implementation of the ecological fatwas themselves. For instance, societal attitudes, political dynamics, and economic interests can significantly influence how eco-fatwas are understood and applied in practice. This broader view emphasizes that while the fatwas provide religious guidance on environmental issues, their success depends on factors like public awareness, government support, and community engagement. The study of eco-fatwas offers a unique lens through which to explore how Islam in Indonesia addresses modern environmental challenges, demonstrating the religion's evolving role in societal problem-solving. By analyzing eco-fatwas, scholars can gain deeper insights into how Islamic jurisprudence interacts with

environmental ethics, showing how religious principles are interpreted in response to local ecological crises such as deforestation, pollution, and climate change. This critical perspective reveals the flexibility and adaptability of Islamic teachings in addressing real-world issues, particularly in a diverse country like Indonesia, where environmental degradation threatens both local communities and the broader ecosystem.

This study acknowledges several limitations. A primary shortcoming is the insufficient empirical data, as the research predominantly relies on a literature review and a conceptual framework to elucidate the initiatives undertaken by local ulama in mitigating environmental degradation in Riau Province. Consequently, the findings are contextually bound to Riau Province, which hampers the ability to generalize these results to other regions within Indonesia. Future research endeavors should aim to broaden the geographical scope and offer more profound insights by engaging relevant stakeholders. From a geographical standpoint, comparative studies involving other regions in Indonesia or even international contexts are warranted to better understand the role of ulama in addressing environmental challenges across diverse settings. Additionally, in combating environmental degradation, a multistakeholder approach is essential to investigate the perspectives and contributions of various entities, including civil society, governmental bodies, environmental organizations, and private sector stakeholders. Such research could illuminate the social, economic, and political dynamics that shape the involvement of academics in environmental issues and the interplay of these factors. Future researchers are encouraged to consider these recommendations to yield more comprehensive and pertinent insights in the development of eco-fatwa studies aimed at addressing the challenges of environmental degradation on a broader scale.

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2. Booth, Anne. 1988. "Living Standards and the Distribution of Income in Colonial Indonesia: A Review of the Evidence." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 19(2): 310–34.
3. Feener, Michael R., and Mark E. Cammack, eds. 2007. *Islamic Law in Contemporary Indonesia: Ideas and Institutions*. Cambridge: Islamic Legal Studies Program.
4. Wahid, Din. 2014. *Nurturing Salafi Manhaj: A Study of Salafi Pesantrens in Contemporary Indonesia*. PhD dissertation. Utrecht University.
5. Utriza, Ayang. 2008. "Mencari Model Kerukunan Antaragama." *Kompas*. March 19: 59.
6. Ms. *Undhang-Undhang Banten*, L.Or.5598, Leiden University.
7. Interview with K.H. Sahal Mahfudz, Kajen, Pati, June 11th, 2007.

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