

## Between Development and Environmental Justice: Tracing the Trail of Ecological Conflict and Environmental Crisis in the Kendeng Mountains

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### ABSTRACT

Kendeng, as one of the natural landscapes in Central Java, provides various resources that are used by the community, especially the Sedulur Sikep, in carrying out their daily lives. However, the use of natural resources as raw materials for cement has sparked the Sedulur Sikep community to reject and resist the Semen company. Therefore, the conflict in the Kendeng region has become one of the environmental histories in Indonesia. The objectives of this article are 1) to analyze the historical dynamics of human-environmental relations in the Kendeng Mountains and 2) to analyze the representation of ecological conflict in the Kendeng Mountains as a conflict at the local and national levels. This research uses a qualitative approach with a literature study method by analyzing secondary data derived from journal articles that will be analyzed using synthetic analysis. We carry out this process to map the historical roots of the conflict and identify patterns of environmental injustice in regional development. Based on the literature review, it can be seen that the conflict in the Kendeng region represents an ecological conflict that impacts the lives of local communities. The resistance carried out by the Sedulur Sikep community is not just an ordinary environmental movement but a demand for ecological and spiritual sustainability of the community. This conflict demonstrates that development without a focus on justice and environmental sustainability can result in ecological crisis and social alienation. In response to this problem, the government must evaluate and design an optimal spatial plan to harmonize development.

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### A. Introduction

Humans and the environment are fundamentally complementary entities that have evolved together throughout history within the dynamics of development. Development also involves patterns of economic, political, social, and cultural change over time. The existing environment provides for human needs in carrying out life, a pattern of relationships that can be recognized as the moral landscape, or ecosystem, as a shared living space. In this regard, balance is a primary requirement for development. Javanese philosophy values memayu hayuning bawana, which means taking care of the world's beauty by managing agriculture and land in a way that respects nature and keeps the environment balanced.

The dynamics of development involve the relationship between humans and nature as a historical process that reflects changes over time in the management of natural resources. Utilizing

natural resources as a process for development is inevitable because nature provides everything humans need for survival. Looking back, nature is not merely an object but a sacred part of cosmic life. This sacredness is a manifestation of community belief in a place and a traditional conservation effort through local culture (Fakhriyah et al., 2021; Wambrauw et al., 2023). One place that implements conservation through a belief system is the Sedulur Sikep, or Samin, community in the Kendeng Mountains, Central Java Province. This community views nature as an integral part of life, and thus, the earth and its waters must be respected as part of a traditional ecological ethic. This belief demonstrates an effort to maintain the balance of nature by considering the concept of sustainability for life.

However, with the advent of colonialism, the relationship between humans and nature began to change, marked by the exploitation of natural resources for regional development. During colonialism, capitalist policies began to spread in Indonesia, shifting the natural management system, which initially relied on local wisdom, into one that separated humans from the environment. This dynamic was further compounded by the paradigm that rapid industrialization and development symbolized a region's progress. Based on this paradigm, nature's position has shifted from being a part of life and the socio-spiritual order to a symbol of an economic commodity. This situation demonstrates the existence of an extractive economy in Java. Essentially, colonial policies introduced a culture of capitalism into the management of natural resources and the environment (Issar, 2021; Nsah, 2023; Radcliffe, 2020).

One area relevant to this situation is the Kendeng Mountains, located in northern Central Java. This region exemplifies historical societal change. The region bears witness to a shift in the paradigm of natural resource management, manifested in the form of conflicting interests. Ecologically, the Kendeng Mountains serve as a water catchment area that supports the irrigation system of the surrounding communities. But since 2010, this area has been a battleground between local communities, the regional government, and a cement company. Limestone mining is feared to disrupt the natural balance that maintains water resources for irrigation. The conflict in the Kendeng Mountains exemplifies an ecological crisis, reflecting the tension between modernization, industrialization, and ecological ethics (Itawan, 2023). Studies conducted by researchers in the Kendeng region demonstrate this condition, with changes in the Kendeng landscape clearly indicating an ecological crisis (Asrawijaya, 2020; Komnasham, 2016; Pravitasari, et al., 2020).

The study of the Kendeng Karst Mountains region can be viewed from an environmental history perspective, where the phenomena occurring in the Kendeng Mountains reflect the continuity of the exploitation paradigm carried over from the colonial era to the present day (Hronček & Chrastina, 2018; Palacio, 2019). Within the context of environmental history, this study aims to demonstrate that environmental damage and crises arise through processes and stages within the socio-economic order, which in turn eliminate existing ecological values. In the case of exploitation in the Kendeng Mountains, it can be seen that this transformation has significantly led to a decline in agricultural productivity, reduced forest cover, and conflict among residents against the exploitation of natural resources (Pravitasari et al., 2020). Based on data, land cover changes occurred over two decades (1996-2016), with rice fields decreasing from 610,898 ha to 585,449 ha. It is projected that by 2036, only 62,628 ha will remain (Pravitasari et al., 2020). Furthermore, the forest area in the Kendeng region

fluctuates, from 138,187 ha in 1996 to 141,346 ha in 2000. However, this figure had declined to 138,532 ha in 2016 and is projected to decrease to 138,509 ha by 2026 (Pravitasari et al., 2020).

Researchers from various perspectives have conducted previous studies discussing ecological conflicts in the Kendeng Mountains. For example, research conducted by Harsasto (2020) discusses social conflict in Kendeng, which is influenced not only by residents' social networks but also by relationships with higher power structures. Meanwhile, research conducted by Huwaina et al. (2024) describes the conflict in the Kendeng Mountains from the perspective of Karl Marx's conflict theory, highlighting the power structures and economic interests affecting the Kendeng community and ecological interests. Furthermore, research conducted by Asrawijaya (2020) explains the Samin community's conflict over the construction of a cement factory in Kendeng using the concept of ecopopulism, explaining that the emergence of the ecopopulist movement is based on environmental, economic, and legal factors. Although these studies provide a comprehensive overview, there remains a research gap that has not fully explored the long-term historical dimension. Few studies have explored the environmental history approach to trace the continuity of the exploitation paradigm from colonial times to the modern era.

Based on the above issues, it can be concluded that the focus of this study is how the history of human relations with nature in the Kendeng Mountains shapes patterns of interaction that culminate in the ecological crisis in the contemporary era. This study is urgently needed as a reflection on local ecological wisdom that counters industrial exploitation and to compare development paradigms that are more appropriate and equitable for community life. Within this framework, this study aims to analyze the historical dynamics of human-environmental relations in the Kendeng Mountains region and the representation of ecological conflict there at the local and national levels.

## B. Methods

This research employed a qualitative literature review method. A literature review is a research activity that utilizes secondary data from various sources and literature relevant to the research topic, including articles, books, and media (Dalkin et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2022; Thwe & Kálmán, 2024). The research was conducted comprehensively using a systematic approach to analyze articles relevant to the ecological crisis in the Sedulur Sikep community in the Kendeng Mountains. The articles that were searched for were either original empirical research or articles that came from factual and empirical research that was related to the research topic.

The data collection strategy involved searching the Google Scholar database using the Publish or Perish software. The search used the keywords "Kendeng Mountains Conflict," "Sedulur Sikep," and "Kendeng Cement Factory." After the search, the data was chosen from the years 2017 to 2025 to make sure it was up to date. The data screening process was carried out based on the following criteria: (1) the article was the result of empirical research, (2) it discussed ecological conflict and the environmental crisis in the Kendeng Mountains, and (3) the article was available in full text and open access. Data analysis was conducted using synthetic analysis, which integrates various literature findings to understand the overall phenomenon being studied (Steingut et al., 2022). In this context, the integration will be carried out on findings related to the ecological crisis and the Kendeng

community's response to the construction of a cement factory. These results will be synthesized to provide answers to the research questions and used to compare findings between studies.

## C. Results and Discussion

### 1. Historical Review of the Dynamics of Human-Environmental Relations in the Kendeng Mountains Region

In examining the relationship between humans and the environment in the Kendeng region, it is clear that the Sedulur Sikep, or Samin community, is a crucial entity. This community has inhabited the Kendeng region since colonial times, where the name Samin originates from a figure named Samin Surosentiko, born in 1859 in southern Blora during Dutch rule (Asrawijaya & Hudayana, 2021; Septiani & Asrawijaya, 2023). Before the pressures of modern industry, the local Kendeng community developed agrarian practices with cosmological concepts to utilize land and water in balance to maintain the region's environmental ecosystem. These mechanisms are not only a cultural practice of local wisdom but also pay attention to land use rotation, traditional prohibitions, planting seasons, and proper natural resource management, all of which are embedded in local ecological knowledge (Dyani et al., 2022; Hikmawati, 2020; Nurul et al., 2021). Anthropological studies have shown that the Samin community's movement to reject cement mining uses local values as a symbol of resistance and conservation, ensuring that local wisdom in the region is not merely a myth but a social actor (Hidayah et al., 2022; Setiadi et al., 2017).

Studies of the Samin conflict within the context of environmental history interpret this practice as part of a long-term interaction between the community and the environment and local ecological adaptation. At the village level in the Kendeng Mountains, community-based land ownership and land use patterns are implemented over the long term, considering sustainability (Hadi et al., 2023; Harnanto et al., 2018). However, internalization from outside parties has resulted in the Kendeng Mountains region experiencing external pressure due to large-scale investment projects, which position the community's social and political roles as determining who can defend the region from external pressure.

In the pre-colonial era of Ancient Java, society and nature had a closely intertwined spiritual relationship. Kendeng, as a mountainous region, holds nature as a spiritual and supernatural symbol (Murnianto, 2021). Kendeng, one of the mountains in Java, is a symbol of fertility for the Sedulur Sikep community and a place that needs to be protected (Asrawijaya & Hudayana, 2021; Elyawati & Fatmawati, 2021; Rozy et al., 2023). Additionally, the history of environmental conflict in Kendeng started with the practice of using nature for development, which began during the Dutch colonial period, when a system was put in place to use natural resources on a large scale for regional growth, specifically through the forced cultivation system (*cultuurstelsel*) and logging by the Boschwezen (Dutch Forestry Service). The northern region of Java (Blora, Grobogan, Demak, and Pati) became a source of teak wood for shipbuilding and railroad construction (Nurkholifah & Kasuma, 2018). In this context, a paradigm shift began to occur, namely the shift from the utilization of local wisdom to the utilization of nature from an economic perspective. This historical development marked the beginning of industrialization in Indonesia, characterized by the extensive use of natural resources.

Furthermore, in the post-independence era, patterns of exploitation continued to experience massive development. During the New Order era, modernization and industrialization became symbols of a region's progress, leading to rapid development. During this period, the colonial paradigm did not disappear but instead strengthened, with the emergence of a "social development engine" with technology as the primary benchmark for progress. During this period, economics became the sole path to progress, known as developmentalism (Bresser-Pereira & Oreiro, 2024; Temin, 2023). During the New Order era, colonial thinking was implemented by expanding the private sector and the state as the primary actors in determining spatial use for massive development, while local communities were marginalized in development decision-making and natural resource utilization.

In the context of development in the Kendeng Mountains, development also included opening up access to mining in the Kendeng Mountains. The post-independence development paradigm often neglected ecological aspects and placed greater emphasis on economic ones. Since the 1990s, the increasing national demand for cement has led to discussions about exploitation of the Kendeng Karst Mountains. However, this development has also met with resistance from the local community, as Kendeng is an area used to maintain the balance of land and water ecosystems, and therefore, exploitation of natural resources would disrupt this balance (Hartono, 2021). Furthermore, the New Order paradigm viewed the exploitation of natural resources as an invasion of extractive capitalism, which led the corporate state structure to suppress ecological space for economic gain. In James C. Scott's view, this phenomenon can be recognized as state simplification, where ecological areas are suppressed for economic gain (Carrier, 2018; Hermansya et al., 2023; Weiss & McElwee, 2021).

After the fall of the New Order, the Reformation era saw the emergence of the grassroots ecological movement, in which the Sedulur Sikep community formed a Kendeng farmers' movement in the Rembang, Blora, and Pati Regencies (Asrawijaya, 2020). This movement became a major symbol of resistance against the exploitation of cement raw materials in the Kendeng region, demonstrating ecological support to maintain the balance of the region's natural environment. The Kendeng community's movement was also initiated by women, thus becoming known as the feminist movement, opposing the exploitation of cement raw materials in Kendeng (Hari, 2023). The community also believes that Law No. 32 of 2009 concerning Environmental Protection and Management is not transparent and actually creates a conflict of interest with the local government that issues mining permits (Zahroh & Najicha, 2022).

In addition to the Kendeng farmers' movement, there is also a social media-based resistance movement (Wijayanto et al., 2020). The Kendeng community movement was carried out, where resistance was also led by women who took action in 2016 by cementing their feet in front of the state palace. The movement spread massively through social media with uploads of images and videos on Facebook, Twitter (now X), and Instagram that aroused people's emotions about the exploitation carried out (Hari, 2023). This demonstrates that social media plays a crucial role in the reform era, as the internet and technology can be utilized to disseminate various types of information. The narrative that farmers are losing water sources and portraits of the lives of the Kendeng community also strengthen the media's action in upholding human rights (Harnanto et al., 2018). Furthermore, media framing is also carried out through documentaries such as Samin vs Semen as a space for expression that strengthens the Kendeng community's resistance in opposing the industrialization of cement

factories (Wijayanto et al., 2020). This treatment serves as a form of education that the problems occurring in Kendeng are complex issues that not only question karst but also community welfare, threats to water sources, and spiritual and ecological relationships to the ecosystem in Kendeng.

The narrative of the Kendeng community's resistance to the construction of a cement factory confirms that, historically, the agrarian conflict in Kendeng is not simply an ordinary agrarian conflict but a concrete manifestation of the interplay between industrialization and economic development that ignores the balance of nature and the demands for environmental justice for which the community is fighting. This means that, fundamentally, if we trace the past, the conflict in Kendeng is rooted in the development concept introduced by colonialism during its occupation of Indonesia. Through historical analysis, the applied development paradigm shows that nature is merely an economic instrument, ultimately leading to an ecological crisis. This can lead to complicated issues in the Kendeng area, like dangers to the karst ecosystem, access to clean water, and the spiritual connection of the Sedulur Sikep community, which is caught in a struggle between economic growth and protecting the community's environment.

## **2. Hegemony of Development and the Loss of Environmental Justice in the Kendeng Ecological Crisis**

The Kendeng ecological crisis is not simply a conflict over natural resources, but rather a reflection of development practices that are not oriented towards environmental justice. This crisis is the result of a complex historical process that began with industrialization and regional development during the Dutch colonial era. This is based on the context of industrialization and modernization that has occurred in Indonesia since the Dutch colonial era. However, this modernization has not only brought positive development but also brought ecological disaster. In this case, the paradigm positions nature as a strategic part of the economic aspect. The erosion of ecology is also inseparable from the concept of the modernization paradigm. According to Anthony Giddens (1991), modernization is a process of disembedding, namely the detachment of social practices from local aspects and traditions (Giovine & Barri, 2024).

By adopting an environmental history approach, the study of the ecological crisis in the Kendeng Mountains is not merely understood as a contemporary phenomenon but rather as a long-term process, where the long history reflects changes in human interactions with the environment, influenced by economics and politics (Averbuch et al., 2021; Silva et al., 2022). On the other hand, Aldo Leopold (1946) described the phenomenon occurring in the Kendeng region as ecological alienation, a phenomenon characterized by human alienation from nature due to capitalism and industrialization, which force the system to achieve economic goals (Jónsson et al., 2020; Meine, 2020). Therefore, the ecological crisis in the Kendeng Mountains essentially represents ecological crises at both the local and national levels. This phenomenon is not merely an ecological crisis; it also involves a conflict of interpretations between human groups regarding nature as a resource provider. In Karl Marx's theory, society, as the proletariat, is oppressed by industrial owners, the bourgeoisie. Therefore, the Sedulur Sikep community, as the oppressed community, will resist and demand their rights (Farha et al., 2022; Kurniawan, 2018; Rufo, 2021; Sitowin & Alfirdaus, 2019). Essentially, conducting a study of karst resources in the Kendeng Mountains presents several dilemmas. This is because karst mountains are essentially protected areas in Indonesia. This is reinforced by the legal

regulations stipulated in Government Regulation of the Republic of Indonesia Number 13 of 2017 concerning Amendments to Government Regulation Number 26 of 2008 concerning the National Spatial Planning (RTRW-N). Article 51 states that geologically protected areas are unique to the landscape, one of which is the karst area. Furthermore, there is a controversial law, namely Law Number 3 of 2020, an amendment to Law Number 4 of 2009 concerning Mineral and Coal Mining (Minerba Law), which has become a controversial debate because the law eliminates a 15,000-hectare mining area and stipulates that mining permits can be extended twice for 20 years (Kuswardani & Anggraini, 2021).

Based on Indonesian regulations, there are conflicts in Kendeng related to applicable laws. Law Number 32 of 2009 concerning Environmental Protection and Management explains that this law serves as the basis for karst as a protected area (Adi Wibowo & Karim, 2023; Bara Firmansyah et al., 2024; Nursya, 2023). This law addresses karst areas as ecosystems, with standard criteria for environmental damage specifically for karst ecosystems to be regulated in government regulations. However, local authorities have the authority to manage environmental and spatial planning permits, as outlined in Law Number 23 of 2014, which grants provincial/district governments the right to manage permits for the utilization of natural resources (Ahmad Robi, 2023; Antasari, 2021). This indicates a conflicting regulation in the utilization of natural resources, which should emphasize function and sustainability. This situation requires clarity in regulations regarding the utilization of natural resources to avoid further problems, including regulatory issues.

The lack of synchronization in regulations regarding natural resource management, as reflected in Law Number 23 of 2014, has hierarchically weakened the bargaining position of local communities against the government's development agenda (Hasanah & Oktaviana, 2024). This conflict of interest became clearer when the Regional Spatial Plans (RTRW) of Rembang Regency and Central Java Province changed their roles to allow the use of karst resources, which are areas that should be protected due to their geological importance. This dynamic demonstrates that policies implemented to exploit natural resources often ignore both environmental and social justice, meaning, in this context, the Kendeng Mountains area, a source of livelihood for the Sedulur Sikep community.

The regulatory mismatch between spatial planning policies and ecosystem carrying capacity further exacerbates the justice crisis in Kendeng. This is evident in the Central Java Provincial Spatial Plan (RTRW) No. 16 of 2019 and the Rembang Regency Spatial Plan (RTRW) No. 14 of 2011, which designate the Kendeng area as an industrial zone (Harnanto et al., 2018; Hasanah & Oktaviana, 2024; Kunz et al., 2024). However, the Strategic Environmental Assessment (KLHS) Phase I (Watuputih Groundwater Basin) and II (Kendeng Region) conducted by the Ministry of Environment and Forestry of the Republic of Indonesia explicitly recommended the termination of the mining permit because the area is part of the Sukolilo karst landscape (KBAK), which functions as a groundwater reservoir (Darmawan & Virgy, 2023; Maimunah, 2017). The neglect of the KLHS demonstrates a policy that prioritizes development over fulfilling environmental rights. This situation undoubtedly creates contradictory development patterns and triggers ecological alienation, with communities losing access to environmental management rights in the Kendeng area.

## D. Conclusion

Based on the analysis conducted, it is clear that the ecological crisis in the Kendeng Mountains is a real consequence of Indonesia's economic development paradigm, which neglects environmental sustainability. The industrialization of cement factories demonstrates the dominance of economic logic over the carrying capacity of the karst ecosystem and the social rights of the Kendeng community. The resistance waged by the Kendeng community is a reaction, not an ordinary environmental movement, but a demand for recognition of the right to living space and ecological sustainability, which are threatened by economic development. The conflict in Kendeng demonstrates that development that fails to integrate the values of justice for the environment and society will continue the ecological crisis. The Kendeng Mountains reflect the paradox of modernity: on the one hand, promising progress; on the other, giving rise to ecological and moral crises.

As a policy implication, an evaluation of existing industrial permits in Indonesia is necessary to prevent similar conflicts from recurring. The government needs to evaluate industrial permits in ecologically sensitive areas, prioritizing community and environmental justice through participatory approaches. On the other hand, the government must also review the Regional Spatial Planning (RTRW) for industries located in protected areas. Spatial planning also needs to be considered so that mining or industrial areas do not significantly impact environmental sustainability and protect human rights, rather than simply focusing on economic investment commodities. Thus, it is hoped that economic development can proceed well in harmony with environmental sustainability and protect the rights of surrounding communities. As an alternative to the old paradigm, the results of the research analysis offer a development model with the concept of memayu hayuning bhawana to emphasize that development does not rely on the accumulation of capital from the cement industry, which is destructive to karst, but rather the future of Kendeng must be well managed with protection of water ecosystem areas and food sovereignty that align with the spiritual values of Sedulur Sikep. We can realize environmentally equitable development without sacrificing space for future generations by recognizing nature as an integral part of humanity.

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