

## Ecotheology Based Character Education for Environmental Awareness in Islamic Private Kindergartens of Lut Tawar District

Elviana<sup>1</sup>, Muhammad Riza<sup>2</sup>, Izzaturredusuli<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>TK Islam Takengon, Central Aceh, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>IAIN Takengon, Central Aceh, Indonesia

<sup>3</sup>IAIN Takengon, Central Aceh, Indonesia

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the implementation of ecotheology-based character education aimed at cultivating environmental awareness among early childhood learners in Islamic private kindergartens in the Lut Tawar District. The research is grounded in the premise that ecological crises are not merely environmental but also moral and spiritual in nature. Thus, integrating ecotheological values into early education is essential for shaping a caring and responsible attitude toward the environment. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through interviews, classroom observations, and documentation involving teachers, principals, and students. The findings indicate that environmental care character can be effectively nurtured through religious-based activities, such as storytelling about nature in the Qur'anic context, collective environmental practices (e.g., planting trees, waste sorting), and the inclusion of ecological values in daily prayers and moral lessons. Teachers play a pivotal role as role models who connect faith-based teachings with ecological responsibility. The study concludes that ecotheology provides a holistic educational framework that harmonizes spiritual, moral, and ecological dimensions of learning in Islamic early childhood education. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of institutional support, teacher competence, and community participation in sustaining these values. The results are expected to contribute to the development of sustainable and value-oriented environmental education models in faith-based educational settings.

**Keywords:** ecotheology, character education, environmental awareness, Islamic education, early childhood education, Lut Tawar District

### ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji penerapan pendidikan karakter berbasis ekoteologi dalam menumbuhkan kesadaran lingkungan pada anak usia dini di Taman Kanak-Kanak swasta Islam di Kecamatan Lut Tawar. Penelitian ini berangkat dari asumsi bahwa krisis ekologis tidak semata-mata bersifat lingkungan, tetapi juga merupakan persoalan moral dan spiritual. Oleh karena itu, integrasi nilai-nilai ekoteologis dalam pendidikan anak usia dini menjadi penting untuk membentuk sikap peduli dan tanggung jawab terhadap lingkungan. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara, observasi kelas, dan dokumentasi yang melibatkan guru, kepala sekolah, dan peserta didik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa karakter peduli lingkungan dapat dikembangkan secara efektif melalui kegiatan berbasis nilai

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keagamaan, seperti bercerita tentang alam dalam konteks Al-Qur'an, praktik kolektif peduli lingkungan (misalnya menanam pohon, memilah sampah), serta pengintegrasian nilai-nilai ekologis dalam doa dan pelajaran moral sehari-hari. Guru berperan penting sebagai teladan yang menghubungkan ajaran keimanan dengan tanggung jawab ekologis. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa ekoteologi menyediakan kerangka pendidikan yang holistik dengan mengharmoniskan dimensi spiritual, moral, dan ekologis dalam pembelajaran pada pendidikan anak usia dini berbasis Islam. Selain itu, penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya dukungan institusional, kompetensi guru, dan partisipasi masyarakat dalam menjaga keberlanjutan nilai-nilai tersebut. Hasil penelitian ini diharapkan dapat berkontribusi terhadap pengembangan model pendidikan lingkungan yang berkelanjutan dan berorientasi nilai dalam konteks pendidikan berbasis keagamaan.

**Kata kunci:** ekoteologi, pendidikan karakter, kesadaran lingkungan, pendidikan Islam, pendidikan anak usia dini, Kecamatan Lut Tawar

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**Corresponding Author:**

Elviana  
TK Islam Takengon  
Jl. Keramat Mupakat, Takengon  
Email: [evi123bulkisa123@gmail.com](mailto:evi123bulkisa123@gmail.com)

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the urgency of global environmental degradation manifested in climate change, biodiversity loss, waste accumulation, and ecosystem collapse has prompted educational institutions worldwide to re-examine their role in shaping sustainable attitudes, behaviours, and values. While much of the discussion has been centred on secondary and tertiary levels of education, there is a growing recognition that early childhood education (ECE) offers a crucial window of opportunity to instil ecological consciousness and character in young learners (Mukhlis, Elvira & Santoso, 2024). In faith-based educational settings, particularly within Islamic education, this opportunity intersects with theological and ethical frameworks that emphasise human responsibility, stewardship (khalifah), and moral accountability towards creation. Accordingly, the integration of ecotheology understood as the theological reflection on humanity's relationship with the natural world into character education offers a promising avenue for cultivating environmental awareness from the earliest stages of formal schooling.

The Indonesian context, and specifically the region of Lut Tawar, reflects this convergence of ecological urgency and faith-based educational opportunity. Islamic private kindergartens in this district provide not only foundational academic learning but also character development grounded in Islamic values. However, there remains limited empirical research on how ecotheology-based character education is operationalised in early childhood settings, especially in Islamic-private kindergarten contexts. To address this gap, the present study explores how an ecotheology-based character education framework can foster environmental awareness among young children in Islamic private kindergartens of Lut Tawar District.

From a conceptual perspective, ecotheology in Islamic education emphasises values such as *tawāzun* (balance), *maslahah* (public welfare), *amānah* (trust/responsibility), and *khalīfah* (vice-regency of humans on earth) (Riza 2022). It posits that environmental crises are not only technical or economic problems but also moral and spiritual in nature. Studies show that when educational programmes embed these values, they can enhance ecological awareness and environmentally responsible behaviour among learners (Syafaruddin, 2025) and within Islamic boarding school settings (Marpaung, 2024). For early childhood education in Indonesia, research has argued for the integration of Qur'anic values such as human stewardship (*khalīfah*) into curricula to promote a care-for-the-earth mindset (Ulya et al., 2023). In short, ecotheology provides a legitimising moral foundation for environmental education within Islamic learning contexts.

Literature on environmental education in early childhood further reinforces the role of early intervention. For example, Mukhlis, Elvira & Santoso (2024) developed an environmental learning model for early childhood that emphasises direct experience, character development, and sustainability values, concluding that young children can and should develop environmental attitudes with appropriate pedagogical design. Similarly, research on the integration of Qur'anic values in early childhood education highlights how spiritual, moral and social dimensions of children's development can be aligned with ecological care (Masyhuri et al., 2024). Yet a gap remains: many studies focus broadly on ECE or Islamic education, but fewer examine the intersection of ecotheology-based character education, early childhood, and Islamic-private kindergarten settings.

Moreover, the role of character education in environmental awareness has become critical. Character education aimed at developing virtues such as compassion, responsibility, respect, and care has been posited as a key lever for fostering sustainable behaviours. When children internalise character traits related to environmental care, they are more likely to act responsibly toward nature and carry those values into later schooling and life (Afifatun & Wulansari, 2025). Within the Islamic educational milieu, character education through ecotheological lenses means shifting from merely teaching about the environment to shaping children's identities as caring, ethical stewards of creation.

In the context of Islamic private kindergartens of Lut Tawar District, applying an ecotheology-based character education approach raises several pertinent questions: How are ecotheological values translated into early childhood pedagogy? What character development strategies are employed to foster environmental awareness in children aged 4-6 years? And what institutional supports (teacher competence, curriculum design, school community engagement) enable or inhibit such efforts? By exploring these questions, this study aims to contribute to both theory and practice: theoretically by refining the concept of ecotheology-based character education in early childhood Islamic settings; practically by providing a context-sensitive model that may inform educators, administrators, and policymakers.

By situating the study within Islamic private kindergartens in Lut Tawar District, the research also addresses contextual factors such as local culture, community norms, and environmental conditions. Kindergarten students in the region are steeped in both Islamic values and the local natural environment, which allows the integration of theology, character, and ecology in authentic contexts. The intentional linkage of spiritual and ecological dimensions can strengthen children's sense of belonging, their moral reasoning, and their engagement with environmental practices.

In summary, the introduction of ecotheology-based character education into Islamic early childhood settings holds significant potential. It aligns with global calls for education for sustainable development (ESD) while rooting that call in Islamic ethics and character formation. Early childhood is a critical stage for value-formation and habit establishment; character education embedded in ecotheological frameworks can shape environmentally aware youths who grow into responsible adult citizens. The present study, therefore, seeks to examine: (1) how ecotheological values are implemented in character education in Islamic private kindergartens in Lut Tawar, (2) how these efforts cultivate environmental awareness among young children, and (3) what enablers and barriers influence this process.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Character Education and Environmental Awareness**

Character education has become a key strategy in instilling moral values, attitudes, and expected behaviors in schools. In early childhood education settings, character encompasses not only cognitive aspects but also affective and conative domains how children feel (attitude) and behave (behavior) toward their surroundings (Miranti et al, 2023). When character is linked with "environmental care," traits such as responsibility, respect for nature, simplicity, and pro-environmental behavior are crucial.

Recent studies indicate that the 5R approach (refuse, reuse, recycle, reduce, replant) effectively cultivates environmental awareness in elementary school students through character education (Retno et al, 2024). This demonstrates that character education and environmental awareness can be integrated rather than treated separately. For early childhood, integrating character values with environmental stewardship allows for sustainable behavioral patterns as children grow.

### **2.2 Islamic Educational Values in Early Childhood**

Islamic education in early childhood emphasizes values such as *amal* (deeds), *amanah* (trust/responsibility), *khalifah* (stewardship), *tawāzun* (balance), and cleanliness as part of faith. Early childhood Islamic education does not merely teach ritual worship but also forms life patterns and character aligned with Qur'an and Hadith. Therefore, the learning environment in Islamic private kindergartens becomes a strategic space to instill Islamic values that encourage ecological responsibility.

The habituation method (repetition of positive behaviors) in Islamic-based early childhood character education has proven effective in instilling moral values, such as giving charity, personal hygiene, and respecting parents. Consequently, incorporating environmental care activities into daily routines (e.g., planting, waste

sorting, classroom cleanliness) in Islamic kindergartens is both a manifestation of Islamic values and an expression of environmental character.

### 2.3 Ecotheology Framework

The ecotheology framework has emerged as a theological paradigm connecting religious teachings with environmental concerns. In Islam, ecotheology emphasizes that humans, as *khalīfah*, have a moral responsibility to protect nature as an amanah (trust) from Allah. Syafaruddin (2025) argues that Islamic education with an ecotheological paradigm requires a holistic approach from philosophical principles to curriculum implementation and teaching methods. Recent studies in nature-based schools in Yogyakarta demonstrate that integrating ecotheology through the “Living Qur’an” concept enables environmental learning that is cognitive, spiritual, and conative. It is illustrated that ecological transformations in pesantren through ecotheology-based practices as a means to address both environmental and social crises.

### 2.4 Integrative Model: Ecotheology-Based Character Education

Based on the literature, this study adopts an integrative model combining three main pillars: (1) character education, (2) Islamic educational values in early childhood, and (3) the ecotheology framework. The model can be outlined as follows:

- a. Pillar A Character Education: focuses on forming environmentally conscious traits such as responsibility, justice toward living beings, simplicity, and cooperation.
- b. Pillar B Islamic Educational Values: includes values such as *amanah* (responsibility), *khalīfah* (stewardship), *mīzān* (balance), and cleanliness (*tahārah*) as manifestations of faith.
- c. Pillar C Ecotheology: a theological framework that views environmental crises as moral and spiritual crises, requiring education to promote value transformation, not merely factual understanding.

The interaction of these pillars produces pedagogical activities designed for early childhood in Islamic private kindergartens. Integration is implemented through:

- a. Concrete experiences: activities such as planting trees, waste sorting, and maintaining classroom cleanliness.
- b. Islamic and ecological narratives: Qur’an stories and Hadith containing environmental messages, such as prohibitions against *fasād* (destruction) and the role of humans as *khalīfah*
- c. Character reflection: simple discussions with children on questions like “Why should we take care of plants?” or “What happens if we litter?” linking the discussion to Islamic values and responsibility.

### 2.5 Early Childhood Education Context

Early childhood (ages 4–6) is a critical phase for shaping character and behavior (Miranti et al, 2023). Research on implementing environmental care character education for children aged 5–6 in Islamic kindergartens shows that integrating pro-environmental character into learning activities is effective. In the context of Lut Tawar District Islamic private kindergartens, the approach must align with children’s cognitive abilities and socio-emotional development.

### 2.6 Supporting Elements and Conditions

The theoretical framework also highlights supporting elements necessary for implementing ecotheology-based character education:

- a. Teacher competence: teachers must be able to connect Islamic values, environmental theory, and practical activities. Islamic religious education teachers play a strategic role in raising environmental awareness in young children
- b. Curriculum and learning environment: the curriculum must provide opportunities for value integration and environmental activities, as demonstrated in nature-based schools
- c. Community and family participation: parental and community involvement strengthens environmental practices in children’s daily life
- d. Local-cultural context: local values and community culture should be integrated with Islamic values and ecotheology for relevance and effectiveness

## 3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design with a descriptive-analytical approach to explore the implementation of ecotheology-based character education for environmental awareness in Islamic private kindergartens in Lut Tawar District. A qualitative approach was chosen to provide an in-depth understanding of processes, perceptions, and practices in early childhood education, where character formation is closely linked to daily routines, cultural values, and religious teachings. The research was conducted in selected Islamic private kindergartens that actively integrate Islamic values and environmental programs, such as planting, waste

management, and nature-based activities, making them representative contexts for examining the integration of ecotheology into early childhood education.

Participants included kindergarten teachers, children aged 4–6 years, and parents. Teachers were purposively selected based on their experience in implementing environmental and Islamic-based character education, resulting in a total of 8 teachers, 60 children, and 12 parents participating in the study. Multiple stakeholders were involved to provide diverse perspectives and enable data triangulation, enhancing the credibility of the findings. Data were collected using several complementary techniques, including structured and unstructured observations, semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and field notes. Observations focused on children's behaviors, attitudes, and engagement in environmental activities, while interviews explored teachers' and parents' perspectives on curriculum design, pedagogical strategies, and challenges. Document analysis examined lesson plans, teaching materials, and activity logs to identify the integration of Islamic values and environmental care practices, and field notes captured informal interactions and contextual nuances.

Data analysis followed thematic analysis procedures, including data familiarization, coding, theme identification, theme review, and interpretation. Themes were developed to represent key aspects of ecotheology-based character education, such as the integration of Islamic values, pedagogical strategies, environmental awareness outcomes, and supporting conditions. To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed triangulation, member checking, and audit trails, verifying findings with participants and cross-checking across multiple data sources. Ethical considerations were strictly maintained, including informed consent from teachers and parents, confidentiality of participants, and safeguarding children's welfare during observations. While the study provides a comprehensive exploration of ecotheology-based character education, its findings are context-specific to Lut Tawar District and may not be directly generalizable, suggesting future studies could employ mixed-methods or multi-site comparisons to enhance external validity.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### **4.1 Results**

The findings from interviews, observations, and document analysis indicate that ecotheology-based character education is effectively implemented in Islamic private kindergartens in Lut Tawar District. Teachers reported that Islamic principles related to environmental stewardship, such as *khalifah* (stewardship) and *mizān* (balance), are embedded in daily classroom routines, storytelling, and structured outdoor activities (Rahmat et al., 2025; Syafaruddin, 2025). Observations confirmed that children actively participated in planting, watering, waste sorting, and garden maintenance, demonstrating practical engagement with ecological values. Document analysis of lesson plans, activity logs, and teaching materials revealed systematic integration of environmental projects, including composting, recycling, and nature observation, alongside Qur'anic verses and Hadith references reinforcing the moral and religious foundation for environmental care (Juliani et al., 2024; Wati et al., 2025).

Children displayed increasing environmental awareness and pro-environmental behaviors, such as picking up litter, conserving water, and reminding peers about responsible care for plants and animals. Teachers noted that children often linked these actions with their religious understanding, showing internalization of both Islamic and ecological values. Parents also confirmed that children practiced environmentally responsible behaviors at home, indicating that the school's ecotheology-based programs positively influenced behavior beyond the classroom (Sabtina & Mahariah, 2025; Aulia Zahra & Khunaifi, 2025).

Several factors supported the successful implementation of ecotheology-based character education. Teachers' competence in integrating Islamic ecotheology, the availability of outdoor learning spaces, and active parental involvement were critical enablers (Marpaung, 2024; Ward-Localised Study, 2025). However, limited teaching resources and varying home practices occasionally constrained children's understanding, requiring repeated guidance and reinforcement. Despite these challenges, the combination of religious teachings, experiential learning, and consistent practice facilitated the development of environmental character and awareness from an early age (Miranti et al., 2023; Nur & Anwar, 2025).

In summary, the study demonstrates that ecotheology-based character education effectively fosters environmental awareness in early childhood, with observable behaviors reflecting the integration of Islamic teachings and ecological responsibility. This model highlights the potential of faith-based education in promoting sustainable practices and ethical environmental stewardship among young learners (Laksono, 2025; Syafaruddin, 2025).

Interviews with members of the school board indicated that the implementation of ecotheology-based character education is conducted through a structured and collaborative approach. One board member noted that: "Values of environmental stewardship are intentionally integrated across all school activities rather than confined to a single instructional theme." Another teacher emphasized that "the ecotheological approach facilitates the integration of environmental education with Islamic teachings, enabling children to develop a clearer understanding as these concepts are framed within religious values and acts of worship."

These statements reflect a strong institutional commitment to the sustained implementation of ecotheology-based character education. The school board also acknowledged several challenges in implementing the program,

particularly limitations in facilities and variations in habituation practices at home. However, they emphasized that consistency in school-based routines and effective communication with parents are the primary strategies for addressing these constraints. One teacher stated that:

“we continuously coordinate with parents to ensure that the habits developed at school are sustained at home.”

This finding underscores the importance of strong synergy between schools and families in fostering environmentally responsible character in early childhood.

#### 4.2 Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that ecotheology-based character education is effectively implemented in Islamic private kindergartens in the Lut Tawar District. Islamic principles related to environmental stewardship, such as *khalifah* (stewardship of the earth) and *mīzān* (balance), are embedded into daily learning activities. This aligns with Rahmat et al. (2025) and Syafaruddin (2025), who argue that religious values integrated into instruction strengthen ecological awareness from an early age. Children’s involvement in activities such as planting, watering plants, sorting waste, and maintaining school gardens demonstrates that learning occurs not only theoretically but also through direct experience. These observations support the findings of Juliani et al. (2024) and Wati et al. (2025), who state that hands-on environmental activities enhance young learners’ ability to understand and apply ecological values in real-life contexts.

Documentation such as lesson plans, activity logs, and instructional materials shows that teachers systematically integrate environmental projects including composting, recycling, and nature observation, accompanied by relevant Qur’anic verses and Hadith references. This indicates that environmental education is not separated from religious education but is instead grounded in strong moral foundations, resulting in more meaningful internalization for children. This is in accordance with Sabtina & Mahariah (2025) and Aulia Zahra & Khunaifi (2025), who found that religious-based environmental character formation influences children’s behavior both at school and at home.

The successful implementation is also supported by several enabling factors, such as teachers’ competence in integrating Islamic ecotheology into practice, the availability of outdoor learning spaces, and parental involvement. These findings are consistent with Marpaung (2024) and Ward-Localised Study (2025). However, limited learning resources and variations in children’s home practices present challenges, requiring consistent reinforcement and guidance (Miranti et al., 2023; Nur & Anwar, 2025).

Overall, this study demonstrates that ecotheology-based character education has strong potential for fostering environmental awareness and responsible ecological behavior in early childhood. The integration of Islamic teachings with experiential learning effectively shapes sustainable environmental attitudes from an early age. This model highlights the strategic role of faith-based education in promoting ethical environmental stewardship among young learners (Laksono, 2025; Syafaruddin, 2025).

The interview findings with members of the school board emphasize the critical role of institutional commitment in the effective implementation of ecotheology-based character education. The structured and collaborative approach adopted by the school reflects a whole-school strategy in which environmental stewardship values are consistently integrated across all activities rather than confined to a single instructional theme. By intentionally linking environmental education with Islamic teachings and framing ecological responsibility as part of religious values and acts of worship, teachers facilitate deeper understanding and value internalization among young learners. This integration strengthens the moral foundation of environmental education and supports the sustainability of the program, indicating that strong organizational alignment and faith-based pedagogy are key factors in the successful long-term implementation of ecotheology-based character education.

The challenges identified by the school board, particularly those related to limited facilities and inconsistent habituation practices at home, highlight the contextual factors that influence the effectiveness of ecotheology-based character education. These constraints suggest that the development of environmentally responsible character in early childhood cannot rely solely on school-based interventions but requires continuity across educational and familial settings. The emphasis on consistent school routines and sustained communication with parents reflects an adaptive strategy to bridge these gaps and reinforce value formation beyond the classroom. This finding aligns with existing literature that underscores the importance of family-school partnerships in early character development, indicating that strong synergy between these environments is essential for ensuring the durability and transferability of pro-environmental behaviors in young children.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that ecotheology-based character education effectively fosters environmental awareness in early childhood within Islamic private kindergartens in Lut Tawar District. The findings indicate that integrating Islamic teachings, such as *khalifah* (stewardship), *mīzān* (balance), and the moral responsibility of caring for creation, into daily classroom routines and structured outdoor activities can instill pro-environmental behaviors among young children. Through activities such as planting, watering, recycling, and nature observation, children not only develop practical ecological skills but also internalize moral and religious values that reinforce

the importance of environmental stewardship. Observations and interviews revealed that children demonstrate awareness in their daily behaviors, such as caring for plants, conserving water, and reminding peers to manage waste responsibly, which reflects the successful operationalization of ecotheology principles in early childhood education. The study also highlights several factors that support and challenge the implementation of ecotheology-based character education. Teacher competency, understanding of Islamic ecotheology, the availability of outdoor learning spaces, and active parental involvement emerged as significant enablers. In contrast, limited educational resources and varying home practices occasionally constrained children's comprehension and application of ecological and moral concepts. Despite these challenges, the integration of religious teachings with experiential learning demonstrated that early childhood education could effectively cultivate both environmental awareness and character values simultaneously. Based on these findings, several recommendations can be proposed. First, schools should continue to strengthen teacher capacity in ecotheology and environmental pedagogy through professional development programs and workshops to ensure that Islamic ecological values are effectively conveyed and practiced. Second, the provision of adequate learning resources, including books, activity kits, and garden facilities, should be prioritized to enhance experiential learning opportunities. Third, parental engagement should be consistently fostered through training, workshops, and communication to align home and school practices in nurturing environmental responsibility. Additionally, the development of community-based projects, such as local environmental campaigns or collaborative green initiatives, can extend the impact of ecotheology-based education beyond the classroom, fostering a sustainable culture of ecological awareness within the broader community.

In conclusion, ecotheology-based character education in Islamic early childhood settings represents a promising approach to cultivating environmental consciousness alongside moral and religious values. This study confirms that the integration of faith-based principles with experiential ecological activities can effectively shape children's attitudes, behaviors, and ethical understanding regarding environmental stewardship. The findings underscore the potential of ecotheology as a framework for sustainable education, emphasizing the synergy between religious education, character formation, and environmental responsibility in developing conscientious future generations.

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