

Reclaiming Maluku's Maritime Future

From the Spice Islands Legacy to a Blue Economy and Maritime Security Hub

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Executive Summary

Maluku has never been a peripheral region in Indonesia's maritime story. Long before modern state borders were drawn, its islands were connected to regional and global trade through spices, sea routes, coastal communities, and maritime political networks. The Banda Islands, in particular, became globally significant through nutmeg and mace, leaving behind a historical landscape of plantations, forts, and colonial trading infrastructure that is now recognized in UNESCO's tentative heritage listing.

Today, Maluku's strategic importance remains highly relevant. Its waters intersect with major fisheries management areas, including WPP 714, 715, and 718, which cover the Banda Sea, Seram Sea, Aru Sea, and Arafura Sea. Recent estimates show that the fisheries potential across these areas reaches more than 4.3 million tons annually, positioning Maluku as a key contributor to Indonesia's food security and blue economy agenda.

However, Maluku's maritime potential has not yet been fully transformed into a future-oriented policy agenda. The province still faces structural challenges, including fragmented maritime governance, limited inter-island connectivity, insufficient downstream fisheries industries, weak maritime surveillance, and underdeveloped maritime heritage tourism.

This policy brief argues that the Government of Indonesia and the Government of Maluku should position Maluku as a blue economy and maritime security hub in eastern Indonesia. To achieve this, policy measures should prioritize integrated maritime early warning, sustainable fisheries development, improved port and logistics infrastructure, maritime heritage preservation, and stronger multi-agency coordination.

1. Background: Maluku as a Maritime Civilization

Maluku's history is deeply shaped by the sea. For centuries, the sea functioned not as a barrier, but as a connector of islands, communities, kingdoms, traders, and foreign powers. Maritime routes connected Maluku with Sulawesi, Java, Papua, Timor, the Malay world, the Pacific, and later European trading networks.

The global reputation of Maluku emerged through the spice trade. The Banda Islands became famous for nutmeg and mace, while other parts of Maluku and North Maluku were historically associated with cloves. This made the region a major arena of international competition involving Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, and English interests. UNESCO describes the Banda Islands' historical landscape as including nutmeg plantations, forts built for the defense of the spice trade, and a colonial town for trading and governance.

Yet Maluku's maritime history should not be reduced to colonial narratives. Local communities, traditional leaders, sailors, traders, and coastal societies were active actors in shaping maritime life. They built systems of trade, customary sea tenure, inter-island mobility, and cultural exchange. In this sense, Maluku was not merely a destination for foreign powers; it was a maritime civilization with its own agency, networks, and political significance.

This historical identity is important for current policy. Maluku's future development should not be designed only through a land-based approach. The province's geography, economy, culture, and security are fundamentally maritime. Therefore, government policy should treat the sea as the center of development, not as a peripheral space.

2. Current Strategic Importance

Maluku's maritime geography creates both opportunities and vulnerabilities. On the opportunity side, the province has strong potential in fisheries, marine tourism, maritime heritage, port development, inter-island logistics, and blue economy industries. Its location in eastern Indonesia gives it a strategic role in national food security, maritime connectivity, and Indonesia's engagement with the Pacific region.

The fisheries potential is especially significant. Maluku intersects with three important Fisheries Management Areas of the Republic of Indonesia: WPP 714, WPP 715, and WPP 718. These areas cover major waters such as the Banda Sea, Seram Sea, Aru Sea, and Arafura Sea. Recent data cited by CFI Indonesia, based on Ministerial Decree No. 19 of 2022, estimates that the fisheries potential across these three areas reaches 4,386,836 tons per year, or around 36.52 percent of Indonesia's total national fisheries potential.

On the vulnerability side, Maluku's wide maritime space creates governance challenges. Many islands are remote, public service delivery is costly, maritime surveillance is limited, and inter-island transportation remains uneven. These conditions can create space for illegal fishing, destructive fishing, smuggling, people trafficking, people smuggling, narcotics routes, marine pollution, and communal tensions over maritime resources.

Indonesia's wider maritime security context also reinforces Maluku's importance. Indonesia has three main Archipelagic Sea Lanes, known as ALKI I, ALKI II, and ALKI III, which function as strategic corridors for international navigation. For Maluku, this means that maritime development cannot be separated from maritime security. Fisheries, ports, coastal communities, shipping lanes, and border areas must be managed through an integrated policy framework.

3. Policy Problem

Despite its historical and strategic importance, Maluku has not yet been fully positioned as a national maritime priority. There are five main policy problems.

First, Maluku's maritime history has not been fully converted into a development asset. The Spice Islands identity is globally known, but its potential for education, tourism, cultural diplomacy, and regional branding remains underdeveloped.

Second, maritime governance remains fragmented. Fisheries, transportation, tourism, immigration, customs, police, navy, coast guard, environmental agencies, and local governments often operate through separate institutional mandates. This weakens early detection, information sharing, and rapid response.

Third, the fisheries sector has not produced sufficient local value-added benefits. Maluku has large fisheries potential, but without strong cold-chain infrastructure, processing industries, certification, and market access, local communities may remain raw-resource suppliers rather than primary beneficiaries.

Fourth, inter-island connectivity remains a structural constraint. In an island province, weak sea transportation affects logistics, education, health access, trade, and state presence. Development in Maluku depends heavily on reliable maritime infrastructure.

Fifth, coastal communities are not yet fully integrated into formal maritime governance. Local fishers and island communities often possess detailed knowledge of sea routes, seasonal patterns, fishing grounds, and suspicious maritime activity. However, this knowledge is not always incorporated into official planning and early warning systems.

4. Policy Objectives

Government policy should aim to achieve five objectives:

- Transform Maluku into a blue economy and maritime security hub in eastern Indonesia.
- Strengthen maritime connectivity between islands and economic centers.
- Ensure that fisheries development benefits local coastal communities.
- Preserve maritime history as a foundation for education, tourism, and cultural diplomacy.
- Build an integrated, data-driven maritime governance and early warning system.

5. Policy Recommendations

A. Develop an Integrated Maritime Early Warning System

The government should build an integrated maritime early warning system for Maluku. This system should connect information from coastal communities, village governments, fisheries offices, port authorities, immigration, customs, police, navy, coast guard, and intelligence actors.

The system should monitor indicators such as suspicious vessel movement, illegal fishing and destructive fishing patterns, foreign national mobility in coastal areas, people smuggling and trafficking risks, narcotics and contraband routes, sea accidents and extreme weather risks, communal tensions over fishing grounds or maritime boundaries, and marine pollution.

A practical model could include village-level maritime reporting posts, district-level coordination forums, a provincial maritime data center, geospatial incident mapping, and monthly maritime risk assessment reports. The system does not need to begin with an overly complex technological platform. It can start with standardized reporting formats, verified local informants, shared databases, and clear escalation procedures.

The main objective is to reduce the gap between local information and government response. In many maritime areas, early signs of security threats are first detected by fishers, port workers, village leaders, or coastal residents. A formal mechanism is needed so this information can be verified, shared, and acted upon quickly.

B. Strengthen Inter-Island Connectivity and Maritime Infrastructure

Maluku's development depends on the quality of its sea connectivity. The government should prioritize small-port modernization, regular sea transportation, fish landing centers, cold storage facilities, and logistics routes connecting Ambon, Tual, Saumlaki, Dobo, Banda, and other island clusters.

Port infrastructure should not be viewed only as a transportation facility. It should become a development node that supports fisheries, trade, tourism, public service delivery, and maritime security.

Government measures should include upgrading small ports in strategic island clusters, improving cold-chain infrastructure, integrating port development with fish processing centers, ensuring affordable and predictable inter-island shipping, developing maritime logistics routes for remote islands, and strengthening digital systems for vessel and cargo monitoring.

Better connectivity will reduce price disparities, improve public service access, and strengthen state presence in remote maritime areas.

C. Build Sustainable Fisheries and Local Value-Added Industries

Maluku's fisheries potential should be managed through a sustainable and community-centered blue economy model. The government should avoid a purely extractive approach that focuses only on catching and exporting raw fish. Instead, policy should prioritize local processing, certification, cold storage, aquaculture, marine-based small enterprises, and cooperative-based economic models.

Key measures should include developing fish processing centers in strategic districts, supporting small fishers with ice, fuel access, equipment, and financing, improving vessel registration and legal fishing permits, strengthening supervision against illegal and destructive fishing, promoting eco-labeling and traceability, supporting women-led coastal enterprises, and expanding vocational education in fisheries technology and marine logistics.

This approach is important because blue economy policy should balance economic growth, ecological sustainability, and social welfare.

D. Preserve Maritime Heritage as a Strategic Asset

Maluku's maritime history should become part of its future development strategy. The government should create a Maluku Maritime Heritage Route connecting Banda, Ambon, Lease Islands, Kei, Aru, Tanimbar, and other historically significant island clusters.

This route could include historical ports, spice trade sites, forts and colonial heritage, oral history of coastal communities, traditional navigation knowledge, maritime museums, spice plantations, maritime festivals, and underwater cultural heritage.

The Banda Islands already have strong historical value because of their association with nutmeg plantations, forts, colonial governance, and global trading networks. This identity should be developed into a broader educational, cultural, and economic program for Maluku.

The government should also develop school materials on Maluku's maritime history, establish digital archives, support community-based heritage tourism, and build international cultural cooperation with countries historically connected to the region, including the Netherlands, Portugal, and the United Kingdom.

E. Strengthen Multi-Agency Maritime Security Coordination

Maluku's sea space is too wide and complex to be managed by one institution alone. The government should strengthen coordination among the Indonesian Navy, Bakamla, Polairud, Immigration, Customs, Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries, local governments, port authorities, and village-level actors.

The coordination mechanism should not only focus on military defense, but also on law enforcement and human security. Maritime security in Maluku should cover illegal fishing, people smuggling, trafficking in persons, narcotics, marine pollution, sea accidents, and communal conflict linked to maritime resources.

A provincial maritime security forum should be established or strengthened with clear functions: sharing maritime intelligence and operational information, mapping vulnerable sea corridors, coordinating patrol schedules, developing joint response protocols, evaluating incidents and lessons learned, and preparing policy recommendations for provincial and national authorities.

This coordination is essential because maritime threats are often cross-sectoral. A suspicious vessel, for example, may involve fisheries violations, immigration violations, smuggling, or transnational crime. Without integrated coordination, each agency may only see part of the problem.

6. Implementation Roadmap

Timeframe	Priority Actions	Expected Output
Short Term: 1-2 Years	Conduct maritime risk mapping; identify strategic ports, vulnerable sea corridors, heritage assets, and coastal community networks; pilot early warning systems in selected island clusters.	Baseline maritime database; pilot early warning mechanism; priority area map.
Medium Term: 3-5 Years	Expand small-port upgrades, fish landing centers, cold storage, inter-island logistics networks, and maritime heritage tourism programs; connect district coordination forums to a provincial data center.	Improved connectivity, stronger fisheries value chain, functioning coordination structure.
Long Term: 5-10 Years	Position Maluku as a national hub for blue economy, sustainable fisheries, maritime security coordination, and maritime heritage diplomacy.	Maluku recognized as Indonesia's eastern maritime hub and policy innovation center.

7. Conclusion

Maluku's future should be built from its maritime past. For centuries, Maluku was connected to global trade, diplomacy, migration, conflict, and cultural exchange through the sea. The same maritime geography that once made Maluku central to the global spice trade can now become the foundation for blue economy development, maritime security, and regional prosperity.

The government should shift from a land-centered development approach to a maritime-centered strategy. This requires stronger inter-island connectivity, sustainable fisheries management, integrated maritime security coordination, community-based early warning, and preservation of maritime heritage.

Maluku should not only be remembered as the historical Spice Islands. It should be developed as Indonesia's eastern maritime hub: a region where history, security, economy, culture, and coastal communities are integrated into one future-oriented maritime policy agenda.

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Editorial Note

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