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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Towards a Local Wisdom-Based Water Resource Management Model

Abang Mohd Razif Abang Muis*

Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning, Universiti Malaysia Sabah 88400 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia

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***Corresponding Author:**

amrazif@ums.edu.my

ABSTRACT

Water resource management is a critical component of sustainable development, particularly in regions facing water scarcity, climate change, and environmental degradation. While modern technological solutions have improved water conservation and distribution, local wisdom and traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) provide valuable, yet often overlooked, insights into sustainable water governance. This conceptual paper explores the integration of local wisdom into contemporary water management frameworks to enhance resilience and sustainability. By systematically reviewing existing literature, the study identifies key principles of indigenous and community-based water management practices that emphasize holistic, participatory, and ecosystem-centred approaches. Findings suggest that incorporating local knowledge strengthens governance, promotes conservation, and fosters ecological balance. This paper advocates for a hybrid management model that harmonizes traditional wisdom with modern scientific methodologies, ensuring a more inclusive, adaptive, and sustainable approach to water resource governance.

1. INTRODUCTION

Water is fundamental to human survival, economic development, and environmental sustainability. However, growing demand, climate change, rapid urbanization, and industrialization present significant challenges to water resource management. While conventional strategies have contributed to water conservation and distribution, they often result in unintended environmental and social consequences (Gleick, 2018). In contrast, traditional knowledge systems developed by indigenous and local communities offer valuable insights into sustainable water management, emphasizing ecological balance, cultural values, and community-led governance (Berkes, 1999). Despite their potential, these traditional approaches remain underutilized in contemporary policy frameworks. This study examines how traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) can be integrated into modern water management strategies, exploring indigenous water management principles, their relevance in contemporary settings, and the benefits of a hybrid approach.

Water resource security has become a pressing global issue, particularly for rural communities that struggle to access clean and treated water. According to the World Health Organization (2023), only 71% of the global population has access to clean water, with significant disparities in rural and remote areas, where access drops to 62%. In Malaysia, this disparity is evident in rural areas of Sabah (61%), Sarawak (67.2%), and Kelantan (82%), which lag significantly behind urban regions, where access to clean and treated water is nearly 100% (National Water Services Commission, 2022). This imbalance underscores the gap in infrastructure development necessary to ensure a consistent and safe water supply.

Table 1: Percentage of access to clean water by state in Malaysia

State	Access to Clean Water Urban Areas (%)	Access to Clean Water Rural/Remote Areas (%)
Johor	100.0	99.8
Kedah	100.0	96.5
Kelantan	65.8	82.0
Melaka	100.0	100.0
Negeri Sembilan	100.0	99.8
Pahang	100.0	96.0
Perak	100.0	99.2
Perlis	100.0	99.0
Pulau Pinang	100.0	99.8
Sabah	100.0	61.0
Sarawak	99.0	67.2
Selangor	100.0	99.5
Terengganu	99.1	92.9
Federal Territory of Labuan	100.0	100.0

Source: National water services commission (SPAN), 2022.

Rural communities often rely on natural water sources such as rivers, springs, and rainwater catchments. However, these sources are increasingly vulnerable to pollution from logging activities, uncontrolled agriculture, and climate change. A significant rise in water pollution has been reported in upstream river areas (Utusan Malaysia, 2023). Additionally, extreme weather patterns such as El Niño and La Niña contribute to unpredictable climate conditions, leading to prolonged droughts and extreme rainfall, further straining water resources. Rising global temperatures also pose threats to Malaysia's water reservoirs, lakes, and catchment areas, causing drastic reductions in water levels and affecting rural livelihoods (Utusan Malaysia, 2024). Despite various policies and initiatives aimed at improving water security, current strategies often fail to consider the specific needs and local contexts of rural communities. Studies suggest that most water management systems in rural areas do not fully integrate green technology or community-based participation. Although solutions such as rainwater harvesting and biofiltration exist, they are often not adapted to the socio-cultural and environmental conditions of rural communities, making their implementation ineffective or unsustainable (Ali & Kamraju, 2024; Józefowicz & Michniewicz-Ankiersztajn, 2023; Kumar & Choudhury, 2024; Shivaraju et al., 2024).

Furthermore, water resource management in Malaysia has traditionally been top-down, with limited involvement from local communities. This lack of community participation results in a diminished sense of collective responsibility for water conservation, ultimately reducing the effectiveness of sustainability efforts (Fulazzaky et al., 2023). According to (Abdul Rahman, 2018), public engagement in environmental issues in Malaysia remains low, contributing to a lack of awareness and responsibility toward natural resource conservation. To address these challenges, a community-based approach to water resource management is essential. This approach ensures active public participation, making water governance more inclusive, effective, and sustainable. The success of disaster management strategies in Malaysia has demonstrated that community involvement enhances public awareness and preparedness. Similarly, integrating green technologies such as biofiltration and rainwater harvesting systems into rural water management can provide long-term, sustainable solutions.

Thus, this study proposes a Local Wisdom-Based Water Resource Management Model that harmonizes indigenous knowledge systems with modern scientific methodologies. By leveraging traditional water management practices rooted in local ecological knowledge, community-led governance, and cultural sustainability alongside technological advancements, this framework aims to improve water security, conservation, and resilience in rural Malaysia and beyond.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Traditional knowledge and water management

Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) refers to cumulative knowledge, practices, and beliefs developed through generations of close environmental interaction (Berkes, 1999). TEK-based water

management includes rainwater harvesting, sacred water sites, irrigation systems, and conservation techniques. Studies show indigenous water governance promotes ecological balance and equitable distribution (Agrawal, 2002). Examples include Bali's Subak system, which efficiently manages water for agriculture (Lansing, 2006), and the qanat system in Iran and Afghanistan, which transports water sustainably through underground channels (Lightfoot, 1997).

Traditional knowledge plays a crucial role in water management across diverse geographical and cultural contexts, offering sustainable solutions that are deeply rooted in local ecological and cultural practices. In Nagaland, India, the Rüza practice exemplifies how indigenous water management systems can contribute to sustainable development by integrating non-Western practices with Western science, thus broadening the conception of sustainable science (Das, 2024). Similarly, the Zapotecs of Southern Mexico utilize their indigenous knowledge to manage water resources effectively, demonstrating the potential for integrating traditional and Western scientific knowledge to protect water resources and human health (Klingaman et al., 2024). In the Pacific Islands, traditional knowledge is vital for building adaptive capacity to climate change impacts on water systems, despite challenges such as colonial legacies and loss of traditional practices (Nursey-Bray et al., 2024). The Maasai in Tanzania also highlight the importance of traditional water management technologies, which are at risk of extinction due to the dominance of colonial education systems (Rwiza et al., 2023). In the Purulia district of West Bengal, traditional agricultural water management practices are crucial for addressing water scarcity, although these practices face threats from modern influences (Niladri, 2024). The Kumaon region in the Indian Himalayas showcases how religious and cultural values are intertwined with water management, emphasizing the sacredness of water in a challenging geographical terrain (Sah, 2023). Furthermore, the integration of traditional ecological knowledge with modern scientific approaches is being explored in various regions, such as in Cross Rivers State, Nigeria, where indigenous knowledge systems significantly impact resource management and environmental conservation (Brownson et al., 2024). The Global Center for Climate Change and Transboundary Waters exemplifies efforts to harmonize traditional ecological knowledge with Western science for transboundary water governance (Krantzberg, 2024). In urban contexts, such as Khulna City, Bangladesh, traditional water knowledge is recognized for its potential to enhance urban design and flood resilience, although challenges in knowledge transmission and governance persist (Asad et al., 2023). Lastly, in western India, a plural knowledges model is proposed to integrate traditional and scientific knowledge for sustainable river management, highlighting the historical significance of traditional water harvesting techniques (Brierley et al., 2024). Collectively, these studies underscore the importance of preserving and integrating traditional knowledge in water management to address contemporary environmental challenges and promote sustainable development.

2.3 Integrating traditional knowledge into contemporary models

Integrating traditional knowledge into contemporary models involves a multifaceted approach that acknowledges the value of indigenous practices across various domains, including health, agriculture, climate change, education, and industry. The Contemporary Implementation of Traditional knowledge and Evidence (CITE) framework, developed through a Delphi study, provides a structured guide for incorporating traditional, complementary, and integrative health care (TCIH) into modern health systems, emphasizing the importance of rigorous and respectful integration (Steel et al., 2024). In agriculture, traditional knowledge plays a crucial role in sustainable practices, as seen in Nigeria's cattle breeding, where nomadic pastoralists' methods align closely with modern scientific standards, suggesting a pathway for integrating these practices to enhance productivity and sustainability (Sikiru et al., 2023). Similarly, a sociocultural framework for agriculture highlights how traditional practices, such as organic pest control and crop diversity, can complement modern techniques like precision agriculture, fostering sustainable development and community resilience (Adebimpe Oluwabukade Adefila et al., 2024). In the context of climate change, indigenous knowledge systems in Java and Bali offer valuable strategies for mitigation and adaptation, which can be integrated into formal climate policies to enhance global resilience (Rahmah & Sulistyono, 2024). The integration of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) into environmental education and conservation efforts underscores the importance of indigenous wisdom in promoting sustainable resource use and ecological balance (Kamakaula et al., 2024; Petrovets & Wasąg, 2024; Slikkerveer & Gellaerts, 2024). In music education, integrating traditional music into contemporary curricula enriches cultural diversity and fosters innovation, providing a model for preserving national heritage

while advancing educational goals (Цуй, 2024). The concept of 'epistemic syncretism' in traditional industries, such as the silk industry, advocates for the integration of indigenous knowledge to achieve sustainable development, emphasizing cognitive justice and a pluralistic approach (Sharma, 2024). Finally, traditional Indian philosophies offer ethical and spiritual guidelines that remain relevant in addressing contemporary socio-cultural and environmental challenges, providing a holistic perspective for modern worldviews (Navneet, 2022). Collectively, these studies illustrate the potential of integrating traditional knowledge into contemporary models, highlighting the need for collaborative approaches that respect and leverage indigenous wisdom to address global challenges.

2.4. Key challenges in water resource security in rural areas

Water resource security in rural areas plays a crucial role in ensuring the well-being of rural communities and socio-economic development. However, these areas often face multiple challenges that threaten water security, including climatic factors, economic constraints, and technological limitations. This study examines these key challenges based on the latest literature. Climate change is one of the biggest challenges to water resource security. A study by Gomba (2019) in areas affected by Typhoon Haiyan found that natural disasters such as floods disrupted water supply systems, highlighting the need for more resilient system designs. In South Africa, Hosea and Khalema (2021) reported that the imbalance between water demand and available resources was further exacerbated by inadequate spatial planning. Climate change also negatively impacts agricultural productivity, as reported by Nephawe et al. (2021) in the Limpopo region, where prolonged droughts affected food security and rural development. In addition to the challenges mentioned, groundwater quality in rural areas is often threatened due to the lack of modern water treatment infrastructure. Malaysia's National Groundwater Quality Standards set threshold values for parameters such as total coliform (5000 MPN/100 ml), nitrate (10 mg/L), and arsenic (0.01 mg/L) to ensure the safety of drinking water. However, pollution from agricultural activities or groundwater overuse in rural areas often results in contamination levels exceeding the permissible limits. For example, the lack of water treatment technology has been a major obstacle for areas facing water crises, as observed in Brazil by Vieira et al. (2020). Therefore, it is essential to develop a water security management framework that integrates green technology to ensure safe groundwater quality.

Arid rural areas such as Yanchi County in China and northeastern Iran also face significant challenges due to imbalances in water supply and demand. Wang et al. (2022) found that excessive groundwater use, and permanent water diversion had led to chronic water shortages in these regions. In Nepal, Merz et al. (2010) reported that dry seasons resulted in significant water shortages for domestic and agricultural use. Economic constraints further worsen water security challenges in rural areas. In Central Africa, Nounkeu et al. (2021) found that most households struggled to access clean water due to limited financial resources. Similarly, in rural Nigeria, the lack of an effective water management framework hindered sustainable solutions. This situation is further aggravated by the high costs of maintaining water infrastructure, as reported by Machado et al. (2023) in Brazil.

In rural areas of Pakistan, the uncontrolled use of groundwater pumps has led to water depletion, exacerbating water scarcity (Ishaque et al., 2023). These economic constraints often force rural residents to rely on contaminated water sources, leading to various health problems, as reported by Akinde et al. (2019) in southwestern Nigeria. Technological limitations also pose a major barrier to ensuring water resource security. In rural Mexico, Alvarado et al. (2022) found that inadequate sanitation and drinking water infrastructure led to various health and social problems. The lack of modern water treatment technology has also affected water quality in rural Brazil (Vieira et al., 2020). A study in India by Lalitha et al. (2014) showed that reliance on traditional technologies such as tube wells led to unsustainable groundwater exploitation. Additionally, Józefowicz and Michniewicz-Ankiersztajn (2023) emphasized the need for digital tools in water resource management to optimize usage and communication with local communities.

Water security challenges are also influenced by socio-economic factors and governance. In Cameroon, Petiangma et al. (2022) reported that limited access to clean water was affected by high costs and weak governance. In rural California, Pannu (2012) highlighted that remote communities faced systemic challenges such as insufficient funding and industrial pollution. Morton (2016) emphasized that water insecurity could lead to social and political instability, as seen in Syria due to drought and inefficient governance. Water security in rural areas is affected by multiple challenges, including climate change, economic constraints, and technological limitations. Additional factors

such as socio-economic issues and ineffective governance further exacerbate the situation. Therefore, an integrated approach involving modern technology, financial support, and good governance is essential to address these challenges. Further research is needed to develop innovative strategies suited to local needs, ensuring the long-term sustainability of water resources in rural areas.

2.5 The impact of community involvement on water resource security

Community involvement in water resource management is increasingly recognized as a crucial approach to enhancing water security, particularly in rural areas. Studies conducted in various countries and contexts indicate that active community participation in water management can improve access to clean water, ensure sustainability, and reduce water-related conflicts. This article examines different perspectives on community engagement and its implications for water security based on current literature. Community-based water resource management has proven to be effective in improving water security. In Timor-Leste, training provided by NGOs such as Permatil enabled communities to build retention basins and enhance groundwater recharge. However, challenges in maintaining infrastructure highlight the need for additional responsibility after training (Burgi & Rydbeck, 2001). A study in Karak, Pakistan, emphasized the importance of community participation through community-based organizations. The findings showed increased satisfaction and water security through participatory approaches (Rasool et al., 2024). In Indonesia, the Drinking Water Consumer Association (HIPPAM) plays a vital role in providing clean water to more than 500 households, thereby promoting resilience against water shortages (Simarmata et al., 2024).

In Nepal, community institutions play a crucial role in improving livelihoods and conserving natural resources. However, gender, caste, and ethnic inequalities pose significant challenges to strengthening community involvement (Prachanda Pradhan et al., 2022). In Kenya, the Community Water Management System (CWMS) has demonstrated effectiveness through the active participation of community members in planning and management (Mathenge et al., 2014). Among Indigenous communities in Australia, community-based water demand management strategies have enhanced social capital and contributed to sustainable water management outcomes (Beal et al., 2023). This approach fosters collaborative learning between communities and water managers. A study in China highlights that integrated governance requires the involvement of multiple stakeholders to improve water security (Yu, 2014). Meanwhile, in South Africa, collaboration between communities, NGOs, and local governments has successfully addressed water security challenges through a collective approach (Hove et al., 2021).

However, community participation is often hindered by power imbalances. A study in Bangladesh revealed that community-based projects tend to fail in addressing the needs of marginalized populations without adequate community and local user involvement (Sultana, 2009). Therefore, a deep understanding of socio-political dynamics is crucial to ensuring fair community participation. Research on gender-inclusive water management in West Africa indicates that involving all community members, regardless of gender, enhances the effectiveness of collaboration between communities, NGOs, and governments (Bothi, 2012). This diversity of perspectives contributes to more sustainable water management practices. Community involvement is a critical component in ensuring water resource security. Studies indicate that community-based management, multi-stakeholder collaboration, and a comprehensive understanding of socio-political dynamics are essential elements for the success of such initiatives. However, challenges such as gender inequality, lack of technical support, and structural barriers require further attention to ensure effective and sustainable community engagement (Muis et al., 2025).

2.6. Developing a community-based water security framework with green technology integration and community education

Water security is a critical global issue, particularly in rural areas facing challenges in accessing clean water. A community-based water security framework that integrates green technology and community education emerges as an innovative and sustainable approach to addressing these challenges. This literature review aims to understand the role of green technology, community engagement, and education in developing a resilient and sustainable water security framework. Studies show that green technology plays a vital role in ensuring access to clean water, especially in areas prone to pollution. For example, Jakariya et al. (2003) highlighted the need for appropriate technology to provide arsenic-free water in Bangladesh. Such technology must be both community-

accepted and economically viable to ensure long-term sustainability. Additionally, sustainable technologies such as manually dug wells and spring capture structures can offer effective solutions. Green technology not only helps reduce pollution but also improves water resource management. For instance, the Blue-Green Action Platform (BlueGap) integrates smart technology with community education to address nitrogen pollution through water quality data analysis (Shrestha et al., 2024). This approach demonstrates how green technology can be combined with education to empower communities.

Community education is a crucial component in developing a water security framework. Education raises public awareness of the importance of sustainable water management. (Li, 2024) emphasized the integration of sustainable desalination technology into educational programs, which helps increase community awareness about environmental conservation and freshwater production. Maneeprakorn et al. (2024) demonstrated that the Learning Innovation Platform (LIP) can enhance community capacity in assessing and treating water quality. Education not only fosters knowledge but also cultivates a sense of responsibility toward water resources. Educational programs tailored to local contexts can empower communities to use green technology effectively (Souter et al., 2024). This approach has proven effective in strengthening community resilience against water-related challenges. Community involvement in water resource management ensures local ownership of water security initiatives. A study by Bogoliubov et al. (2023) indicated that community participation could address water pollution issues and the lack of technical maintenance expertise. In Khon Kaen, Thailand, community education has helped improve water quality and health outcomes (Maneeprakorn et al., 2024). A community-based approach also allows communities to participate in planning and implementing water security programs. Santos et al. (2024) emphasized the importance of environmental education in promoting safe water use practices. By integrating green technology and community education, a water security framework can be adapted to local contexts.

The integration of green technology and community education in a community-based water security framework offers a sustainable solution to water security challenges. To ensure the effectiveness of this approach, several key steps must be taken; (i) Green technology must be adapted to the needs and resources of the local community; (ii) Educational programs should focus on building community capacity in water resource management; and (iii) Collaboration between communities, non-governmental organizations, and local authorities is essential for the success of this framework (Ismail et al., 2025).

3. Conceptual Framework

This paper presents a conceptual framework for integrating traditional ecological knowledge with modern water management strategies. The framework consists of three main components:

i. Community-based governance is the key component to emphasize the importance of local communities in decision-making processes, ensuring that their knowledge and practices are respected and incorporated into water management policies.
ii. Recognizing sacred and cultural significance to promote sustainable practices. This aspect highlights the need to acknowledge and preserve the cultural values associated with water resources, fostering a sense of stewardship among community members and encouraging sustainable practices that align with their traditions.
iii. iii. Incorporating flexible and nature-based solutions in response to climatic variations. This approach advocates for the use of adaptive management strategies that can evolve with changing environmental conditions, utilizing natural processes to enhance resilience and sustainability in water resource management.

This framework highlights how traditional knowledge can complement contemporary water management approaches to enhance sustainability, resilience, and inclusivity.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Principles of traditional water management

i. Collective decision-making in water governance

Community participation in water governance refers to the active involvement of local communities in decision-making processes that impact their water resources. This approach recognizes the importance of incorporating community voices, knowledge, and practices into the management and

governance of water systems, ensuring more sustainable and equitable outcomes. One of the primary benefits of community participation is empowerment and inclusivity. By engaging local populations in governance, individuals and groups, particularly marginalized communities, gain a stake in the management of their water resources. This inclusivity ensures that diverse perspectives are considered in discussions and decisions, leading to fairer and more representative policies. Moreover, communities often possess traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) that has been developed over generations. This local expertise provides valuable insights into seasonal changes, water quality, and sustainable usage practices that modern scientific approaches may overlook. By integrating TEK with contemporary water management frameworks, decision-makers can create more context-specific and effective solutions. Another key advantage of community participation is its role in building trust and relationships between stakeholders, including government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and local residents. When communities feel that their input is valued and respected, they are more likely to collaborate and engage in water governance processes, thereby reducing conflicts over resource allocation. Furthermore, participation enhances sustainability and resilience by ensuring that management practices align with local cultural values and environmental conditions. When communities take ownership of water management initiatives, they are more likely to implement and maintain sustainable practices, which helps enhance the resilience of water systems to climatic variations and environmental challenges.

Effective collective decision-making is another crucial component of community participation. Through community meetings, forums, and participatory planning sessions, local populations can engage in shared dialogue and consensus-building, ensuring that decisions reflect their collective needs rather than the interests of external stakeholders. This collaborative approach fosters a greater sense of responsibility and commitment to water resource management. Additionally, accountability and transparency improve when communities are actively involved in governance. They can hold decision-makers accountable for their actions, leading to better management practices and increased public trust in water governance institutions. Furthermore, community participation facilitates adaptive management, allowing local populations to respond to changing environmental conditions and emerging challenges. This flexibility is essential for addressing pressing issues such as climate change, resource scarcity, and water pollution. By engaging directly in governance, communities develop the capacity to identify problems early, implement locally driven solutions, and adjust strategies as needed. In summary, community participation is a vital component of water governance, as it enhances decision-making processes, promotes sustainable practices, and ensures that water management strategies remain culturally relevant, inclusive, and effective. By integrating local insights and practices into governance frameworks, water management can become more resilient, adaptive, and responsive to the needs of local populations, ultimately contributing to long-term water security and sustainability.

ii. Indigenous reverence for water bodies promotes ethical use

The sacred and cultural significance of water bodies is deeply embedded in the traditions of many Indigenous cultures worldwide. This reverence extends beyond the recognition of water's physical properties; it reflects a profound spiritual connection that shapes ethical practices, community values, and the sustainable management of water resources. Indigenous communities often regard water as a living entity, imbued with spiritual significance, which fosters a deep respect for its protection and responsible use. Rituals, ceremonies, and traditions centred around water reinforce its sacredness, embedding the principle that water must be treated with care, reverence, and gratitude. The Indigenous perspective on water emphasizes ethical use and stewardship, viewing water not as a commodity to be owned but as a communal resource essential for all living beings. This philosophy underpins sustainable water management practices that ensure water bodies remain healthy, accessible, and protected for future generations. Many Indigenous communities practice conservation by safeguarding water sources from pollution and over-extraction, drawing on Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) to implement sustainable land-use strategies that maintain the integrity of ecosystems. Additionally, Indigenous groups actively participate in restoration initiatives to revive degraded water bodies, often through replanting native vegetation, conducting clean-up projects, and advocating for stronger environmental protections.

Water is also central to cultural identity and community cohesion in Indigenous societies. It holds symbolic and spiritual significance in their stories, traditions, and social structures, reinforcing a

collective sense of responsibility for its preservation. Cultural practices such as purification ceremonies, seasonal celebrations, and offerings to water sources reinforce this deep connection while educating younger generations about ethical water stewardship. Knowledge transmission plays a crucial role in preserving these values, with elders serving as custodians of wisdom, ensuring that future generations continue to uphold the reverence for water and maintain their responsibilities toward its protection. Beyond cultural traditions, Indigenous reverence for water often translates into advocacy and environmental justice efforts. Many Indigenous communities engage in legal and political battles to defend their water rights against industrial exploitation, pollution, and climate change impacts. Their holistic understanding of the interconnectedness of water, land, and life makes them key advocates for sustainable water management. Indigenous groups frequently collaborate with environmental organizations, government agencies, and academic institutions to integrate traditional ecological knowledge into modern water governance policies. These partnerships highlight the importance of incorporating Indigenous perspectives into water management frameworks to promote long-term sustainability and ethical resource use.

The sacred and cultural significance of water within Indigenous communities fosters a framework of respect, stewardship, and communal responsibility that promotes ethical water use and sustainability. By recognizing water as a vital, living entity, Indigenous peoples advocate for practices that protect and conserve this essential resource, ensuring its availability for future generations. This deep reverence for water not only enhances water security and ecological resilience but also supports social equity and environmental justice. The integration of traditional ecological knowledge with contemporary water management strategies presents a valuable opportunity to develop more holistic, sustainable, and culturally inclusive approaches to global water governance.

iii. Flexibility in responding to climatic variations ensures sustainability

Adaptive management is a systematic and iterative approach to natural resource management that emphasizes flexibility and responsiveness to changing environmental conditions. This method is particularly crucial in the context of climate variability, where shifting rainfall patterns, prolonged droughts, and extreme weather events significantly impact water availability and quality. By incorporating continuous learning, stakeholder engagement, and knowledge integration, adaptive management ensures that water governance remains dynamic, resilient, and sustainable in the face of uncertainty. A learning-oriented approach is at the core of adaptive management, where decision-makers actively analyse the outcomes of their management strategies. Through a cycle of planning, implementation, monitoring, and adjustment, managers refine their approaches based on observed ecological responses and evolving environmental conditions. This process enables water management authorities to make evidence-based adjustments, ensuring that interventions remain effective over time. The iterative nature of adaptive management not only improves efficiency but also reduces the risks associated with rigid, one-size-fits-all policies that may not respond adequately to environmental fluctuations.

One of the defining characteristics of adaptive management is flexibility, which allows decision-makers to modify policies in response to new data, emerging challenges, or unexpected environmental changes. This adaptability is essential in addressing climate change impacts, such as fluctuating water levels, altered precipitation patterns, and increasing demand for freshwater resources. For instance, in the event of a prolonged drought, adaptive management strategies can help reallocate water resources, implement conservation measures, and prioritize essential uses to minimize social and ecological disruptions. This real-time responsiveness strengthens the capacity of water governance systems to withstand environmental uncertainties. Stakeholder engagement plays a vital role in adaptive management by fostering community participation in decision-making processes. Local communities, particularly those with Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), possess invaluable insights into regional water cycles, seasonal variations, and sustainable resource-use practices. By incorporating their expertise, water management initiatives become more culturally relevant, socially inclusive, and locally effective. Community participation not only enhances trust and cooperation but also promotes a sense of shared responsibility, ensuring that policies align with local needs and are more likely to gain widespread support.

The integration of traditional and modern knowledge systems further enhances the effectiveness of adaptive management. Traditional water management techniques, such as seasonal water harvesting, crop rotation, and watershed conservation, offer time-tested strategies for maintaining

water balance. When combined with modern technologies, such as remote sensing, data-driven modelling, and precision irrigation, these approaches can result in more efficient, sustainable, and context-specific solutions. This hybrid approach acknowledges the value of indigenous wisdom while leveraging scientific advancements to optimize water resource utilization. A key strength of adaptive management is its ability to address uncertainty in the face of climate change. As environmental conditions become increasingly unpredictable, managers must experiment with different strategies, monitor their impacts, and adjust policies accordingly. This trial-and-error approach ensures that even if initial interventions do not yield the desired results, the system can self-correct and evolve based on lessons learned. By continuously refining strategies, adaptive management minimizes risks associated with static or outdated water policies that fail to accommodate emerging challenges.

Moreover, adaptive management fosters resilience-building, equipping both ecosystems and communities with the capacity to absorb disturbances while maintaining their essential functions. Resilient water management strategies prioritize nature-based solutions, such as wetland restoration, agroforestry, and watershed protection, which enhance biodiversity and strengthen ecosystem services. These approaches mitigate climate-related risks, such as floods and droughts, while promoting long-term ecological balance and water security. By embracing resilience as a core principle, adaptive management ensures that water governance remains sustainable, equitable, and future-ready. Adaptive management is an indispensable approach for ensuring the sustainability of water resources in the face of climate variability and environmental uncertainty. By emphasizing learning, flexibility, stakeholder participation, and knowledge integration, this approach equips decision-makers with the tools necessary to navigate complex and dynamic water challenges. Its focus on resilience and responsiveness allows water governance systems to adapt proactively, ensuring more effective and sustainable outcomes for both ecosystems and the communities that depend on them. As climate change intensifies, embracing adaptive management principles will be essential for safeguarding global water resources and promoting long-term sustainability.

iv. Conservation through terracing, agroforestry, and wetland preservation

Nature-Based Solutions (NbS) are strategies that leverage natural processes and ecosystems to address environmental challenges, particularly in the realm of water resource management and conservation. These solutions aim to enhance ecosystem services while promoting sustainability, resilience, and biodiversity. By integrating natural approaches such as terracing, agroforestry, and wetland preservation, communities can mitigate environmental degradation, improve water retention, and strengthen ecological balance. One of the most effective NbS practices is terracing, an ancient agricultural technique that involves constructing stepped levels on sloped terrain to control water runoff and soil erosion. This method is especially beneficial in hilly and mountainous regions, where soil degradation poses a major threat to agricultural productivity. By slowing down water flow, terracing enhances soil infiltration, preventing nutrient loss and improving overall soil health. Additionally, this practice contributes to water conservation by capturing and storing rainwater, ensuring its availability for crops during dry seasons. Beyond its agricultural benefits, terracing creates diverse microhabitats, supporting biodiversity by providing suitable environments for various plant and animal species. Ultimately, this technique enhances food security, enabling farmers to cultivate crops in challenging landscapes while minimizing environmental harm.

Another key NbS approach is agroforestry, which integrates trees and shrubs into agricultural landscapes, blending agriculture and forestry to create sustainable land-use systems. This approach improves soil stability, as tree roots help anchor the soil, preventing erosion and enhancing fertility through the natural addition of organic matter. Agroforestry also promotes water conservation, as trees improve soil moisture retention and reduce evaporation, ensuring a steady water supply for crops. Moreover, agroforestry systems foster biodiversity, providing habitats for various species, which enhances ecosystem resilience against environmental changes. From an economic perspective, this method diversifies farmers' income by enabling the cultivation of multiple products such as timber, fruits, and nuts, reducing reliance on a single crop and enhancing food security. By combining ecological and economic benefits, agroforestry supports long-term sustainability in agricultural landscapes.

Wetland preservation is another vital NbS strategy that plays a crucial role in water filtration, flood mitigation, and biodiversity conservation. Wetlands, characterized by water-saturated soils, serve as natural filters, trapping pollutants and sediments, thus significantly improving water quality in

surrounding areas. Their ability to absorb excess rainfall and runoff makes them natural flood buffers, protecting communities and infrastructure from severe flooding events. Furthermore, wetlands provide critical habitats for a wide range of species, including migratory birds, fish, and amphibians, supporting overall ecosystem diversity. Another critical function of wetlands is carbon sequestration, as these ecosystems store large amounts of carbon in their soil and vegetation, helping to mitigate climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The conservation of wetlands is therefore essential not only for water security and biodiversity protection but also for climate resilience.

Nature-Based Solutions such as terracing, agroforestry, and wetland preservation provide effective, sustainable strategies for managing water resources, preserving ecosystems, and enhancing agricultural productivity. By harnessing the inherent benefits of natural processes, these solutions increase resilience to climate change, improve water security, and promote social equity. The integration of NbS into modern water resource management frameworks fosters a holistic, environmentally responsible approach to addressing pressing global water challenges. As the world continues to grapple with climate change, water scarcity, and environmental degradation, the widespread adoption of Nature-Based Solutions will be critical in ensuring long-term sustainability and ecological balance.

4.2 Integrating traditional knowledge into modern models

The findings emerging from recent research strongly indicate that the deliberate incorporation of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) into contemporary water management practices significantly enhances overall water security, leads to a marked reduction in environmental impact, and fosters a greater sense of social equity among various communities. Furthermore, hybrid models that effectively combine indigenous practices with cutting-edge modern technologies possess the potential to deliver far more comprehensive and holistic solutions for the management of water resources, thereby addressing the multifaceted challenges associated with water scarcity and sustainability. Such integrative approaches not only promote resilience within ecosystems but also empower local communities by valuing and utilizing their ancestral wisdom in conjunction with scientific advancements.

4.3 Future direction in Malaysia

In Malaysia, future research should focus on evaluating the effectiveness of this framework across different geographical and social contexts to ensure broader application. According to the National Water Services Commission (SPAN, 2022), only 61% of the rural population in Sabah and 67.2% in Sarawak have access to clean and treated water, significantly lower than other states in Malaysia. In Peninsular Malaysia, Kelantan records 82% access to clean water, further highlighting the urgent need for sustainable solutions in remote areas. Below are the key indicators for determining study areas for this research:

Table 2: Key indicators

Indicator	Descriptive	Data Source
Access to Clean and Treated Water	Percentage of districts with access to clean water supply (less than 70%).	(Suruhanjaya Perkhidmatan Air Negara, 2022)
Geographical Distance	Distance from the main urban center (more than 40km).	Google Maps (Google, 2025)
Average Income (RM)	Areas with the lowest average income.	Official Open Data Portal Malaysia (Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia, 2025)
Absolute Poverty	Absolute poverty rate (exceeding 10%).	Official Open Data Portal Malaysia (Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia, 2025)

Based on the indicators and data sources mentioned, the primary study areas for this research can be identified, with their selection justified by considering all these indicators.

Table 3: Indicators of selected rural areas in Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak

No.	State	District	Access to Clean and Treated Water (%)	Distance from Main Urban Centre (KM)	Average Income (RM)	Absolute Poverty (%)
1	Sarawak	Bukit Mabong	21.6	135 KM from Kapit	3,509	28.7
2	Sarawak	Song	29.8	50.9 KM from Kapit	3,477	6.0
3	Sarawak	Selangau	38.5	77.7 KM from Sibu	4,128	14.3
4	Sarawak	Tebedu	44.1	39 KM from Serian	3,218	38.6
5	Sarawak	Julau	46.8	58.2 KM from Sibu	3,548	13.0
6	Kelantan	Bachok	47.4	24.8 KM from Kota Bharu	4,811	13.1
7	Sarawak	Marudi	47.4	34.8 KM from Miri	5,373	16.9
8	Sabah	Ranau	47.4	106 KM from Kota Kinabalu	5,270	26.8
9	Sarawak	Belaga	48.5	189 KM from Bintulu	4,239	6.9
10	Sabah	Tenom	50.9	41.7 KM from Kota Kinabalu	5,217	17.2
11	Sabah	Tongod	53.4	266 KM from Kota Kinabalu	4,019	56.6
12	Sarawak	Kapit	57.3	159 KM from Sibu	4,053	3.8
13	Sarawak	Telang Usan	57.8	137 KM from Miri	4,692	13.6
14	Sabah	Beluran	63.6	76.9 KM from Sandakan	4,501	45.0
15	Sarawak	Lundu	63.6	83.8 KM from Kuching	4,935	10.2
16	Sarawak	Tatau	63.7	54.8 KM from Bintulu	5,617	5.0
17	Sarawak	Lawas	65	235 KM from Miri	4,476	14.4
18	Sarawak	Subis	67.4	47.6 KM from Miri	6,390	7.5
19	Kelantan	Machang	68	45.3 KM from Kota Bharu	4,987	7.1
20	Kelantan	Kota Bharu	68.4	0 KM from Kota Bharu	5,693	9.1
21	Kelantan	Pasir Puteh	68.5	45 KM from Kota Bharu	4,712	12.7
22	Sarawak	Sebauh	68.7	131 KM from Bintulu	5,120	7.4
23	Sabah	Nabawan	68.8	67.2 KM from Keningau	5,016	35.6
24	Kelantan	Kuala Krai	70	71.9 KM from Kota Bharu	3,798	22.4

5. CONCLUSION

This study has explored the integration of local wisdom and traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) into contemporary water resource management frameworks, demonstrating that indigenous and community-led approaches can significantly enhance water governance, sustainability, and resilience. The findings highlight that traditional water management systems, rooted in cultural heritage and ecological balance, offer practical solutions that complement modern scientific methodologies. By leveraging community-based governance, adaptive management, and nature-based solutions, this paper advocates for a hybrid model that ensures water security, environmental conservation, and equitable resource distribution. One of the key takeaways from this research is the importance of community participation in water governance. Indigenous knowledge systems emphasize collective decision-making, ethical stewardship, and cultural reverence for water bodies, fostering a strong sense of ownership and responsibility among local populations. This involvement is crucial in addressing challenges such as water scarcity, pollution, and climate change impacts. Additionally, integrating nature-based solutions, such as terracing, agroforestry, and wetland preservation, into water management strategies can further enhance ecological sustainability and resource efficiency.

The study also underscores the need for flexible, adaptive management approaches to respond to climate variations and environmental uncertainties. By combining traditional practices with modern data-driven technologies, water governance can become more dynamic, resilient, and responsive to emerging challenges. Moreover, policy frameworks should recognize and incorporate traditional knowledge, ensuring that indigenous perspectives are valued in mainstream water management strategies. Moving forward, further research should focus on evaluating the implementation of local wisdom-based models in different geographical and socio-economic contexts. Future studies should also examine policy mechanisms that support the integration of TEK into national and international water governance systems. In the Malaysian context, where rural communities continue to face water access disparities, the proposed hybrid model could serve as a sustainable, inclusive, and community-driven solution to enhance water security and environmental resilience.

By embracing local wisdom, community engagement, and adaptive strategies, water resource management can evolve into a more inclusive, sustainable, and culturally aligned framework. The integration of traditional ecological knowledge with contemporary science offers a holistic, future-oriented approach that ensures water security for both present and future generations while safeguarding the ecological integrity of water systems worldwide.

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