

Promoting Sustainability through Indonesian Community and Faith-Based Perspectives: Insights from the *Semesta* Documentary Film Screening

¹Ayendra Kukuh Pangesti, ^{2*}Nuryaman, ³Kartika Puji Pangesti, ⁴Hariyanto, ⁵Gabriel Nigel

^{1,2,3,4,5}The University of Sydney

*Penulis korespondensi, email: nnur0084@uni.sydney.edu.au

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Abstrak

Program pengabdian ini bertujuan untuk meningkatkan kesadaran dan pemahaman publik terhadap peran nilai budaya dan spiritual dalam mendorong pemanfaatan lingkungan yang berkelanjutan. Permasalahan utama yang diangkat adalah kecenderungan diskursus berkaitan lingkungan yang belum sepenuhnya mempromosikan peran agama, kepercayaan, dan kearifan lokal sebagai nilai-nilai yang sejatinya tidak dapat dipisahkan dari aktivitas pelestarian lingkungan. Kegiatan ini dilaksanakan melalui program edukatif bertajuk "Sound of Semesta" di University of Sydney dengan metode pemutaran film dokumenter Semesta: Island of Faith yang diikuti dengan diskusi panel. Metode pelaksanaan program mengacu pada kerangka manajemen POAC (Planning, Organizing, Actuating, and Controlling) untuk memastikan efektivitas kegiatan. Hasil kegiatan menunjukkan bahwa pendekatan berbasis budaya dan spiritual mampu memperkuat kesadaran ekologis peserta serta membuka ruang refleksi kritis mengenai keberlanjutan yang berakar pada praktik lokal masyarakat adat dan keagamaan di Indonesia. Diskusi panel menunjukkan bahwa nilai-nilai spiritual, seperti konsep khalifah, adat, dan kesakralan alam, berfungsi sebagai motivasi dalam menjaga lingkungan. Kegiatan ini juga menunjukkan pentingnya dukungan sistemik melalui kebijakan, pendidikan, dan kolaborasi multmaupun intersektor untuk memperkuat resistensi praktik lokal. Program ini juga menekankan bahwa integrasi kearifan budaya dan spiritual merupakan pendekatan strategis dalam memperkuat program keberlanjutan dan pendidikan lingkungan global. Penyelenggara program mendatang dengan film yang sama, film sebaiknya diputar sampai selesai atau per tema, diikuti dengan memfasilitasi ruang diskusi atau essay refleksi pasca kegiatan untuk meningkatkan keterampilan berpikir kritis peserta.

Kata Kunci: keberlanjutan, nilai spiritual, masyarakat adat, pengelolaan lingkungan, film dokumenter

Abstract

This community engagement program aims to enhance public awareness and understanding of how cultural and spiritual values contribute to environmental action. The primary issue addressed is the marginalisation of religious, faith-based, and cultural perspectives within dominant environmental discourses, despite their long-standing role in shaping sustainable practices across communities. The program, titled "Sound of Semesta," was conducted at the University of Sydney using a documentary screening of Semesta: Island of Faith, followed by a panel discussion. The implementation adopted the Planning, Organizing, Actuating, and Controlling (POAC) management framework to ensure effective delivery. The findings indicate that cultural and spiritual narratives significantly strengthen ecological awareness and encourage critical reflection on sustainability rooted in Indigenous and faith-based practices. Panel discussions highlighted that spiritual concepts, such as stewardship, adat law, and the sacredness of nature, serve as ethical drivers for collective environmental responsibility. The program also revealed that while local wisdom is essential, sustainable environmental practices require systemic support, including policy alignment, education, and cross-sector collaboration,

to withstand external pressures. Overall, this initiative demonstrates that integrating cultural heritage and spiritual values into environmental education offers a meaningful and inclusive pathway for addressing contemporary ecological challenges and advancing sustainable development discourse. Future events may consider screening the documentary in full or presenting it in thematic segments across multiple sessions, complemented by post-screening discussions and short reflective essays submitted by participants to deepen critical engagement.

Keywords: sustainability, spirituality, local community, environmental stewardship, documentary film

1. Introduction

In contemporary discussions of environmental protection, the role of religion, faith, and culture is often overlooked. In fact, according to Ives et al. (2024), intergenerational knowledge passed down through rituals, stories, and daily practices embodies ecological wisdom in nurturing and protecting ecosystems. By excluding this perspective, there is a risk of overlooking deeply rooted values and practices that have long contributed to environmental stewardship.

Several experts have proposed different mechanisms that explain how stewardship beliefs are linked to environmental protection. Among believers, humans are seen as caretakers of the Earth (or, in Islam, referred to as *khalifa*), and therefore it is prohibited to create destruction, as doing so may lead to God's punishment (Kadir et al., 2023; Preston & Baimel, 2021). Some religious worldviews also treat nature, species, or certain places as sacred entities, where overuse or contamination may lead to karma (in Hinduism or Buddhism, for example) and create negative repercussions for humans (Gairola, 2020).

Although there is ongoing debate about how effective religious perspectives have been in tackling the climate crisis, particularly as some spiritual communities in the United States, for example, do not believe in the climate crisis (Veldman et al., 2021) and religious countries do not necessarily perform best in climate action (Sharma et al., 2021) is still worth examining how these practices have existed for centuries and inspired generations to maintain a close relationship with nature. Indonesia, considered a religious country and rich in cultural diversity, can serve as an example of how stewardship beliefs are transformed into real actions to address the climate crisis.

Using documentary film as an approach to tell stories and spark discussion is believed to be an effective method. This approach will be used in an educational program held at the University of Sydney. The film selected is *Semesta: The Island of Faith*, directed by Chairun Nissa and produced by actor Nicholas Saputra and Mandy Marahimin. Released in 2020, the documentary follows seven individuals from different provinces in Indonesia as they attempt to reduce the impacts of global warming.

The event is titled "*Sound of Semesta*," carrying a philosophical meaning that reflects the harmony between humans and nature. In Indonesian, semesta means "the universe," and through this event, we hope to listen to the sound, the voices, wisdom, and stories of the Earth and its people who have long lived in balance with it. It symbolises an invitation to rediscover ecological consciousness through storytelling and reflection. The event aims to showcase how religion, faith, and culture from different provinces in Indonesia inspire local communities to protect their environment, while also opening discussions on how these perspectives can contribute to addressing the environmental destruction currently occurring in Indonesia.

2. Methods



Figure 1. Event Workflow

Referring to Figure 1, the implementation of the “*Sound of Semesta*” program followed the classical management framework of Planning, Organizing, Actuating, and Controlling (POAC) (Sudaryono et al., 2020), a model widely adopted across organizational and community-engagement activities to ensure goal attainment (Asni, 2025; Nitro & Abdurrahman, 2025). The entire process was designed to integrate team aspirations with the administrative requirements of SUPRA as the primary funding body.

During the planning stage, the team first joined a mandatory Induction Training Session on 4 September 2025 at the SUPRA Office. SUPRA USYD arranged this session to introduce key operational guidelines, including budgeting, scheduling, institutional bureaucracy, publications, and post-event reporting formats. After the induction, the team held weekly and incidental coordination (both offline and online) to allocate the budget, select speakers (moderators and panelists), draft the event rundown, secure venues, and prepare publication strategies.

In the organising stage, the team leader distributed the job descriptions to five divisions: Publicity, Public Relations (PR), Logistics, Catering, and Event Management. The Publicity and PR were responsible for crafting the poster and other promotion channels, followed by participation management. Meanwhile, other divisions focused on technical preparations, venue settings, and panellists' coordination and Terms of Reference (TOR) to ensure the program could run smoothly.

The actuating stage involved the implementation of the event on 23 October 2025 at Lecture Theatre 320, Susan Wakil Health Building, University of Sydney. The core activity consisted of a screening of the documentary Semesta: Islands of Faith, a panel discussion moderated by Associate Professor Novi Djenar (Department of Indonesian Studies), and contributions from two speakers: Associate Professor Jeffrey Neilson (School of Geosciences) and Nerlian Gogali (Institut Mosintuwu). The event concluded with networking sessions among participants and Indonesian traditional food refreshments. Additionally, testimonies were collected from participants, and to strengthen event exposure, post-event publication could be undertaken across eligible social media and institutions.

Furthermore, controlling functioned as a benchmark to align between planned aims and actual outcomes. Where discrepancies occurred, corrective actions (individual or collective) were implemented to enhance accountability and improve future program delivery.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Showcasing Indigenous Indonesian Approaches to Sustainability

The screening of the documentary *Semesta: Island of Faith* has been done to illustrate and explore environmental and climate change through a cultural and spiritual perspective in Indonesia. The screening highlights five provinces that represent beliefs, tradition, and local wisdom to take care of nature and respond to ecological challenges in the communities (See Figure 2). The first chapter was opened by Tjokorda Raka Kerthyasa from Bali. He highlighted Nyepi, the day of silence in Bali, when all activity holds and stops for 24 hours. Lights are turned off, people stay at home with very minimal activity, and the borders, including airports and all transportation modes. The key message of Nyepi is that giving nature a rest by reducing pollution and returning to harmony with the environment is a spiritual and traditional responsibility.

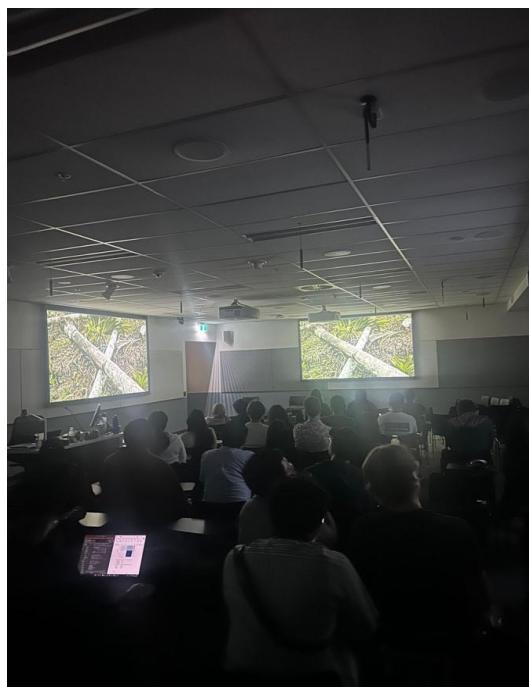


Figure 2. Documentary Film Screening Session

The second story is from West Kalimantan, which was delivered nicely by the Dayak Iban Sungai Utik community. The community is Indigenous, who protect the forest with their belief in culture (adat). The indigenous strictly protect their forest with adat law by prohibiting logging and exploitation, for them forest is the source of sustained food, water, and cultural identity. The third story came from West Nusa Tenggara (Nusa Tenggara Timur/NTT), which was presented by the rural Christian village community. The community discovers and manages small-scale hydroelectric systems powered by rivers to produce clean and sustainable electricity. The church supports this environmental activity as part of its faith. This story told us that faith can motivate practical solutions for energy challenges.

The next story is told by Islamic Environmental Stewardship from Aceh. This story highlights how the community leaders of major faiths in Indonesia take part in environmental and sustainability efforts. The faith believes that humans as khalifah (guardian) of the earth must care

for the environment as part of a moral and religious obligation. Environmental and climate action align with Islamic ethics, and protecting nature is part of worship. The last story highlighted in the screening was about how Papuan communities protect their sea and forest. The story shows how Coastal and forest-dependent Papuan Communities focus on traditional rules on fishing and resource extraction to ensure there is no damage to ecosystems. It is also shown how Papuans view nature as living relatives, not a resource, so over-exploitation leads to breaking the ancestor bonds. Because of the time limit, the sixth and seventh stories did not show in the screening time, but the audience was told how to access the full movies on their own time.

During the screening of *Semesta: Island of Faith*, participants engaged in a focused and reflective viewing experience. The room remained quiet, with participants maintaining attentive postures and sustained eye contact with the screen, indicating strong interest and concentration. Subtle non-verbal responses, such as nodding, leaning forward, and changes in facial expressions, suggested emotional and cognitive engagement with the film's narratives. Moments of silence following key scenes reflected processes of contemplation and meaning-making rather than disengagement. Interpretatively, the screening functioned not only as an informational activity but also as a contemplative space that encouraged participants to think critically about the relationship between culture, spirituality, and environmental sustainability.

Ultimately, this screening provides the basic information for further discussion about how culture and faith drive Indonesian Indigenous peoples to preserve nature and answer climate challenges. Theoretically, societies may follow religious leaders or customary laws to avoid social sanctions or out of fear of being disrespectful to ancestors, even without fully internalising the underlying moral or ecological rationale for environmental protection (Lestawi & Bunga, 2020). This initial compliance, however, remains significant, as it provides a foundation for deeper reflection and dialogue. Such screening offers basic yet critical insights for further discussion on how cultural norms and faith-based values motivate Indonesian Indigenous peoples to preserve nature and respond to contemporary climate challenges.

3.2 Demonstrating the Role of Cultural and Spiritual Values in Inspiring Environmental Action

The panel discussion (See Figure 3) that occurred after the movie screening offered a chance to reflect on how cultural and spiritual values can lead to real-world environmental action. The Panel discussion was moderated by Associate Professor Novi Djenar and Associate Professor Jeffrey Neilson in Australia, and Nerlian Gogali was present via Zoom and participated from Poso, Central Sulawesi. This panel emphasised that sustainability is more than a technical or financial issue, but is deeply embedded in communities' values, beliefs, and way of life.



Figure 3. Panel Discussion Session

Nerlian then articulated many powerful examples from Indigenous groups in Poso regarding how environmental preservation is part of their cultural heritage and connected to their spiritual beliefs. For many Indigenous cultures is viewed not as a resource to be exploited but as a living resource that must exist in a state of balance. Therefore, their perspective on spirituality transforms the definition from a "one who wishes to be sustainable," to a new meaning whereby it re-establishes the idea of "feeling enough," rather than being fulfilled through consuming more and growing. Interestingly, this concept aligns with the ethic of enough by Fricker (2002), which has been linked to individual sustainable consumption.

The panel also confirmed that spirituality plays a very important role in how environmental protection is managed locally through community ownership. Values regarding respect for the land, trees, rivers, etc., are passed down from generation to generation through customary means, community leadership, and everyday community-based activity. These values establish how religious communities practice farming and manage forests, as well as how they conduct their interactions with their environment to achieve long-lasting sustainability without formal regulation. However, the panel agreed that cultural wisdom alone is not sufficient. Sustainable practices at the grassroots level require strong systemic support. Effective governance, supportive policies, and cross-sector collaboration are necessary to protect local initiatives from external pressures such as extractive industries and unsustainable development. As suggested by Ives et al 2024, religious and cultural values should be engaged in environmental policy and research, considering four modes: (1) enabling, (2) including, (3) reflecting, and (4) shifting values and two analytical axes regarding religion's (1) social scale (individual versus collective) and (2) dynamic continuum (religion as stable versus changeable).

During the discussion session, Fachrizal, one of the participants, raised an important question about how younger generations can contribute to sustainability, especially given low environmental awareness and limited government support in Indonesia. The panel responded by highlighting the importance of education, cultural storytelling, and intergenerational dialogue. Empowering youth to reconnect with cultural and spiritual values was seen as a key pathway to sustaining environmental action in the future. Based on our evaluation, there are several areas for future improvement. We evaluated by asking questions and soliciting feedback from the audience and speakers regarding the event's organization. We also held internal meetings to finalize the event.



Figure 4. Reflection from Participants

As Lindsay (2023) noted, documentary films have been proven to be effective in fostering awareness and dialogue by encouraging critical reflection and audience engagement (See Figure

4). Dira Amanda, a Data Science student at the University of Sydney, stated that this event was very useful for raising awareness that people around us live with different cultures, religions, languages, and traditions. While she was aware of this, she never imagined Indonesia would be so rich in ethnic and cultural diversity. On the other hand, Arnie Jasmine, a Civil Engineering student, also believes that events like this are crucial to hold consistently because they can help raise public awareness about the importance of maintaining tolerance.

Moreover, since pursuing an education in Australia, Arnie has observed that tolerance has been well-maintained, at least throughout her time in Sydney. We also received feedback from Ikhsan, an MBA student, who suggested that it would be better to show the full film so that the audience could see the final act. However, we had already discussed this internally, as we were concerned that if the event ran too long, it would diminish participant interest. In addition, limiting the screening length was a deliberate strategy to stimulate participants' curiosity and encourage them to further explore the meaning of sustainability practices in their own time. We also promoted the sources of the film and informed the audience about its accessibility, enabling them to watch the full version and engage with the content more comprehensively. Furthermore, this constructive feedback from participants serves as an important evaluation for the committee when considering the possibility of screening the full film in future events.

After the panel discussion concluded, all participants were invited to enjoy a selection of traditional Indonesian dishes as a form of local cultural promotion for non-Indonesian attendees, while also serving as a nostalgic cultural reflection for Indonesian participants. During this session, the organizing committee actively introduced the traditional snacks provided by explaining their names, distinctive flavors, and regions of origin to interested participants. This informal cultural exchange not only enhanced participants' understanding of Indonesia's culinary heritage but also created a relaxed space for networking among attendees, organizers, and speakers, thereby reviving a sense of warmth and communal engagement in the closing session of the event.

4. Conclusion

Environmental stewardship through religious, faith-based, and cultural practices has existed for centuries, inspiring generations to maintain a close relationship with nature. However, such perspectives are only recently gaining renewed attention in contemporary discourse. Indonesia, often described as a deeply religious country and one of immense cultural diversity, offers a compelling example of how stewardship beliefs can be translated into concrete actions to address the climate crisis. Through the screening and discussion of *Semesta: The Island of Faith*, the activity highlighted how religion, faith, and culture across different provinces in Indonesia inspire local communities to protect their environments. The discussion suggests three key conclusions: viewing sustainability through a spiritual lens helps restore a sense of "feeling enough"; spirituality serves as the nadi (lifeblood) of environmental stewardship in Indonesian communities, passed down from leluhur (ancestors) as warisan (heritage); and while spirituality can inspire individual and collective action, effective environmental protection also requires structural transformation and sustained commitment at the national level.

Moreover, the findings highlight how cultural and spiritual values function as powerful motivators for collective engagement in environmental protection. Through customary laws, rituals, and community leadership, environmental awareness is transmitted not only as knowledge but also as an ethical obligation. These practices foster resilience and social cohesion, enabling communities to respond adaptively to ecological challenges while preserving cultural identity.

Ultimately, recognising and valuing Indigenous perspectives offers important lessons for contemporary sustainability efforts. By bridging traditional wisdom with modern environmental strategies, policymakers, educators, and practitioners can develop more inclusive and culturally

grounded approaches to sustainability. This reinforces the argument that meaningful environmental action emerges most effectively when cultural heritage and spiritual values are acknowledged as integral drivers of sustainable development.

5. Acknowledgement

The successful implementation of this program was made possible through the financial and institutional support of the Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association (SUPRA), which acted as the primary funding body. SUPRA's support enabled the planning and execution of key program components, including venue arrangements, technical logistics, speaker coordination, and participant engagement activities. This funding support reflects SUPRA's commitment to fostering educational initiatives, cross-cultural dialogue, and student-led community engagement within the University of Sydney. In addition, access to the documentary film was facilitated through a strategic collaboration with Ashoka Indonesia under the Layar Gaharu program. Layar Gaharu is an initiative dedicated to promoting social impact storytelling by curating and disseminating films that address social, environmental, and cultural issues across Indonesia. Through this collaboration, the program was able to legally screen *Semesta: Island of Faith*, ensuring ethical use of media content while strengthening transnational partnerships between academic institutions and civil society organisations. This partnership not only enriched the educational value of the program but also demonstrated how cross-sector collaboration can effectively support sustainability-focused community engagement initiatives. Future similar

events could screen the documentary in its entirety or divide it into thematic sessions held over multiple meetings, allowing audiences more time to absorb the content. These formats can be strengthened through facilitated discussions and brief reflective essays, which help participants process the themes critically and engage more deeply with the issues presented.

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