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Analysis of the Digital Diplomacy of the West Bali National Park Management Through Conservation Content on Social Media

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Abstract

In the digital age, social media has evolved into a strategic tool not only for disseminating information but also for state diplomacy. Digital diplomacy is defined here as the use of digital platforms by state or state-affiliated actors to communicate with foreign publics, project a positive national image, and pursue declared foreign policy objectives. This study analyzes the practice of "digital diplomacy by default" carried out by the management of West Bali National Park (TNBB) through conservation content on social media platforms, namely Instagram @btn.balibarat and TikTok @btn_balibarat. Using a descriptive qualitative method with content analysis and in-depth interviews with the Public Information Officer and TNBB social media managers, this study examines how conservation content is constructed, whether the content production process reflects diplomatic awareness, and how the Ministry of Forestry's public relations policies facilitate these practices. The findings indicate that although social media managers have not explicitly recognized their activities as part of digital diplomacy, the content produced objectively fulfills digital diplomacy functions through narratives of conservation success, reinforcing Indonesia's identity as a megabiodiversity nation and its commitment to sustainable natural resource management. This study found that role fragmentation, limited human resources, and the dominance of the Indonesian language pose structural barriers to optimizing TNBB's digital diplomacy. This study contributes to the concept of digital diplomacy by offering a sub-state-actor perspective at the conservation-site level and by proposing "digital diplomacy by default" as an analytical refinement to the International Relations debate on who practices diplomacy and under what conditions.

Keywords: Conservation education, Digital diplomacy, Digital diplomacy by default, Social media, West Bali National Park.

Abstrak

Di era digital, media sosial telah berkembang menjadi alat strategis tidak hanya untuk menyebarkan informasi, tetapi juga untuk diplomasi negara. Diplomasi digital didefinisikan di sini sebagai pemanfaatan platform digital oleh aktor negara atau aktor yang berafiliasi dengan negara untuk berkomunikasi dengan publik asing, memproyeksikan citra nasional yang positif, dan mencapai tujuan kebijakan luar negeri yang dideklarasikan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis praktik "diplomasi digital secara implisit" yang dilakukan oleh pengelola Taman Nasional Bali Barat (TNBB) melalui konten konservasi di platform media sosial, yaitu Instagram @btn.balibarat dan TikTok @btn_balibarat.Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif yang dilengkapi analisis konten dan wawancara mendalam dengan Petugas Humas serta pengelola media sosial TNBB, penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana konten konservasi disusun, apakah terdapat kesadaran diplomatik dalam proses produksi konten, serta bagaimana kebijakan hubungan masyarakat Kementerian Kehutanan memfasilitasi praktik-praktik tersebut. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa meskipun pengelola media sosial belum secara eksplisit mengakui aktivitas mereka sebagai bagian dari diplomasi digital, konten yang dihasilkan secara objektif memenuhi menampilkan fungsi-fungsi diplomasi digital melalui narasi keberhasilan konservasi, penguatan identitas Indonesia sebagai negara dengan keanekaragaman hayati yang luar biasa, serta pengelolaan sumber daya alam yang berkelanjutan. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa fragmentasi peran, keterbatasan sumber daya

manusia, dan dominasi bahasa Indonesia menjadi hambatan struktural bagi optimalisasi diplomasi digital TNBB. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pengayaan konsep diplomasi digital dengan menyajikan perspektif aktor sub-negara di tingkat lokasi konservasi dan dengan mengusulkan konsep "diplomasi digital secara implisit" sebagai penyempurnaan analitis terhadap perdebatan Hubungan Internasional tentang siapa yang menjalankan diplomasi dan dalam kondisi apa.
Kata kunci: *Diplomasi digital, Diplomasi digital secara implisit, Media sosial, Pendidikan konservasi, Taman Nasional Bali Barat*

INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has fundamentally transformed the global communications landscape. Social media is no longer merely a space for social interaction, but has become a strategic arena for both state and non-state actors to project influence, build their image, and conduct public diplomacy. In international relations, digital diplomacy refers to the use of digital tools, particularly social media, by diplomatic actors, whether governmental or non-governmental, to achieve foreign policy objectives (Ong Hai Liaw et al., 2025). This definition situates digital diplomacy within the broader tradition of public diplomacy, which Cull (2009) defines as an international actor's attempt to manage the international environment through engagement with a foreign public (Cull, 2009). Digital diplomacy differs from classical public diplomacy in its instruments digital platforms rather than cultural centers, exchange programs, or broadcast media and in its reach, which is immediate, interactive, and potentially global. However, digital diplomacy is no longer limited to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or diplomatic officials; sub-state actors such as local governments, public institutions, and even conservation area managers also engage in activities that substantively have a diplomatic character.

The urgency of examining this phenomenon arises from two developments. First, the digitalization of public communication has created a situation in which institutions without diplomatic mandates, such as national park authorities, routinely produce content that reaches foreign audiences and narrates national achievements. This content may perform diplomatic functions even without a diplomatic mandate. Second, much of the literature on digital diplomacy has been developed through studies of ministries of foreign affairs, embassies, and their official representatives (Manor, 2023; Rachmawati, Kuncoro, & Sari, 2025). The literature has not systematically examined sub-state institutions as potential sites of digital diplomacy and therefore lacks analytical tools to describe diplomatic functions performed without diplomatic intent. The concept of "digital diplomacy by default," proposed in this article, fills this gap.

The existing literature on social media and conservation has examined how platforms are used by protected areas for tourism promotion (Hausmann et al., 2018), for monitoring biodiversity through user-generated content (Di Minin et al., 2015), and for public engagement in conservation campaigns (Bjola & Holmes, 2015). This literature has not, however, examined conservation communication as a diplomatic practice. Conversely, the literature on digital diplomacy has not examined conservation institutions as diplomatic actors. This study therefore addresses the gap at the intersection of two

literatures that have developed separately: social media in conservation and digital diplomacy. By bringing them together, the study offers both an empirical case and a conceptual refinement.

The phenomenon examined in this research is better captured by distinguishing three ideal types of practice. First, formal digital diplomacy refers to the deliberate use of digital platforms by designated diplomatic actors, such as ministries of foreign affairs, embassies, and their official representatives, to pursue declared foreign policy objectives and shape perceptions among foreign publics (Bjola & Holmes, 2015). Second, public diplomacy refers to communication with foreign publics by state or state-affiliated actors to influence their perceptions. However, it does not require digital platforms and may be conducted through cultural centers, exchange programs, or broadcast media (Cull, 2009). Third, "digital diplomacy by default," the concept proposed in this research refers to a condition in which actors who are not mandated with diplomatic functions, and who do not themselves recognize their work as diplomacy, nonetheless produce digital content that performs functions ordinarily associated with digital diplomacy, such as narrating national achievements, projecting a positive national image, and reaching foreign audiences. In this third type, the diplomatic function is neither intended nor managed as such; it emerges as a by-product of the institution's primary mandate, in this case the conservation mandate and the public information obligation attached to it

This conceptual distinction matters for the study of International Relations because it separates the analytical question of what a practice does from the normative and intentional question of what its practitioners mean to do. A practice may perform a diplomatic function without being diplomacy in its actors' self-understanding. Recognizing this possibility allows scholars to analyze sub-state institutions, such as national park authorities, as potential sites of diplomatic practice without overstating those institutions' intentionality.

The state goals that digital diplomacy ordinarily serves provide the benchmark against which TNBB's practice can be assessed. Digital diplomacy is conventionally directed at three objectives: first, projecting a positive national image to foreign publics; second, building or maintaining a country's reputation and credibility on specific policy domains; and third, supporting the pursuit of declared foreign policy priorities, including multilateral commitments and international agenda-setting (Manor, 2023). In environmental conservation, Indonesia's relevant state goals include its commitments under the Convention on Biological Diversity, its FOLU Net Sink 2030 target for the forestry and land-use sector, and its broader positioning as a megabiodiverse country with credible conservation governance. TNBB's conservation content can be assessed against these goals: does the content narrate Indonesia's conservation achievements in ways that would support its reputation and credibility on these international commitments? The findings

presented below suggest that the content does narrate these achievements, but that the narration is not designed or evaluated as a contribution to the state goals it happens to support.

TNBB can be analyzed as a diplomatic actor based on three characteristics. First, it holds internationally significant biodiversity: it is the only national park in Bali Province, the habitat of the endemic Bali Starling (Leucospaar rothschildi), and a site of marine ecosystems of regional importance. Second, it receives significant numbers of foreign visitors: 1,524 international tourists in 2024, with visitors from Australia, France, Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, and the Netherlands among the most frequent (Park, n.d.). Third, it operates within international conservation networks and its content has reached international audiences through media coverage. These three characteristics do not by themselves make TNBB a diplomatic actor in the formal sense; they do, however, establish the conditions under which its digital output can perform diplomatic functions

The Ministry of Forestry of the Republic of Indonesia, through the Directorate General of Natural Resources and Ecosystem Conservation (KSDAE), has recognized the importance of effective public communication in building public trust in conservation efforts. In a directive from the Secretary of the KSDAE Directorate General dated January 15, 2026, it was emphasized that government public relations is now a strategic instrument of public policy, not merely a publication function (Secretariat of the KSDAE Directorate General, 2026). The guidelines emphasize three key principles: communication based on data and field observations, transparency and public accountability, and a unified narrative from the Minister down to the Technical Implementation Units (TIUs).

Bali Barat National Park (TNBB) is the only national park in Bali Province with high conservation value, encompassing the natural habitat of the endemic Curik Bali (*Leucopsar rothschildi*) and nine mammal species unique to Bali. This area was established by Minister of Forestry Decree No. 493/Kpts-II/1995, covering an area of 19,002.89 hectares, comprising 15,587.89 hectares of land and 3,415 hectares of marine waters (Bali Barat National Park, 2019). With its high biodiversity and easy accessibility, TNBB faces both challenges and opportunities in communicating conservation values to domestic and international audiences.

Previous research on Indonesia's digital diplomacy has largely focused on official accounts of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or Embassies (Rachmawati, Kuncoro & Sari, 2025). Meanwhile, research on the use of social media by national parks in Indonesia remains limited to aspects of tourism promotion or conservation education. It has not yet been linked to the framework of digital diplomacy. In fact, content showcasing conservation successes, natural beauty, and the preservation of endemic wildlife indirectly helps shape a positive image of Indonesia in the eyes of the world. Thus, this study addresses this gap by examining digital diplomacy practices from the perspective of sub-state actors at the conservation site level. Consequently, the central research

question is: How do West Bali National Park managers implement digital diplomacy through educational content on social media? Based on this research question, this study aims to analyze the characteristics of conservation educational content produced by the West Bali National Park (TNBB) social media managers and to identify diplomatic intent.

Accordingly, this research has two objectives. First, it analyzes the characteristics of conservation content produced by TNBB's social media managers and identifies whether, and to what extent, diplomatic intent is present among the actors involved. The second is to assess whether the content exhibits the functions of digital diplomacy identified in the literature: narrative construction, orientation toward global audiences, and reach to foreign audiences, and, if so, whether those functions translate into measurable influence. The second objective is deliberately framed as an assessment of alignment rather than a claim that TNBB already practices digital diplomacy in a full sense, because the evidence presented below suggests that the conversion of function into influence remains incomplete.

Theories or Conceptual Framework

This study employs a single analytical concept: digital diplomacy. This study develops the concept in three steps. First, it presents the classical definition of digital diplomacy. Second, the concept of "digital diplomacy by default" is specified as a refinement. Third, the four analytical dimensions used to examine the case are presented.

Digital Diplomacy

Digital diplomacy, in its classical sense, refers to the use of the internet and information technology by diplomatic actors to achieve foreign policy objectives and to project a nation's image (Corneliu Bjola and Marcus Holmes, 2015). The concept has three constitutive elements that are analytically distinct and should not be conflated. First, the actor: digital diplomacy is conventionally associated with designated diplomatic actors ministries of foreign affairs, embassies, consulates, and their official representatives who are mandated to conduct foreign policy. Second, the instrument: digital diplomacy uses digital platforms, particularly social media, websites, and digital media, as communication channels. Third, the objective: digital diplomacy serves foreign policy objectives, which may include projecting a positive national image, building reputation in specific policy domains, managing crises, and supporting declared foreign policy priorities (Manor, 2023).

When all three elements are present, we can speak of digital diplomacy in the full sense. When some elements are present and others absent, we need a more precise vocabulary. The concept of digital diplomacy by default is designed to describe the case in which the third element, the diplomatic objective, is absent from the actor's self-understanding. In contrast, the first two elements digital platforms and content that reaches foreign audiences are present. In this case, the actor is not mandated with diplomatic functions, does not recognize its output as diplomacy, but produces content that performs the

functions ordinarily associated with digital diplomacy.

Digital Diplomacy by Default

The concept of "digital diplomacy by default" builds on Pamment's (2014) observation that diplomatic functions are increasingly performed by actors outside the diplomatic corps, a condition he describes as "diplomacy without diplomats." Pamment's argument is evaluative: the dispersal of diplomatic functions across non-diplomatic actors complicates assessing diplomatic outcomes because the actors producing those outcomes do not measure, intend, or report them as diplomatic activity. This article takes that observation as a starting point and specifies it for the digital context.

Digital diplomacy by default is defined here by three features: (1) the actor is not mandated with diplomatic functions and does not receive diplomatic instructions; (2) the actor does not recognize its own digital output as diplomacy or nation branding; and (3) the digital output nevertheless exhibits one or more functions that the digital diplomacy literature identifies as characteristic of diplomatic practice, such as narrating national achievement to foreign audiences, projecting a positive national image, and reaching foreign audiences.

The concept differs from "accidental diplomacy" or "unintentional public diplomacy" in one important respect. Accidental diplomacy refers to unplanned diplomatic consequences of an action; digital diplomacy, by contrast, refers specifically to the routinization of a non-diplomatic mandate through digital channels, so the diplomatic function becomes a structural by-product of the institution's ordinary work. In the case of TNBB, the conservation mandate and the public information obligation attached to it produce digital content that reaches foreign audiences and narrates national conservation achievement; the diplomatic function is therefore not accidental in the sense of being random, but default in the sense of being the structural consequence of a non-diplomatic routine.

The concept of digital diplomacy by default makes three analytical claims that can be examined empirically. The first is the functional claim: the output of a non-diplomatic actor can perform functions conventionally associated with digital diplomacy. The second is the intentional claim: the actor producing that output does not recognize it as diplomacy, so the diplomatic function operates without diplomatic intent. The third is the consequential claim: because the diplomatic function operates without intent and without measurement, the output is not optimized to produce diplomatic outcomes, and the conversion of function into influence remains incomplete. This study examines the three claims in sequence through the four analytical dimensions presented below.

The analytical dimensions used in this study were adapted from a digital diplomacy evaluation framework developed by previous researchers (Rachmawati, Kuncoro & Sari, 2025), with adjustments to the national park context, namely:

1. The Narrative Communication Dimension, which analyzes how conservation messages are constructed and whether the narratives intentionally highlight values relevant to domestic and international audiences. This dimension examines the functional claim: does the content narrate national achievement in ways that the digital diplomacy literature identifies as characteristic of diplomatic practice?
2. The Global Audience Dimension examines the extent to which social media managers are aware of and target international audiences, including the barriers they face (e.g., language use). This dimension examines the functional and intentional claims simultaneously: does the content reach foreign audiences, and is that reach intended?
3. The Diplomatic Meaning-Making Dimension explores whether actors are aware that their activities are part of diplomatic efforts or nation branding. This dimension examines the intentional claim directly: do the actors recognize their output as diplomacy?
4. The Institutional Dimension, which analyzes the structures, policies, and resources that support or hinder digital diplomacy practices. This dimension examines the consequential claim: are the structures, policies, and resources in place to convert function into influence?

These four dimensions are not separate theories; they are operational tools for examining the single concept of digital diplomacy by default. They allow the analysis to move from description (what functions does the content perform?) to interpretation (are those functions intended?) to explanation (why is the conversion from function to influence incomplete?).

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method. Qualitative research involves analyzing, describing, and summarizing various conditions and situations based on data collected through interviews or observations regarding the research problem as it occurs in the field (Miles et al., 2014). Another perspective states that qualitative descriptive research aims to describe and depict existing phenomena, whether natural or human-made, focusing on characteristics, qualities, and the interconnections among activities (Sukmadinata, 2011). This method was chosen because it allows the researcher to understand the meaning behind the digital communication practices carried out by the managers of West Bali National Park (TNBB), as well as to capture the perceptions and awareness of the actors involved (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Based on this, the researcher acts as a key instrument in data collection and analysis. This study uses both primary and secondary data.

The researcher collected primary data through in-depth interviews with two key informants: managers of West Bali National

Park. The first informant was Mr. Adang Bayu Pamungkas, S.Hut., M.Sc., Head of the Administrative Subdivision and Public Information Approver for TNBB, who is responsible for verifying and approving content before publication. We selected this informant because he is a gatekeeper who understands the strategic policies behind content selection. The second informant is Ni Luh Ketut Tamara Sawitri, S.I.Kom., a Senior Public Relations Officer who serves as a Social Media Manager and Contributor, pursuant to the Decision of the Head of the West Bali National Park Office No. SK.24/T.16/BTNBB/HMS.01.02/B/02/2026 regarding the Appointment of Personnel for Public Information, Documentation, and Social Media Management (West Bali National Park Office, 2026). The interviews used a semi-structured approach based on four dimensions of analysis: narrative communication, global audience, diplomatic intent, and institutional framework.

Secondary data was collected from various official documents, including: the Ministry of Forestry's Social Media Management Guidebook (2025), the Director General of KSDAE's Secretary's Directive on KSDAE Public Relations Management (January 15, 2026), the 2025 TNBB Performance Report, the 2024 TNBB Statistical Book, the TNBB Long-Term Management Plan for the 2019–2028 Period, the Ministry of Forestry's Publication Concept (June 4, 2025), as well as TNBB visitor data for 2024 and 2026. These documents provide policy context and objective data on conservation achievements as well as TNBB visitor profiles.

Data analysis followed three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion (Miles et al., 2014). Content analysis of documents and interview transcripts used a thematic approach to identify patterns related to the four dimensions of analysis. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation, namely by comparing information from interviews with policy documents and statistical data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Dimensions of Narrative Communication

Based on an interview with Ni Luh Ketut Tamara Sawitri, TNBB's social media manager, the content production process begins with collecting documentary materials from field officers across the three Regional National Park Management Sections (SPTN): SPTN Region I, SPTN Region II, and SPTN Region III. Field contributors in the SPTNs whose regions have events or activities send photos and videos of patrols, wildlife monitoring, habitat restoration, and other noteworthy moments. The four-member social media team (Tamara, Sinta Febi Ardiani, Zeini Ikrawan, and Isti Mawaddah) then edits this material into Instagram feed, Reels, or TikTok content designed to educate the public about conservation.

TNBB's content can be categorized into three main types. First, species education content, such as posts about the Bali Myna and various endemic bird species. This content typically includes popular science information on the conservation status, habitat, and behavior of the animals. Second, conservation activity content, such as area patrols, trail and boundary

maintenance, coral reef transplantation, and invasive species control. Third, natural beauty and sustainable tourism content, showcasing Menjangan Island's underwater panoramas, savannas, seasonal forests, and other natural tourist attractions.

According to the guidelines from the Secretary of the Directorate General of KSDAE, the recommended content should be locally relevant and include educational, humanistic, and performance-oriented content for the public interest related to conservation (Secretariat of the Directorate General of KSDAE, 2026). TNBB's practices align with these guidelines. Tamara explained that the main message intended is that conservation begins with wildlife protection or area protection and extends to security measures (Sawitri, 2026). This indicates that the narrative constructed centers on substantive conservation values, not merely tourism promotion. Thus, an analysis of the communication dimensions in Bali Barat National Park's social media content indicates that the narrative strongly emphasizes conservation values, particularly the preservation of endemic wildlife, specifically the Bali Starling, which is of national and international concern.

From a digital diplomacy perspective, the narrative dimension examines the functional claim: does TNBB's content perform the narrative functions the digital diplomacy literature identifies as characteristic of diplomatic practice? The answer is affirmative. The content consistently narrates conservation achievements, specifically the recovery of the Bali Starling population from 184 individuals in 2018 to 692 individuals in 2024 (Bali Barat National Park, 2025). This statement is a national achievement narrative, and narrating national achievement to foreign audiences is one of the functions the digital diplomacy literature identifies as characteristic of diplomatic practice. The functional claim is therefore satisfied on this dimension: TNBB's content performs a diplomatic narrative function without the actors intending it as diplomacy.

What needs to be noted, however, is that the satisfaction of the functional claim does not by itself establish that the function produces influence. The narration of conservation achievement performs a diplomatic narrative function in that it exhibits the kind of content the literature identifies as characteristic of diplomatic practice; whether it actually influences foreign audiences is a separate question addressed in the following dimension.

Global Audience Dimension

Visitor data for 2026 shows that tourists from various countries continue to visit West Bali National Park, with a significant number of international visitors (West Bali National Park, 2026). Data from January–April 2026 indicates that tourists from Australia, France, Germany, the United States, South Korea, China, the United Kingdom, Japan, the Netherlands, and Russia were the most frequent visitors. These tourists are potential "ambassadors" who can share their positive experiences through their personal social media accounts, thereby helping to build a positive image of Indonesia.

The visitor data establishes that foreign audiences are physically present at TNBB, but physical presence is not the same

as digital reach. The analytical question for the Global Audience Dimension is therefore whether TNBB's digital content actually reaches foreign audiences and, if so, whether that reach is intended and measured. The evidence on this question is mixed. On the reach side, at least one documented case exists: a video of an oceanic manta ray (*Mobula birostris*) filmed in the waters of Menjangan Island was covered by international English-language media, including Social Expat, and the coverage circulated the content to audiences beyond Indonesia. On intention and measurement, the evidence is weaker. The social media insights available to the researchers show that the largest share of the audience is located in Indonesia, with smaller shares from Australia, the United States, and India. The manager interviewed confirmed that the content is not produced with a foreign audience in mind and that no targets exist for foreign reach. The manta ray case is therefore best characterized as unplanned reach rather than audience targeting.

From the perspective of digital diplomacy by default, this dimension examines the functional and intentional claims simultaneously. The functional claim requires that the content reach foreign audiences; the intentional claim requires that the reach not be intended. Both claims are satisfied in this case: TNBB's content has reached foreign audiences in at least one documented case, but the actors did not intend the reach. This condition is precisely what the concept of digital diplomacy by default predicts: the diplomatic function operates, but without diplomatic intent.

The Ministry of Forestry's Publication Concept, drafted on June 4, 2025, identifies the conservation and protection of forests, as well as protected plants and animals, as one of its four main content pillars (Ministry of Forestry, 2025). The statement indicates that the Ministry of Forestry strategically views conservation issues as a key public communication tool. The document also states that establishing a public relations communication network with Technical Implementation Units (UPTs) as producers of data and field stories is a strategic step (Ministry of Forestry, 2025).

TNBB's potential to serve as a role model for digital conservation diplomacy is partly supported by concrete performance achievements. The 2025 TNBB Performance Report notes the realization of non-tax state revenue (PNBP) amounting to Rp8,535,699,000 (159.27% of the target), along with a significant increase in the population of the Bali Starling (Bali Barat National Park, 2025). These achievements provide the raw material for a diplomatic narrative function: demonstrable evidence of institutional competence and environmental stewardship that foreign audiences, including international conservation bodies, would find credible. Whether foreign audiences have received them as such, however, is a separate question the available evidence cannot answer. The achievements, if effectively communicated in a bilingual format with engaging narratives, could support Indonesia's reputation in international forums such as the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) or UNESCO; the conditional "could" is deliberate, because the

communication has not yet been systematically undertaken.

Tamara noted that short-form content under 60 seconds featuring wildlife and natural beauty tends to be more popular on TikTok than longer, more informative content (Tamara, 2026). Consequently, these insights are crucial for developing content strategies that better respond to the preferences of a global audience without compromising educational substance.

The Dimension of Diplomatic Objectives

One of the most intriguing findings of this study is the gap between the objectivity of digital diplomacy practices and the subjective awareness of the actors engaged in them. This gap is precisely what the concept of digital diplomacy by default is designed to capture. The actors do not intend to practice diplomacy, but their output exhibits diplomatic functions. The gap is not a deficiency to be corrected; it is the defining feature of the phenomenon under study.

Adang Bayu Pamungkas, as Head of the Administrative Section and approver of Public Information, explicitly stated that the primary objectives of TNBB's social media are education and public awareness (Pamungkas, 2026). When asked whether specific, intentional messages were designed to highlight Indonesia's conservation successes, Adang answered affirmatively. The condition is a significant qualification of the by-default thesis. At the approver level, there is partial diplomatic intent: the approver recognizes that publishing conservation achievements contributes to Indonesia's image domestically and internationally, even though the term "digital diplomacy" is not used. The by-default condition therefore applies most clearly to the social media manager, who does not recognize the diplomatic dimension of her work, and only partially to the approver, who does recognize it in substance if not in terminology. The intentional claim is therefore stratified by actor level: it holds fully at the operational level and only partially at the managerial level.

Furthermore, Adang explained that the continuously increasing population data of the Bali Starling from 184 individuals in 2018 to 692 individuals in 2024 constitutes important information to be published (West Bali National Park, 2025). Thus, the narrative of conservation success is inherently embedded in TNBB's content, even if it is not framed using the terms "diplomacy" or "nation branding."

Meanwhile, Tamara, a social media manager, admitted that she knew very little about the term "digital diplomacy." Nevertheless, she intuitively sensed that the content she posted could attract an international audience. Her experience with the video of manta rays on Menjangan Island going viral marked a turning point in her realization that conservation content can reach a global audience.

This finding aligns with the concept of "diplomacy without diplomats" (Pamment, 2014), in which non-diplomatic actors objectively perform diplomatic functions without explicitly recognizing that role. In the context of TNBB, digital diplomacy occurs organically as a logical consequence of the conservation mandate and public information transparency, rather than as the result of strategic diplomatic planning.

From the perspective of digital diplomacy by default, this dimension examines the consequential claim: does the diplomatic function, operating without intent, produce measurable influence? The answer is negative, and the reason lies in the structure of the by-default condition itself. An institution that does not recognize its output as diplomacy will not design it to produce diplomatic outcomes, will not measure those outcomes, and will not adjust its output in response. The by-default condition therefore explains both the presence of diplomatic functions and the absence of measurable diplomatic influence. Thus, the concept's central analytical contribution is that it accounts for the paradox of an institution that performs diplomatic functions without knowing it, and therefore cannot optimize what it does not know it is doing.

The evidence supporting this conclusion consists of three findings. First, the manta ray video reached foreign audiences through international media coverage, demonstrating content transmission but not its conversion into influence. Second, the manager reported receiving comments in English on some posts, but the institution does not systematically track commenters' nationality, sentiment, or subsequent behavior, so it cannot measure influence. Third, no evidence was found that foreign audiences have changed their perceptions of Indonesia, expressed increased trust in Indonesian conservation management, or engaged in behavior consistent with such changes, as a result of TNBB's content. The honest conclusion is therefore that the narrative function is performed and, in at least one case, transmitted to foreign audiences; but influence is neither demonstrated nor measured.

The finding that TNBB's content projects a positive image of Indonesia must also be specified more carefully than the phrase "Indonesian culture" allows: TNBB's content projects not culture in a general sense, but two specific elements. The first is the Balinese conservation ethic articulated in Tri Hita Karana, which the park's management plan explicitly cites as a guiding principle. The second is the Indonesian state's green development vision, which frames conservation as a national project of sustainable resource management. These are cultural and policy elements, not culture as such. The distinction allows a more precise claim: TNBB's content projects a specific Balinese ethic of harmonious relations between humans and nature, embedded within a specific national developmental vision. Whether foreign audiences recognize these elements as distinctively Indonesian, rather than as generic environmental messages, is an empirical question that the available evidence cannot answer.

Institutional Dimensions

This study identifies several structural barriers that limit TNBB's ability to optimize its digital diplomacy. First, role fragmentation and human resource constraints. TNBB's social media team consists of personnel with other responsibilities. This situation results in a lack of personnel fully dedicated to social media management, leading to less structured content planning (Sawitri, 2026).

Second, most content is in Indonesian. However, West Bali National Park is visited by thousands of foreign tourists every year, with 2024 data showing 1,524 international visitors, primarily from Australia, France, Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, and the Netherlands (West Bali National Park, 2025). Most post captions are in Indonesian, which limits international audiences' access to and understanding of the conservation narratives intended to be conveyed. In fact, the Ministry of Forestry's 2026 Instagram Visual Guidelines do not prohibit foreign languages and even encourage hashtags that can reach a broader audience (Ministry of Forestry, 2026).

When asked about bilingual content, Adang responded with openness and support for reaching a global audience, while emphasizing that data presentation and verification remain top priorities and that TNBB must collaborate with other parties to convey information (Pamungkas, 2026). This statement indicates that the barriers to creating bilingual content are not merely a matter of English proficiency, but also involve cross-sectoral data verification procedures that require time and coordination.

Third, there is a lack of a systematic content plan and content calendar. The Ministry of Forestry's Social Media Management Guide requires every UPT to develop monthly and weekly content calendars to plan and manage publications (Ministry of Forestry, 2025). However, Tamara acknowledges that this has not yet been implemented due to other priorities. "Actually, I really wanted to create a content plan for this month, but because we're really limited in terms of staff, it hasn't been realized yet, since in public relations, it turns out we don't just handle social media" (Sawitri, 2026). As a result, content publication tends to be reactive to field activities rather than proactive based on pre-planned strategic themes.

Fourth, information restrictions exist, such as those related to forestry-related criminal offenses. Adang explained that not all information can be published, especially regarding investigative processes or similar matters that should not be made public indiscriminately (Pamungkas, 2026). These restrictions, while necessary to maintain the integrity of legal processes, also limit the potential for narratives about conservation law enforcement efforts that could attract international public attention.

These four dimensions are not separate but interrelated when examining digital diplomacy by default. The Narrative Communication Dimension examined the functional claim and found it satisfied: TNBB's content performs a diplomatic narrative function. The Global Audience Dimension examined the functional and intentional claims simultaneously and found both satisfied: TNBB's content has reached foreign audiences in at least one case, but the reach was not intended. The Diplomatic Objectives Dimension examined the intentional claim and found it satisfied fully at the operational level but only partially at the managerial level. The Institutional Dimension examined the consequential claim and found it satisfied. Because the diplomatic function operates without intent and without measurement, it is not optimized to produce influence, and

the conversion of function into influence remains incomplete.

TNBB has significant strengths in narrative communication (Dimension 1) and institutional support (Dimension 4), but needs significant improvement in global audience (Dimension 2) and diplomatic relevance (Dimension 3). The main challenges TNBB faces in optimizing these four dimensions are limited human resources (only one person focuses on social media), the absence of a systematic content plan, and the dominance of the Indonesian language, which limits global reach.

It is important to state clearly what these findings establish and what they do not. They establish that TNBB's content exhibits the functions of digital diplomacy narrative construction, partial orientation toward global audiences, and documented reach to foreign audiences in at least one case, and that these functions are performed without diplomatic mandate or diplomatic intent at the operational level. They do not establish that TNBB "is practicing digital diplomacy" in the full sense, if that phrase implies intentional diplomatic strategy, measurable influence on foreign audiences, or systematic pursuit of diplomatic outcomes. The distinction between exhibiting diplomatic functions and practicing digital diplomacy is the distinction between digital diplomacy by default and digital diplomacy proper. The evidence supports the former, not the latter. This evidence is not a weakness of the study; it is the precise finding that the concept of digital diplomacy by default was designed to capture.

Solutions for Strengthening Digital Diplomacy in the Conservation Sector

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are proposed as solutions for strengthening digital diplomacy in the conservation sector, specifically at TNBB and generally for other KSDAE UPTs. These recommendations are framed with the awareness that digital diplomacy by default, as defined in this article, cannot be "optimized" without first changing the by-default condition itself. The first and most fundamental recommendation is therefore the transformation from digital diplomacy by default to deliberate digital diplomacy.

First, transformation of diplomatic awareness. The most fundamental step is to raise awareness among social media managers and public information approvers that their output performs diplomatic functions. This awareness can be built through internal training, workshops, or discussions with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Forestry on the diplomatic dimension of public communication in the conservation sector. Without this awareness, the other recommendations below will be difficult to implement sustainably, because no actor will feel responsible for the diplomatic function.

Second, we need to strengthen public relations human resource capacity, both in quantity and qualifications. Strengthening the public relations functions at the Secretariat of the Directorate General of KSDAE as the coordinator for UPT public relations, as outlined in the presentation "Strengthening Synergy in Public Relations and Information Management at the

Directorate General of KSDAE" (Bureau of Public Relations and Foreign Cooperation, 2026), must be followed up with the addition of specialized personnel at the UPT level who focus on social media management, including English language proficiency for bilingual or multilingual content.

Third, TNBB should develop a thematic content calendar that integrates the national forestry calendar (such as National Nature Conservation Day, Tree Planting Day, etc.) with global events (World Biodiversity Day, World Environment Day). The Ministry of Forestry's Publication Concept has provided sample content calendars for June, July, August, and beyond (Ministry of Forestry, 2025). TNBB can develop a similar calendar by adapting it to local potential.

Fourth, TNBB needs a policy for gradually experimenting with bilingual content. While not all content needs to be bilingual, strategic content highlighting conservation achievements (such as the increase in the Bali Starling population, successful coral reef transplantation, or wildlife releases) can include English captions, either as the main text or as alternative text or pinned comments. This will expand the message's reach to an international audience without overburdening the team.

Fifth, optimize collaboration with central social media accounts (Ministry of Forestry, Directorate General of KSDAE) for content of national strategic value. The collaboration workflow for publishing outlined in the Social Media Management Guidebook (Ministry of Forestry, 2025) enables UPTs to submit content for collaborative publication, thereby broadening the message's reach. This collaborative principle can extend to the digital realm by involving the social media accounts of relevant ministries and agencies.

Table 1
Key indicators and primary objectives as an analysis of the four dimensions

Dimension	**Primary Objective**	**Key Indicators**
Narrative Communication Dimension	Building and disseminating positive narratives digitally	Messages reflect the nation's positive values (conservation successes, cultural preservation)
Global Audience Dimension	Strategically reaching and engaging international audiences	Use of foreign languages (English), adaptation of content for cross-cultural audiences, interaction with global accounts

Diplomatic Intent Dimension	Carrying out diplomatic functions in a conscious and planned manner	Understanding that content is part of public diplomacy efforts; active involvement in national campaigns
Institutional Dimension	Strengthening the supporting structure of digital diplomacy	Availability of specialized human resources, budget, SOPs, and central policy support

***Source**: Data processed by the author*

Table 2
TNBB's Position Identified Across the 4 Dimensions

Dimension	Current Status of TNBB	Evaluation
Dimension 1: Narrative Communication	Content focuses on conservation education, success stories regarding the increase in the Bali Starling population, and sustainable area management.	Already strong in substance
Dimension 2: Global Audience	Limited due to the predominant use of Indonesian; viral content occurs unintentionally	Still weak and unplanned
Dimension 3: Diplomatic Intent	Activities occur organically without explicit awareness as part of diplomacy.	Not yet optimal due to limited awareness

Dimension 4: Institutional	Support from the Ministry of Forestry through policies and regulations, but limited human resources and SOPs	Foundation is in place; capacity building is needed.

***Source**: Data processed by the author*



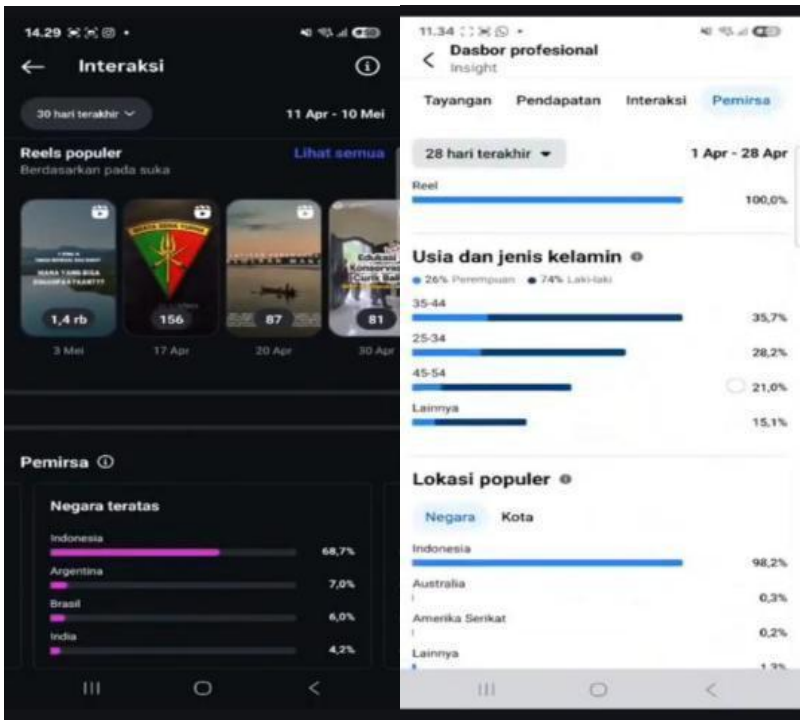




Source: Instagram @btn.balibarat

Figure 1

Bali Blue-eared Flycatcher Conservation Education, content on area patrols, content on natural beauty, and sustainable tourism



Source: Instagram @btn.balibarat and TikTok @btn_balibarat

Figure 2
Screenshot of TNBB's Instagram and TikTok social media account insights



Source: Personal documentation from the author

Figure 3
Documentation of Data Collection and Interviews

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis, this study concludes that the West Bali National Park (TNBB) objectively exhibits the functions of digital diplomacy through its social media conservation content, despite lacking a diplomatic mandate or explicit awareness. This phenomenon is conceptualized as "digital diplomacy by default": a condition in which non-diplomatic actors produce digital output that performs diplomatic functions, narrating national achievements and reaching foreign audiences as a structural by-product of their primary institutional mandate.

This research introduces the concept of "digital diplomacy by default," bridging two previously separate literatures: digital diplomacy studies, which focus too narrowly on formal state actors, and conventional social media studies, which overlook diplomatic implications. Theoretically, this concept contributes to International Relations by separating the functional question (what a practice does) from the intentional question (what actors mean to do), thereby expanding the analytical scope of sub-state actors in diplomatic practice.

The urgency of these findings is underscored by structural barriers: human resource fragmentation, the dominance of the Indonesian language, the absence of a systematic content calendar, and information restrictions. These barriers prevent the diplomatic function from moving beyond narrative transmission to produce measurable influence on foreign audiences. Consequently, transforming from "default" to "deliberate" digital diplomacy is imperative for sub-state institutions like TNBB to systematically optimize their conservation potential as a strategic instrument for Indonesia's nation branding and environmental diplomacy on the global stage.

RESEARCH TRANSPARENCY AND ETHICS STATEMENTS

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no financial or non-financial conflicts of interest associated with the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

Statement on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

The authors use generative AI tools (such as Perplexity AI integrated with Google Scholar) on a limited basis solely to assist in searching for and compiling prior research literature for the sake of efficiency. The authors then sorted, reviewed, and verified this information and took full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of this published manuscript. AI is not listed as authors because it does not meet the criteria for authorship. The authors also used Mendeley for citations and references and used Grammarly to ensure proper and correct grammar.

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