

Gurindam 12 as an Ecospiritual Manifesto: Preserving the Environment Through Local Wisdom of Malay Culture in the Riau Islands

Otieli Harefa^{1*}

¹Real Theological Seminary Batam

<p>Abstract: This study analyzes <i>Gurindam 12</i> as an ecospiritual manifesto that connects moral, ethical, and spiritual values in classical Malay literature with environmental conservation practices in the Riau Islands. The research approach used was qualitative-descriptive-analytical, with primary data obtained through semi-structured interviews with cultural figures, community leaders, and local communities, as well as participatory observation. Secondary data include <i>the text of Gurindam 12</i> and the scientific literature on ecospirituality, ecotheology, and local wisdom. The results of the study show that <i>Gurindam 12</i> contains ecospiritual values that can be a guideline for sustainable living and harmonious interaction with nature. Malay cultural practices, including traditional rituals and resource management, are a form of internalization of these values. This research emphasizes the potential for integrating local literary and cultural policies into environmental and educational policies to increase people's ecological awareness. The research findings contribute to the development of culturally relevant and widely applicable culture-based environmental maintenance models.</p>	<p>Research Paper</p> <p>*Corresponding Author: Otieli Harefa Real Theological Seminary Batam</p> <p>How to cite this paper: Otieli Harefa (2025). Gurindam 12 as an Ecospiritual Manifesto: Preserving the Environment Through Local Wisdom of Malay Culture in the Riau Islands. <i>Middle East Res J. Humanities Soc. Sci</i>, 5(5): 177-182.</p> <p>Article History: Submit: 24.09.2025 Accepted: 22.10.2025 Published: 25.10.2025 </p>
<p>Keywords: Gurindam 12, Ecospirituality, Malay Local Wisdom, Environmental Maintenance, Riau Islands.</p>	
<p>Copyright © 2025 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.</p>	

INTRODUCTION

Today's global environmental crisis has reached a tipping point, so it is necessary to find the right way to deal with it, before it reaches a point of permanent damage. Degradation of marine ecosystems, deforestation, climate change, and pollution have threatened the sustainability of life on earth. International reports, such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) forum, show that human activities are the main cause of the acceleration of climate change and biodiversity loss. In (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 2022) this context, there is an urgency to find alternative approaches that are not only technical but also touch on moral and spiritual aspects. Berry revealed that one of the most appropriate approaches to address the environmental damage crisis is through ecospirituality, which is the integration of spiritual values and environmental ethics as the foundation for the maintenance of the earth(Thomas Berry, 2019b)

In Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia, there are many local cultural traditions that store wisdom that

can be a source of ecospirituality value for the sustainable maintenance of the earth. Local wisdom is certainly not just a legacy of the past, but a living principle that can inspire sustainable behavior in the present. The Riau Islands, as the center of Malay culture, have an important heritage in the form of Gurindam 12, the work of Raja Ali Haji in the 19th century. Gurindam 12 is known as a moral and ethical literary text that combines religious teachings with local Malay wisdom.(Norli Abdullah, 2020) For the Malay people of the Riau Islands, Gurindam 12 is not just a stanza of chalkish literature, but has become a source of views on life, especially related to moral ethics both in the relationship between humans and God and the relationship between humans and nature. Through this classic literary stanza, everyone listens to the balance of life, human responsibility to God, others, and the environment.

The Riau Islands, which are a cluster of island islands, face significant ecological challenges. As a strategic maritime area, this area is vulnerable to coastal degradation, overfishing, mangrove conversion, and marine pollution due to industrial activities.(Nor

Amalina Yusoff, 2019) Based on data from the Riau Islands Research and Development Agency, 2023 shows that the potential for mangrove rehabilitation in the Riau Islands reaches around 109,000 hectares, with a damage rate of up to 23.5% due to industrial pressure and human activities.(Sutran *et al.*, 2023) In addition, studies on anthropogenic indices in Tanjungpinang show high pressure on mangrove ecosystems due to domestic activities, coastal development, and land conversion.(Sutran *et al.*, 2023) This is in line with the information and recognition of the local community that continuous sea sand mining has had a direct impact on marine ecology, disrupted the livelihood of fishermen, and damaged the balance of coastal ecosystems, which is very detrimental to most coastal communities whose work is as traditional fishermen. This ecological crisis shows that the relationship between humans and the environment in the Riau Islands is moving away from the principle of balance which is the philosophy of the Malay society in teraju terms. Likewise, from the perspective of the Christian faith, the divine mandate to man to maintain the earth is even further away from hope. From the perspective of modern ecotheology thinking, emphasizing the need to reinterpret the divine mandate in the context of ecological crisis, Dewi's previous research results show that ecospirituality in the perspective of ecotheology, especially in the face of the impact of industrialization in the Riau Islands, is still very low and even tends to be ignored by policymakers.(Dewi *et al.*, 2024).

This ecological damage not only has an impact on the sustainability of natural resources, but also threatens the cultural identity of the Malay people who are closely linked to the sea and nature. It is in this context that the poem of Gurindam 12 can be reread as an ecospiritual manifesto, that is, a relevant ethical-spiritual text to guide ecological responsibility. Berry again explained that the concept of ecospirituality emphasizes the intrinsic relationship between the spiritual dimensions of man and nature, so he said that "an ecological crisis is a crisis of spirituality" that requires human reconnection with nature through moral values and faith.(Thomas Berry, 2019b) Similar ideas are developed in contextual ecotheology, which seeks to bridge religious teachings, local cultures, and environmental science.(Runtuwene, 2025) In this perspective, Gurindam 12 is not only a literary heritage, but also a theological and cultural instrument that can strengthen the ecological consciousness of the community. Some verses of Gurindam 12, which deal with this as in Article 5, contain a message to take care of oneself and stay away from the damage of the message which can be interpreted as an invitation to maintain ecological harmony. The Malay proverb "nature develops into a teacher" which is in line with the values of gurindam shows the view that nature is a source of learning and wisdom.(Norli Abdullah, 2020)

This research uses a qualitative approach with content analysis of Gurindam 12 as well as a literature review on Malay culture and maritime environmental issues. The results of the analysis are expected to provide a model of environmental ethics based on local wisdom that can be widely adapted. The integration between spiritual values, local literature, and sustainability principles confirms that solutions to the ecological crisis require a holistic approach that connects contemporary traditions and challenges. By elevating Gurindam 12 as an ecospiritual manifesto, this research not only contributes to the preservation of Malay culture but also to the global movement to find new ways in protecting the earth. This is relevant not only for the Malay community but also for the global community who are looking for ethical and spiritual inspiration in the face of modern environmental challenges.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative, descriptive-analytical approach to understand the ecospiritual value and local Malay wisdom in Gurindam literature 12. The qualitative method was chosen because it focuses on interpreting the text and cultural context, rather than quantitative measurement.(John W. Creswell dan J. David Creswell, 2018)

The primary data source of this research is in the analysis of literature related to the text of Gurindam 12 and scientific literature related to ecospirituality, ecotheology, and Malay local wisdom in the Riau Islands – Indonesia. Meanwhile, the data collection and analysis techniques were carried out by document study: Analysis of the Gurindam 12 text and related literature, semi-structured interviews to explore community experiences and traditional practices and conduct participatory observations: Observing the implementation of community moral values that make Gurindam 12 a source of community wisdom and environmental conservation actions in the Malay culture of the Riau Islands.

Through this method, the research is expected to present a new paradigm for contextual ecospirituality through verse Gurindam 12 that not only enriches the academic discourse of ecotheology, but also makes a practical contribution to efforts to preserve the earth in a balanced and sustainable manner, and can form ecological awareness for immigrant communities and stakeholders. Thus, Gurindam 12 as a spiritual eco manifesto can be well understood by people living in the Riau Islands, and is a relevant alternative for the preservation of the earth in a balanced manner in the midst of the challenges of modern industrialization.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

a. Ecospirituality and Contextual Ecotheology

Ecospirituality is an approach that connects the spiritual dimension of humans with ecological

responsibility to the earth. The term has grown rapidly in the last decade due to the global environmental crisis that requires a cross-disciplinary approach. White and Kramer mention that ecospirituality can help integrate religious values, morality, and environmental sustainability into daily life practices.(L. White, 2022) Meanwhile, Berry emphasized that the contextual ecotheological approach emphasizes that spiritual and theological values must be reread according to the local cultural context, so that it becomes a more relevant environmental solution and rooted in the traditions of the community with all its local wisdom.(Thomas Berry, 2019b) Bock and White develop this concept further, emphasizing that ecospiritual approaches can strengthen sustainability practices by linking literature, culture, and ethics.(Cherice Bock, 2024) This means that humans do not only preserve the environment through technology or policy, but also through the internalization of spiritual and cultural values that shape daily behavior. In the Malay context, *Gurindam 12* provides a foundation of moral values that can be integrated into ecospiritual principles. If the understanding of theology is only from the literal aspect, it is often not implemented in attitudes and actions, but when literal theology is connected with local cultural wisdom, it is much easier to implement it in attitudes and actions, because people are used to living in their own culture, which is essentially full of ecospirituality both in relation to God, others and nature itself. Contextual ecotheology in Southeast Asia often draws on cultural traditions to instill the value of environmental conservation. The results of Ahmad's research show that local wisdom and religious values can be an effective instrument in mitigating ecological damage in maritime areas such as the Riau Islands.(Z. Ahmad, H. Rahman, 2022).

b. Gurindam 12 as a Work of Malay Literature and Moral Ethics

Gurindam 12, written by Raja Ali Haji in the 19th century, where this literature is ultimately not only considered a classic literary work but also a moral ethical text that reflects the Malays' view of life. Sirait revealed that in the study of Malay literature, *Gurindam 12* is seen as a moral guide that unites religious, social, and cultural values. The chapters in *Gurindam 12* emphasize balance, honesty, self-control, and harmony with fellow creatures, including nature.(Sirait, 2018) For example, chapter 5 of *Gurindam 12* teaches that humans should not do harm and maintain the balance of life, which can be interpreted as the initial message of ecospirituality. The social and religious function of *Gurindam 12* is also emphasized in contemporary Malay studies. which states that the values in this *gurindam* remain relevant to face modern ethical challenges. Sirait further emphasized that the revitalization of *Gurindam 12* as a source of local wisdom is important for contemporary education. In the context of the Riau Islands, the values contained in *gurindam* can be used to shape people's ecological awareness, guide social behavior, and build moral responsibility towards nature.(Sirait, 2018) In addition,

Gurindam 12 emphasizes the spiritual relationship of humans with the environment as part of a harmonious life, thus emphasizing ecospirituality from a literary perspective.

c. Malay Local Wisdom and Environmental Conservation

Malay culture, especially in the Riau Islands region, has various terms and concepts that show a close relationship with nature. The phrase "Nature develops into a teacher" reflects the view that nature is a source of knowledge and ethics. Then there is the concept of "Teraju" which describes balance, harmony, and human moral responsibility to organize their lives, including relationships with the environment. These values emphasize harmony between humans, the environment, and spirituality. For example, people use *sea sasi* to limit fishing to keep ecosystems sustainable, while *teraju* becomes a symbol of leadership and moral responsibility that includes environmental protection and *Gurindam 12* as an ecospiritual eco-theological manifesto.(Destiana *et al.*, 2021) Marisyah and Fatimah emphasized that the Malay community has used *the values of Gurindam 12* to guide social behavior, including in the management of natural resources. This value integrates moral, ethical, and ecospiritual aspects in daily life practices, thus making local Malay wisdom the foundation for sustainable environmental management.(Marisyah & Fatimah, 2020) Even in the maritime context, the Malay community which is identical to the sea coast also has traditional practices in maintaining the environmental ecosystem such as the prohibition of fishing in certain seasons or maintaining mangrove forests as a natural fortress against coastal abrasion.(Yusuf, N., Hanafiah, R., & Wahid, 2019) The same thing was expressed by Y. Adriani, and Effend that preserving mangroves for the Malay community and culture is part of the responsibility and moral ethics to maintain the natural ecosystem and prevent abrasion, even to maintain all living things that depend on it.(Effendi *et al.*, 2022).

d. Integration of Gurindam 12 and Ecospirituality

The classic verse of Gurindam 12 which is loaded with moral values and messages with its ecospiritual principles creates a model of cultural and moral-based environmental maintenance. *Gurindam's* literal values, which emphasize responsibility, balance, and morality, serve as a code of conduct that supports sustainability. Noviana emphasized that the integration of local cultural wisdom with eco-spirituality is very close, so that it is part of religious and social education that can strengthen the ecological awareness and pro-environmental behavior of the Malay community.(Eddy Noviana, 2023) The integration of the ethical and moral values of *Gurindam 12* which has been integrated with the wisdom of local Malay culture provides a rich framework to develop a contextual model of environmental ethics. In fact, Noor emphasized that the success of environmental conservation strategies in the Southeast Asian region, especially Indonesia and the

Riau Islands, is highly dependent on the use of local culture and existing spiritual values (M. Noor, 2020). Thus, *Gurindam 12* is not only interpreted as a classic literary work, but has become an ecospiritual manifesto that is relevant to the contemporary context, especially in environmental conservation. This major work teaches the importance of ecological awareness combined with moral, social ethics, and spiritual values, as well as being the basis for scientific research related to ecology and environmental conservation in the Riau Islands.

e. The Value of Environmental Conservation from Gurindam 12 as an Ecospiritual Manifesto

Gurindam 12 by Raja Ali Haji is a classic Malay literary work that is rich in moral, ethical, and spiritual values that are enough to influence the views of the Malay people of the Riau Islands both in their relationship with fellow humans, with God and in their relationship with nature as God's pure creation. Each chapter of *Gurindam* implies a guideline for life that is relevant to man's relationship with God, others, and the environment. In this paper, we specifically look at and analyze several texts that are directly related to the ecospirituality of earth maintenance in terms of social and ecotheological aspects.

The first chapter emphasizes man's obedience to God. This spiritual value encourages the awareness that nature is God's creation that must be protected. In the context of ecospirituality, obedience is not only ritual or formal worship, but also includes tangible actions to preserve the earth as part of the divine mandate to man. By understanding nature as a manifestation of God's will, humans are encouraged to practice ecological responsibility. (Raja Ali Haji, 1847) The second article emphasizes the importance of doing good to all relationships. This value can be extended not only to social interactions between humans, but also to nature and other living things. The principle of doing good reflects the balance between human interests and the preservation of ecosystems, so behavior that damages the environment is considered contrary to moral teachings. (Sirait, 2018) From the perspective of ecotheology, doing good is a manifestation of faith in Christ.

The fourth and sixth chapters highlight the relationship between actions and consequences, as well as the importance of holding trust and acting fairly. From an ecospiritual perspective, the principle of causation encourages humans to consider the ecological impact of each of their actions, while trust and justice emphasize man's responsibility as *stewards* of the earth. The moral and ethical values contained in this *gurindam* show that humans are expected to maintain the balance of nature as part of the moral mandate as well as the theological mandate. (Marisyah & Fatimah, 2020).

The eighth chapter teaches humans to guard themselves from corruption and bad deeds. In the context

of the environment, this teaching is particularly relevant to efforts to prevent ecological damage through overexploitation, pollution, and actions that damage ecosystems. This article emphasizes that environmental conservation is inseparable from individual self-control and moral awareness (Destiana *et al.*, 2021).

The twelfth article affirms the importance of human accountability for all actions. This value reinforces the concept of ecospirituality because every action towards nature and others will be morally and spiritually accountable. This awareness of accountability is the foundation for sustainable environmental conservation, where humans actively protect the earth as a mandate from God. (Lynn White dan Christopher Bock, 2022).

Overall, *Gurindam 12* can be seen as an ecospiritual manifesto, in which moral, ethical, and spiritual values guide humans to preserve the earth. Key articles emphasizing ecospirituality include Articles 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, and 12. As revealed by Noviana the integration of these values shows that classical Malay literature not only serves as a moral and social guideline, but also as a philosophical and practical basis for environmental education, local resource management, and strengthening ecological awareness in the Malay community in the Riau Islands. (Eddy Noviana, 2023).

f. Riau Islands Malay Local Wisdom in an Ecospiritual Context

The Malay people of the Riau Islands have traditions and practices that reflect local wisdom in maintaining the balance of nature. Practices such as *semah laut* and *tolak bala* are ritual forms that show gratitude and request for protection to God and respect for nature. These rituals reflect the dialogical relationship between humans and nature, where humans are not only the rulers, but also as part of the ecosystem that must be preserved (Pujiarti, 2022). If it is connected to *Gurindam 12* as an ecospiritual manifesto, then the local wisdom of the Malay people of the Riau Islands, cannot be separated from its source that inspires and influences, namely the text of the *Gurindam 12* temple.

g. Challenges in the Preservation of Ecospiritual Values

The Riau Islands, which are 96% oceans, have their own challenges in terms of environmental conservation, especially some cities are industrial bases that are always related to waste that damages the environment, both land and sea. Although the ecospiritual values in *Gurindam 12* and the practice of Malay local wisdom have proven to be effective in preserving nature, major challenges arise due to modernization and changes in people's lifestyles. Berry said that technological developments and urbanization have led to a shift in traditional values and practices. Therefore, it is important to revitalize and adapt these values so that they remain relevant to the conditions of

the times.(Thomas Berry, 2019a) Related to the challenges faced, the role of religious and traditional leaders as guardians of moral and spiritual values needs to continue to convey educational messages through local culture that has become a role model for the community.

h. Implications for Environmental Policy

Stakeholders both in the local government and in Malay religious and customary institutions need to have a high moral spirit and need to continue to innovate in order to apply the ecospiritual values contributed by Gurindam 12 so that they can be implemented properly in the life of society, religion and culture. The dissidents should be interested in formulating environmental conservation policies based on the spirit of local wisdom values such as Gurindam 12 which has been rooted in the Malay community of the Riau Islands so that environmental maintenance based on local cultural wisdom is carried out. Niman revealed that policies that value local wisdom and the integration of spiritual values can increase effectiveness in environmental conservation. Therefore, it is important for the government and policy makers to involve the community in the process of planning and implementing environmental policies.(Niman, 2019).

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study shows that Gurindam 12 acts as an ecospiritual manifesto that unites Malay moral, spiritual, and local wisdom values in an effort to preserve nature. The values contained in Gurindam 12 can be used as a guideline for the community in developing sustainable living practices and harmony with nature. Malay local wisdom, especially found in the Riau Islands, strengthens the ecospiritual dimension through the appreciation of religious and cultural values practiced in daily attitudes and actions so that the relationship between humans and God and humans and nature continues to be maintained.

Through this scientific work, it can be concluded that the combination of Gurindam 12, ecospirituality, and local wisdom of Malay culture has been integrated in the life of the people of the Riau Islands so as to make a real contribution to the formation of environmental awareness, as well as strengthening the cultural and spiritual identity of the people of the Riau Islands. This approach is not only relevant locally, but also has the potential as a model of sustainable nature conservation that can be adopted by other communities throughout Indonesia, Asia and even the world.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Cherice Bock. (2024). Ecospiritual praxis: Cultivating connection to address the climate crisis. *Religious Studies Review*. *Religions*, 15(11), 215–229.
- Destiana, R., Yuniningsih, T., & Ardiansyah, A. (2021). *Penyengat Island Halal Tourism Within the Framework of Local Wisdom*. November 2019. <https://doi.org/10.4108/eai.21-10-2020.2311843>
- Dewi, I. G. A. A. O., Sukoharsono, E. G., Purwanti, L., & Mulawarman, A. D. (2024). Akuntabilitas Humanis Ekosentrisme: Konstruksi Holistik Menuju Keberlanjutan Di Indonesia. *KRISNA: Kumpulan Riset Akuntansi*, 16(1), 119–131. <https://doi.org/10.22225/kr.16.1.2024.119-131>
- Eddy Noviana. (2023). Understanding “Tunjuk Ajar Melayu Riau”: Integrating local wisdom into disaster education. *Heliyon*, 9(9). Heliyon
- Effendi, I., Yoswaty, D., Harahap, I., Jupendri, J., Adriani, Y., Effendi, I., & Andrizal, A. (2022). Mangrove and Malay Ethnocultural Approaches for Conservation in Dumai Municipality, Indonesia. *International Journal of Conservation Science*, 13(4), 1173–1186.
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). (2022). *Climate change 2022: Impacts, adaptation, and vulnerability*.
- John W. Creswell dan J. David Creswell. (2018). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. SAGE Publications.
- L. White, & J. K. (2022). Ecospirituality and contextual theology: Bridging faith and environmental action. *International Journal of Eco-Theology*, 18(1), 45–63.
- Lynn White dan Christopher Bock. (2022). Ecospiritual Approaches to Environmental Ethics: Literature, Culture, and Sustainability. *Environmental Philosophy Review*, 14(3), 233–252.
- M. Noor. (2020). Cultural wisdom as environmental ethics: Malay perspectives on sustainable living. . . *Asian Journal of Environment and Culture*, 7(3), 233–249.
- Marisyah, A., & Fatimah, S. (2020). *Application of Gurindam 12 Local Wisdom Values in Malay Community Life in Tanjung Pinang City, Riau Islands*. 458(Icssgt 2019), 396–403. <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.200803.049>
- Niman, E. M. (2019). KEARIFAN LOKAL DAN UPAYA PELESTARIAN LINGKUNGAN ALAM. *Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Kebudayaan Missio*, 11(1), 91–106. doi:10.36928/jpkm.v11i1.139
- Nor Amalina Yusoff, at all. (2019). Environmental challenges in Riau Archipelago: Toward sustainable maritime governance. *Marine Policy*, 108. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2019.103602>
- Norli Abdullah. (2020). Moral teachings in Gurindam Dua Belas: A study of Malay wisdom literature. *Jurnal Melayu*, 19(2), 45–60. <https://doi.org/10.21315/jm2020.19.2.3>
- Pujiarti, R. (2022). *Hubungan manusia dan alam dalam budaya Melayu di Riau*. <https://id.scribd.com/document/721096279>
- Raja Ali Haji. (1847). *Gurindam Dua Belas*. Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia.
- Runtuwene, H. C. M. (2025). Ecotheology: Integrating Faith, Creation Care, and Contextual

- Practice in Indonesian Protestant Congregations. *Educatio Christi*, 6(1), 145–170. <https://doi.org/10.70796/educatio-christi.v6i1.215>
- Sirait, L. (2018). Revitalisasi Gurindam Dua Belas Karya Raja Ali Haji Sebagai Pendidikan Berbasis Kearifan Lokal Etnis Melayu. *Sosietas*, 8(1), 446–451. <https://doi.org/10.17509/sosietas.v8i1.12497>
 - Sutran, S., Suryanti, A., & Zulfikar, A. (2023). Indeks Antropogenik Mangrove di Kota Tanjungpinang, Provinsi Kepulauan Riau. *Jurnal Akuatiklestari*, 7(1), 44–51. <https://doi.org/10.31629/akuatiklestari.v7i1.6236>
 - Thomas Berry. (2019a). *The Ecological Vision: Reflections on Literature, Spirituality, and the Environment*. Routledge.
 - Thomas Berry. (2019b). *The Sacred Universe : Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century*. Columbia University Press.
 - Yusuf, N., Hanafiah, R., & Wahid. (2019). Mangrove conservation and traditional ecological knowledge in the Riau Archipelago. *Maritime Sustainability Journal*, 11(2), 140–158.
 - Z. Ahmad, H. Rahman, & S. (2022). Local wisdom and religious values in environmental conservation: A Southeast Asian perspective. *Journal of Environmental Ethics*, 42(3), 215–230.