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Living with Nature: Ritual *Asyeik* as a Traditional Ecological Knowledge System among the Kerinci People, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Rituals are not merely religious practices but also cultural mechanisms through which Indigenous communities construct, transmit, and preserve ecological knowledge. Among the Kerinci people of Sumatra, Indonesia, the *Asyeik* ritual has long been recognized as an important cultural tradition; however, its role as a Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) system has received limited scholarly attention. This study aims to examine how the Asyeik ritual represents ecological knowledge, facilitates its intergenerational transmission, and contributes to environmental conservation and disaster mitigation. Employing an ethnographic approach, data were collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews with ritual specialists (guriu or salih balian) across several customary communities in Kerinci between 2024 and 2026. The findings demonstrate that ritual materials—including diverse plant species, animals, water, and other natural elements—are selected based on ecological characteristics rather than solely ritual requirements. These species function as ecological indicators reflecting the health of forests, rivers, wetlands, springs, and other environmental landscapes while simultaneously embodying symbolic meanings that regulate human-environment relationships. Furthermore, myths and ritual symbols surrounding sacred ecological spaces operate as cultural institutions that discourage environmental exploitation and reinforce collective responsibilities toward ecosystem conservation. Consequently, the Asyeik ritual serves not only as a spiritual practice but also as a mechanism for transmitting ecological knowledge, strengthening community resilience, and sustaining socio-ecological balance. This study contributes to anthropological discussions by demonstrating that ritual functions as an institution for preserving Traditional Ecological Knowledge, thereby extending interpretive approaches to ritual toward broader debates on human-environment relations, Indigenous knowledge, and biocultural conservation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ritual constitutes an important cultural medium through which Indigenous communities (Koentjaraningrat, 1995) construct, preserve, and transmit knowledge concerning the relationship between humans and their environment. From an anthropological perspective, ritual is understood not merely as a religious practice or symbolic expression but as a social mechanism that embodies a community's collective experiences in adapting to nature. Knowledge generated through long-term interactions with the environment forms a system of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), which is transmitted across generations through diverse cultural practices.

One Indigenous community that continues to maintain this knowledge system is the Kerinci people, who inhabit the highlands of Sumatra, Indonesia. Culturally known as *Alam Kerinci*, this region has a long history of interaction between humans and the tropical montane environment, giving rise to numerous cultural traditions, one of which is the *Asyeik* ritual. The ritual is performed for various purposes, including healing the sick, seeking protection, praying for rainfall, requesting offspring, and expressing gratitude, making it an integral component of the social and cultural life of the Kerinci people.

Previous studies have demonstrated that the *Asyeik* ritual predates the arrival of Islam in Kerinci and later underwent a process of cultural acculturation with Islamic traditions (Prasetya et al., 2026; Prasetya & Sintia, 2025; Sunliensyar, 2016). Its historical existence is further supported by archaeological evidence in the form of cylindrical stone sculptures depicting dancing human figures discovered in Kumun Debai, Sungai Penuh City, which are believed to represent ritual performances practiced by the ancient Kerinci community. These findings suggest that the interconnected relationship among humans, nature, and ancestral spirits has constituted a fundamental element of Kerinci culture since its earliest development.

Despite its spiritual significance, the *Asyeik* ritual encompasses far more than religious beliefs. Every stage of the ritual demonstrates a close relationship with the natural environment through the use of plants, water, bamboo, and other ritual materials selected according to local knowledge regarding their characteristics, ecological functions, and symbolic meanings. Such knowledge is neither arbitrary nor incidental; rather, it represents the cumulative outcome of generations of ecological experience that has been continuously transmitted through ritual practice. Consequently, the *Asyeik* ritual can be understood as a medium for transmitting ecological knowledge while simultaneously functioning as a cultural institution that sustains harmonious relationships between humans and nature.

Today, however, the continuity of the *Asyeik* ritual faces significant challenges. The declining number of *guriu* or *salih*, the ritual specialists responsible for conducting the ceremony limited intergenerational transmission, and the increasing difficulty of obtaining ritual materials due to land-use change and environmental degradation have contributed to the gradual decline of ritual practice across many parts of Kerinci (Prasetya et al., 2026). Nevertheless, during ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2024 and 2026, several customary communities were found to have successfully maintained both the ritual and its associated knowledge system. Among them, Dusun Empih in Sumur Anyir Village, Sungai Bungkal District, Sungai Penuh City, serves as the principal research site because it continues to preserve the *Asyeik* ritual in its traditional form, providing an important setting for examining the relationship between ritual, local ecological knowledge, and the environment.

Research on the *Asyeik* ritual has been undertaken from various disciplinary perspectives. Previous studies have primarily examined its historical development (Sunliensyar, 2016) symbolic meanings (Prasetya, 2025, 2026; Pudjiraharjo et al., 2025) artistic dimensions (Pramasheilla et al., 2025; Ramadani et al., 2020) social functions, and religious beliefs (Prasetya et al., 2026). However, relatively little attention has been devoted to understanding

the *Asyeik* ritual as a system of Traditional Ecological Knowledge. Embedded within every stage of the ritual are bodies of knowledge concerning plant utilization, natural resource management, landscape classification, and environmental ethics that have been transmitted across generations. Examining the ritual from this perspective is essential because it demonstrates that ritual functions not merely as a cultural expression but also as a mechanism for preserving Indigenous ecological knowledge.

Against this background, this study aims to examine the *Asyeik* ritual as a system of Traditional Ecological Knowledge among the Kerinci people. Specifically, it investigates how the ritual represents ecological knowledge, how such knowledge is transmitted through ritual practices, and how the *Asyeik* ritual contributes to sustaining long-term relationships between humans and the natural environment. Employing an ethnographic approach, this study seeks to offer a new perspective on ritual as a cultural institution for the transmission of ecological knowledge while contributing to broader anthropological discussions on the interrelationships among humans, culture, and the environment.

2. METHODS

This study employed an ethnographic approach as the primary research method to understand and describe the cultural life of the Kerinci people from an emic perspective, emphasizing how community members themselves interpret and experience their cultural practices (Spradley., 1997). Ethnography enabled an in-depth exploration of the meanings, knowledge systems, and cultural practices embedded in the everyday lives of the community through prolonged field engagement.

Data were collected using participant observation and in-depth interviews with key informants. Throughout the fieldwork, the researcher actively participated in various stages of the *Asyeik* ritual, allowing direct observation of ritual performances, close interaction with ritual practitioners, and a comprehensive understanding of their knowledge, beliefs, and lived experiences from the participants' own perspectives (Ahimsa, 2022). This approach facilitated a holistic interpretation of the ecological knowledge, cultural values, and human–environment relationships embodied in the *Asyeik* ritual.

Fieldwork was conducted between 2024 and 2026 across several customary communities in Kerinci, including Dusun Empih, Sumur Anyir Village (Sungai Penuh City); Dusun Baru (Sungai Penuh City); Sungai Penuh Village (Sungai Penuh City); Dusun Pondok Tinggi, Pondok Tinggi Village (Sungai Penuh City); Dusun Tanjung Rawang (Sungai Penuh City); Koto Keras, Pesisir Bukit (Sungai Penuh City); Koto Tengah, Pesisir Bukit (Sungai Penuh City); Koto Baru (Sungai Penuh City); Kubang, Luhah Tanah Sekudung, Renah Kasah, Danau Tinggi, and Dua Luhah Pendung Semurup (Kerinci Regency). Among these research sites, the customary territory of Datuk Singapai in Dusun Empih, Sumur Anyir Village, Sungai Bungkal District, Sungai Penuh City, served as the principal field site because it continues to preserve the *Asyeik* ritual together with its associated cultural knowledge.

Informants were selected through purposive sampling, whereby participants were chosen based on their direct knowledge, experience, and active involvement in the *Asyeik* ritual (Trislianto, 2020). Five principal informants participated in this study: Tino Kasmi (73), guriu (salih balian) of Dusun Empih; Tino Mitijah (75), guriu of Pendung Semurup; Tino Ruhaina (82), guriu of Kubang; Tino Rosniah (80), guriu of Siulak Mukai; and Tino Jusniar (87), guriu of Mukai Pintu. Their extensive ritual knowledge and long-standing roles as ritual specialists provided essential insights into the ecological knowledge, symbolic meanings, and cultural values embedded within the *Asyeik* ritual.

3. RESULT and DISCUSSION

a. Historical Background of the *Asyeik* Ritual

Previous studies indicate that the Asyeik ritual predates the introduction of Islam to Kerinci and originated during the period when the ancestors of the Kerinci people practiced animistic and dynamistic belief systems (Prasetya & Sintia, 2025; Sunliensyar, 2016). Its antiquity is further supported by archaeological evidence, particularly cylindrical stone sculptures depicting anthropomorphic figures in wide-legged dancing postures discovered in Kerinci. These figures have been interpreted as representations of ritual performances resembling the contemporary *Asyeik* ritual. Additional historical evidence is reflected in the use of cultural materials during the ritual, including Chinese, Dutch, and Japanese ceramic bowls, as well as the keris (traditional dagger), all of which suggest long-standing historical interactions and cultural exchanges between the Kerinci people and external societies.

In the Kerinci language, the term *Asyeik* literally denotes a state of profound concentration, devotion, or complete absorption in a particular activity. This meaning reflects the ritual itself, in which every participant is expected to devote full attention to the ceremonial process. During the performance of the ritual, no other communal ceremonies or customary activities may be conducted simultaneously within the same customary territory, as they are believed to disrupt the ritual process. Besides *Asyeik*, the ceremony is also locally referred to as *ndok nginggong neghui* ("shaking the land") (Prasetya et al., 2026) and *ngadiak* or *nyimpuah* ("paying homage to the ancestors"), emphasizing its cosmological significance within Kerinci society.

Ethnographic findings reveal that the *Asyeik* ritual is performed only under specific cultural circumstances. Four principal motivations underpin its implementation: seeking healing (*mintok ubiak*), fulfilling ritual vows or ancestral obligations (*nepak janjui maye utua*), removing misfortune or spiritual affliction (*ngilang panoah or ble*), and cleansing or reinstalling sacred heirlooms (*ngise padandeng or sko*). Without at least one of these customary purposes, the ritual is traditionally considered inappropriate to perform. This demonstrates that the *Asyeik* ritual is not an ordinary ceremonial event but rather a culturally regulated institution governed by customary norms and collective beliefs.

The ritual is traditionally led by one or three female ritual specialists known as *guriu* or *salih balian*. These women attain their status only after undergoing a lengthy process of ritual initiation through customary ceremonies such as *nyaleh guriu*, *nyujung stai,* or *plaho negak sangkak*. The initiation process represents both spiritual and social recognition of their authority as ritual leaders. During the ceremony, the guriu is assisted by female ritual attendants known as *dayeng gaduih* or *salih gadih*. Although women constitute the majority of ritual specialists, ethnographic fieldwork also documented several male ritual practitioners (*salih bujia* or *salih bujang)* in a number of customary communities, indicating a degree of variation in ritual leadership across Kerinci.

Depending on its purpose, the *Asyeik* ritual may last from one to seven consecutive nights and is generally conducted after the evening (Isha) prayer or, in some cases, during the morning. The ritual comprises a sequence of ceremonial stages involving chants, ritual recitations, bodily movements, and dance performances that culminate in trance. During the final stage, several *salih* and *dayeng gaduih* recite ritual incantations while following the movements of the guriu until they enter an altered state of consciousness. Within the Kerinci cosmological worldview, this trance state is understood as the moment when ancestral spirits temporarily enter the bodies of the dancers to convey messages, healing, guidance, and blessings to their descendants. Rather than being interpreted merely as spirit possession, this experience represents a culturally recognized medium through which communication

between the living community and their ancestors is established, reaffirming social memory, cultural continuity, and the reciprocal relationship between humans and the spiritual world.

b. Traditional Ecological Knowledge of the Kerinci People in the *Asyeik* Ritual

1. The *Asyeik* Ritual as Traditional Ecological Knowledge

The *Asyeik* ritual demonstrates that the Kerinci people do not perceive plants and animals merely as natural resources but as integral components of a cultural knowledge system that connects humans, ancestors, and the ecological landscape. Ritual materials are systematically classified according to their symbolic functions, including objects that are hung (*ta ntoa*), arranged on the ground (ta ampoa), erected (ta tegiak), presented as offerings (*bheh jkek*), scattered (*ta amba*), and offered through animal sacrifice (*diambik nyawo*). This classification illustrates that each ritual element occupies a specific position and carries particular meanings and functions within the broader cosmological system of Kerinci society.

Most ritual materials are collected from diverse ecological settings, including forests (*imbo),* lakes (*dane*), rivers (*sungoa*), springs (*ulu ayoa*), wetlands (*daye*), cliffs (*luhuah*), and residential areas (*dusing*). The plant materials comprise flowers, leaves, stems, roots, fruits, and entire plants, which are collectively known as *bungo redung tujeuh rano sambilia*. The ritual fauna include domestic chickens, white-breasted waterhens (*Amaurornis phoenicurus*), red junglefowl (*Gallus gallus*), Sumatran peacock-pheasants (*Polyplectron chalcurum*), mamproah (*Cyclocheilichthys apogon*), semah (*Tor douronensis*), siluang (*Rasbora spp.),* and baung catfish (*Hemibagrus spp*.), collectively referred to in the local language as pamakang *urang stai urang kuramuak* ("the food of the ancestors"). The diversity of these species reflects the fact that the *Asyeik* ritual represents the entire ecological landscape of Kerinci from mountains, forests, and freshwater ecosystems to terrestrial environments rather than a single habitat.

One of the most significant ethnographic findings of this study emerged during field observations accompanying community members in collecting ritual materials from the Kerinci forests. The Kerinci people employ a local classification system that categorizes ritual plants according to the ecological characteristics of their habitats. Plants are symbolically divided into two gendered categories: *bungo batina* ("female flowers") *and bungo jantia* ("male flowers"). Plants growing in relatively accessible environments, such as riverbanks, wetlands, and areas surrounding settlements, are categorized as bungo batina. In contrast, plants found in primary forests, mountain slopes, and steep cliffs that are difficult to access are classified as *bungo jantia*. Furthermore, *bungo batina* generally consists of species that are relatively abundant, easily cultivated, and readily available, whereas *bungo jantia* comprises wild species that are difficult to locate and rarely cultivated. This classification suggests that the concept of gender in Kerinci society extends beyond human social relations and functions as a cognitive framework for organizing ecological knowledge based on habitat characteristics, accessibility, and the perceived qualities of plant species.

These findings demonstrate that the *Asyeik* ritual embodies a reciprocal relationship between humans and their environment. As argued by Geertz (1992), culture constitutes a web of meanings that humans themselves create through symbolic systems. Within this framework, plants, animals, and ecological spaces function not merely as ritual objects but as cultural symbols through which the Kerinci people perceive, classify, and assign meaning to their natural environment. Consequently, the *Asyeik* ritual can be understood as a symbolic medium through which ecological experiences are transformed into cultural knowledge and transmitted across generations.

2. The *Asyeik* Ritual as a Mechanism for the Transmission of Traditional Ecological Knowledge

Geographically, Kerinci is a volcanic basin formed by the interaction between the Eurasian and Indo-Australian tectonic plates, making the region highly susceptible to earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods, and landslides (Nabella et al., 2019; Oktariadi et al., 2024). These environmental conditions have required local communities to develop adaptive strategies that enable them to recognize ecological changes while ensuring the sustainable management of natural resources. One of the cultural mechanisms that has evolved within Kerinci society is the *Asyeik* ritual. The findings of this study demonstrate that the ritual functions not only as a spiritual practice but also as a medium for transmitting Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), preserving collective ecological experiences through the use of plants, animals, and natural landscapes embedded within the community's cultural knowledge system.

a. Ecological Knowledge through Biological Indicators

The use of plants and animals in the *Asyeik* ritual extends beyond ceremonial purposes, serving as a cultural mechanism for recognizing the ecological condition of a particular environment. Each species is selected because of its close association with specific habitats that support local livelihoods. Consequently, the presence or absence of these species is understood as an ecological indicator reflecting environmental health. For example, semah (*Tor douronensis*) , mamproah (*Cyclocheilichthys apogon*), siluang (*Rasbora spp.),* and baung (*Hemibagrus spp.)* are found only in rivers with high water quality. Similarly, plant species such as ambai(*Phlegmariurus squarrosus),* ketipuk tebing (*Arundina graminifolia*), pandan (*Pandanus spp.),* various fern species, and large trees belonging to the *Arecaceae* family and Ficus benjamina thrive in habitats characterized by high humidity, stable soils, and abundant water availability. Ecologically, these plant communities contribute to water infiltration, reduce soil erosion, and sustain springs that constitute essential water sources for the Kerinci people (Yuliantoro et al., 2016).

During field observations while accompanying community members in collecting ritual materials from the forests of Kerinci, the researcher documented an ethnographic episode illustrating how local ecological knowledge is applied in everyday life. After the research team's drinking water supply had been exhausted, one of the local residents suggested drinking directly from a nearby stream because mamproah (*Cyclocheilichthys apogon*) could still be observed swimming freely in the water. According to local knowledge, the presence of this fish indicates that the stream remains clean, uncontaminated, and safe for human consumption.

Conversely, the disappearance of mamproah is interpreted as evidence of declining environmental quality resulting from pollution or ecosystem degradation. According to the informants, the species is now increasingly rare and survives only in a few remote rivers that still maintain relatively intact ecological conditions. This finding demonstrates that the Kerinci community employs mamproah as a biological indicator (bioindicator) to assess the ecological health of river ecosystems. Knowledge regarding this species therefore forms an integral component of Traditional Ecological Knowledge, enabling local people to monitor environmental change through naturally occurring biological indicators.

b. The Asyeik Ritual as a Medium for the Transmission of Ethnomedicinal Knowledge

Another important dimension revealed in this study is that *bungo redung tujeuh* functions not only as an essential ritual assemblage but also as a medium for transmitting the

ethnomedicinal knowledge of the Kerinci people. Based on collaborative identification conducted with the *guriu (salih balian*), bungo *redung tujeuh* consists of more than seventy local plant species recognized for their medicinal properties. These species include rhizomatous plants, flowering plants, woody species, ferns, and numerous wild plants collected from forests, wetlands, cliffs, and village landscapes.

From the perspective of the Kerinci community, these plants are not selected arbitrarily but are chosen on the basis of generations of empirical observations concerning the medicinal properties of each species for both human health and environmental well-being. Knowledge concerning plant identification, habitat characteristics, harvesting periods, and processing techniques is transmitted through the performance of the *Asyeik* ritual. Consequently, the ritual serves not merely as a ceremonial event but also as an intergenerational institution for preserving and transmitting ethnomedicinal knowledge.

c. Ritual, Agriculture, and Ecological Sustainability

Interestingly, the functions of ritual plants within the *Asyeik* tradition extend beyond the treatment of human illnesses. According to the informants, many of these species are also employed to maintain soil fertility, strengthen the growth of roots, stems, and leaves, naturally control agricultural pests, and enhance crop productivity through ritual practices. These findings indicate that the concept of healing in the Kerinci cosmological worldview transcends the human body and encompasses the restoration of the ecological landscape as a shared living environment. Within this perspective, human health is understood as inseparable from the health of soil, water, plants, animals, and the broader ecosystems that sustain life. Accordingly, the *Asyeik* ritual functions not only to maintain harmonious relationships between humans and their ancestors but also as a cultural mechanism for sustaining ecological balance and environmental continuity.

3. Ritual, Symbols, and Disaster Risk Reduction

The relationship between ritual and the environment is further reflected in the numerous local myths concerning the existence of *mambang, diwa,* and other spiritual entities believed to guard forests, springs, rivers, and various ecological spaces. Within the Kerinci worldview, these landscapes are regarded as sacred spaces that must not be exploited indiscriminately.

From Victor Turner's perspective (Turner, 1995), ritual symbols embody not only religious meanings but also function as mechanisms for regulating social behavior. In the context of the *Asyeik* ritual, the sacralization of ecological spaces operates as a cultural institution that restricts human activities, thereby preserving the ecological functions of forests, rivers, springs, and other natural landscapes. Accordingly, these myths should not be interpreted as expressions of irrational belief; rather, they constitute cultural devices through which human–environment relationships are governed and ecological ethics are maintained.

These findings suggest that the *Asyeik* ritual represents an indigenous form of culture-based disaster risk reduction. Forest conservation, spring protection, river maintenance, and respect for ecologically significant landscapes are institutionalized through ritual symbols, myths, and customary practices that are collectively observed by the community. When ecological indicator species begin to disappear from their natural habitats, local people interpret this as evidence of ecological imbalance that may ultimately lead to environmental disasters. Consequently, the Asyeik ritual functions as a cultural mechanism for detecting environmental change while simultaneously fostering collective awareness of the importance of maintaining ecological balance.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the Asyeik ritual should not be understood merely as a religious practice or an ancestral veneration ceremony, but rather as a system of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) embedded within cultural symbols and ritual practices. The use of diverse plant and animal species originating from forests, lakes, rivers, springs, wetlands, cliffs, and settlement areas reflects the ways in which the Kerinci people conceptualize, interpret, and maintain reciprocal relationships between humans and their natural environment. From the perspective of interpretive anthropology, these plants, animals, and ecological landscapes function as symbolic media through which ecological knowledge is transmitted across generations, while the ritual itself serves as a mechanism for reproducing collective memory and accumulated ecological experience.

The findings further reveal that the Kerinci community employs the presence and absence of particular plant and animal species as biological indicators for assessing environmental conditions. The disappearance of ritual species is understood not merely as the depletion of natural resources but as evidence of ecological imbalance that may increase the risk of environmental disasters. Consequently, the Asyeik ritual functions as a cultural institution integrating environmental conservation, disaster risk reduction, and the intergenerational transmission of local ecological knowledge within a coherent cosmological system.

From a theoretical perspective, this study extends anthropological discussions of ritual by demonstrating that ritual symbols do not merely generate religious and social meanings, as proposed by Geertz (1992) and Turner (1995), but also serve as mechanisms for preserving and transmitting Traditional Ecological Knowledge. The *Asyeik* ritual therefore represents a form of cultural adaptation through which the Kerinci people sustain reciprocal relationships between humans and nature while strengthening socio-ecological resilience in the face of environmental change.

The findings of this study demonstrate that the *Asyeik* ritual constitutes a cultural institution that integrates Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), Etnosains, ethnobotany, and ethnomedicine into a coherent and interconnected knowledge system. From the perspective of interpretive anthropology, as proposed by Geertz (1992), the plants, animals, and ecological landscapes employed in the ritual are not merely ceremonial materials; rather, they function as cultural symbols that construct webs of meaning concerning the relationship between humans and their environment. Likewise, Turner (1995) argues that ritual serves as a social mechanism through which collective experiences are reproduced and transmitted by means of symbolic action. Within the context of the Kerinci community, the Asyeik ritual functions as a cultural medium through which the ecological knowledge and lived experiences of ancestors are transmitted to subsequent generations through the continuous enactment of ritual practices.

Accordingly, the Asyeik ritual should not be understood solely as a spiritual practice or a form of traditional healing. Rather, it represents a mechanism for the reproduction of Traditional Ecological Knowledge, enabling the Kerinci people to sustain reciprocal relationships among humans, culture, and the natural environment. In this sense, the ritual serves not only to preserve cultural identity but also to reinforce socio-ecological resilience by ensuring the continuity of ecological knowledge across generations.

The findings of this study indicate that safeguarding the *Asyeik* ritual cannot be separated from conserving the ecological landscapes that provide the plants and animals essential to its performance. Consequently, cultural heritage policies should be integrated with environmental conservation strategies through the protection of forests, springs, rivers, wetlands, and other natural habitats that sustain the cultural practices of the Kerinci community. Such an approach recognizes intangible cultural heritage and biodiversity

conservation as mutually reinforcing components of an integrated cultural landscape. From an academic perspective, future research should further investigate the relationships among the Asyeik ritual, ethnoscience, ethnobotany, ethnoecology, and environmental change using approaches drawn from ecological anthropology, ethnobiology, and biocultural diversity studies. Comparative research involving other Indigenous communities in Indonesia and Southeast Asia would also contribute to a broader understanding of ritual as a mechanism for transmitting Traditional Ecological Knowledge and as a cultural strategy for adapting to environmental change.

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