



Practicing Environmental Communication: Lessons Learned from a Unique Community in Indonesia

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Abstract

The environment is essential to human life. People need to protect the environment, as it plays a vital role in our daily lives. One of the ways to protect the environment is through environmental communication. Using Robert Cox's (2010) perspective, this study aims to examine the role of a community of haunted place explorers in practicing environmental communication. This research uses a qualitative research method. The data were collected using interviews, observation, and documentation. The study results show that the Semarangker Community has performed two functions of environmental communication, i.e., (1) pragmatic and (2) constitutive. They do it as a proof of their concern about the environment and contribution to protecting nature.

Keywords: *Environmental Communication; Nature; Community; Climate Change*

1. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. All nations are urged to take action by implementing SDGs in order to advance prosperity while preserving the environment. One of the important agendas of the SDGs is related to climate issues (Dulari et al., 2014; Streimikiene & Mikalauskiene, 2021). All nations are invited to take the necessary actions to combat climate change and its impacts. Climate change is a real problem that threatens everyone on the planet. One way to address climate change is by protecting nature and the environment. In order to do so, all parties must work together at the local, national, and international levels (Alkhajar & Luthfia, 2018; Streimikiene & Mikalauskiene, 2021; Luthfia & Alkhajar, 2021).

Amidst such condition, there is a unique community called Semarangker Community. The main interest of this community is to conduct explorations in places that are considered haunted, scary, and full of myths. Intriguingly, this community also has a concern for nature and environmental protection. They even carry out what is known as environmental communication. They do their actions voluntarily without any financial support from other parties. They mainly contribute to protecting nature and the environment around their local area of Semarang, Central Java. They consider their effort as a modest thing because they just want to bring benefit to their environment.

Their activities make real impacts to the environment and contribute to the mission of making the planet a better place. Civil societies, including local communities, play an urgent role to fight climate change (Luthfia & Alkhajar, 2018; Streimikiene & Mikalauskiene, 2021; NDC, 2021). Using Cox's perspective (2010a), this study aims to examine the role of a community of haunted place explorers in doing environmental communication.

2. Research Method

The Semarangker Community was selected purposively as the case of this study. This study used a descriptive qualitative approach. The data were gathered by observation, interviews, and literature reviews. For the interview, five capable informants were specifically selected. To complete and enrich the data, observation and literature studies were performed. An interactive model was used for the data analysis. The data analysis process included data gathering, data reduction, data display, conclusion drawing, and verification. The outcomes were then explained in narrative form.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. A Glimpse into the History of a Community

Semarangker Community was founded on March 13, 2007. Due to their first five members, the community was initially called *Pandawa Lima* (inspired by the five brothers from the Mahabharata story) or *Voltus V*. For five years, from 2007 to 2012, this community did not recruit any new members. It was only in 2012 that they started to accept new members. The recruitment of new members is fairly strict because they only allow those who are serious to join the community. The current number of their membership has reached hundreds of people. The members today do not only come from Semarang and its surroundings, but also from various areas such as Surakarta, Surabaya, and Jakarta.

The Semarangker Community has six divisions, namely social and nature division, equipment division, women's division, animal safety and protection division, exploration and survey division, and arts and creative division. Various social actions and campaigns for the preservation of nature and the environment are carried out particularly by the social and nature division. These activities include planting mangroves, casuarinas, and trees in various locations.



Figure 1. The Logo of the Semarangker Community
Source: Semarangker Community Archive

According to Cox, environmental communication is a term that refers to pragmatic and constitutive means to convey our understanding regarding the environment and our relationships to nature; it is a symbolic medium that we use in constructing environmental problems and negotiating society's different responses to them (2010a, p. 20). According to this definition, the two functions of environmental communication that have been done by the Semarangker Community can be explained as follows.

3.2. Pragmatic

Environmental communication, as stated by Cox, is pragmatic. “It educates, alerts, persuades, mobilizes, and helps people solve environmental problems. It is an instrumental sense of communication that probably occurs to us initially: the work of communication-in-action” (2010a, p. 20). The Semarangker Community carried out various actions to protect nature and the environment such as waste cleaning action, planting trees for reforestation, campaigning for 1001 tree planting, planting casuarinas, and planting mangroves (Cf. Luthfia & Alkhajar, 2018; Luthfia et al., 2020).

Planting mangroves is one of their routine activities. According to them, the existing coastal areas and mangrove forests need to be constantly rehabilitated and restored. These efforts are made to ensure that the functions of the mangroves are optimal. The first mangrove planting was carried out in 2015. To date, they have done this program six times in various locations around Semarang and Kendal. For planting the mangroves, they usually get supports from various communities and mangrove activists.

A total of about 43,000 mangroves have been planted by Semarangker Community. They also manage to get mangrove seeds for free. As a community that cares about nature and the environment, Semarangker always emphasizes the importance of working together, synergizing, and collaborating with various parties, especially mangrove communities.

From their activities, the Semarangker Community has performed the pragmatic function of environmental communication to some extent. For example, through the mangrove planting activity, they invite and educate their own members, youth, school students, and the community in general, to protect nature and the environment. They also use various social media (Facebook, Blog, WhatsApp Group, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter) to disseminate information related to their activities, including the ones to protect nature and the environment (Luthfia & Alkhajar, 2018). Such information often makes people curious to participate. They also disseminate the benefits and importance of mangroves for nature and the environment (Alongi, 2008; Buncag, 2021).

They hope that the mangroves they plant will eventually grow and develop into mangrove forests. The existence of mangrove forests itself has been known to possess many benefits, including preventing erosion and coastal abrasion, protecting coastal ecosystems, preventing sea water intrusion, balancing and stabilizing environmental quality, neutralizing pollutants or chemicals such as detergents and oil, absorbing carbon dioxide (CO₂), and producing oxygen (O₂). In addition, mangrove forests also serve as habitats and shelters for various kinds of living creatures, both land animals such as monkeys and birds, as well as marine animals such as fish, shrimp, jellyfish, snails, and crabs.

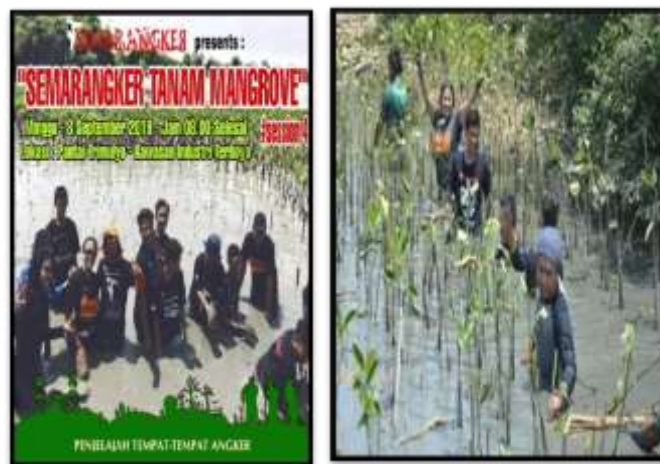




Figure 2. Mangrove Plantation
Source: Semarangker Community Archive

3.3. Constitutive

Environmental communication is also constitutive. According to Cox, “on a subtler level, environmental communication also helps to constitute, or compose, representations of nature and environmental problems themselves as subjects for our understanding” (2010a, p. 21). The Semarangker Community admits that they have never sent press releases to the media. This is, of course, unfortunate because actions to protect nature and the environment are positive and beneficial messages. It would be great if such messages are disseminated through various media, i.e., print, electronic, and online media. The main purpose of disseminating such messages is to provide an understanding related to the importance of nature and the environment, including the various existing environmental problems (Agyeman, 2007; Catenaccio, 2008; Nisbet, 2009).

However, Semarangker Community acknowledges that they tend to avoid making press releases or the likes because they like to keep things simple and do not expect to be famous for what they do. As long as what they do brings benefits and does not interfere with others, they are quite content and grateful. Nevertheless, they still provide positive, inspirational and educative statements and messages when they are interviewed or get coverage from various media related to the various activities they do to protect nature and the environment, such as the mangrove planting activity in various locations (Cf. Cox, 2010a, 2010b).

They also provide an understanding that there are many environmental problems such as coastal abrasion and climate change. Therefore, they inspire people to act and contribute to the protection of nature and the environment. In this context, to some extent, Semarangker Community has performed the constitutive function of environmental communication.

3.4. Some Lessons Learned from the Semarangker Community

As a community of haunted place explorers and voluntary social movement activists who have concern about nature, environment, and climate change, Semarangker Community has taught several lessons to the society. First, they do not rely on local government support or financial assistance from any parties to carry out various actions to protect nature and the environment. They keep on fighting to make their ideals about nature, the environment, and climate change come true. Second, they never ask for funds or do fundraising because they think it is risky and has the potential to lead to negative things. Therefore, they prefer to do self-financing or self-funding. They all collect the money voluntarily for logistical needs such as buying food and beverages.

Semarangker Community also humbly recognizes the limitations that they have. However, their limitations do not dampen their enthusiasm to act on their concern for nature and the environment. This research showed that there are still many communities that have environmental awareness and take

various actions to protect nature and the environment according to their capacities and resources. This is indeed good news for all. We must continue to contribute to and collaborate for the protection of nature and the environment, which also means the protection of our own planet.

Conclusion

The findings of this research showed that the Semarangker Community has carried out the two main functions of environmental communication, namely the pragmatic and constitutive functions. The community conducts various activities related to environmental issues, especially under the coordination of their social and natural division. What they do is a proof of their concern and contribution to the protection of nature and the environment. The findings also showed that there are still some actions that can be taken to promote the educational values and sincerity of their action to a wider audience.

In other words, communication and dissemination of messages related to environmental care is an important aspect that needs to be maximized in the future. Such information dissemination is expected to inspire more parties to be aware and take concrete actions to preserve nature and the environment. We must always remember that we only have one earth to live on. Therefore, protecting nature and the environment is everyone's responsibility. Protecting the nature and environment also means protecting our earth for our own sake.

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