



Original Research Paper

Stewardship for Shared Futures, Educational Leadership and Conservation Practices, Safeguarding Human Communities and Natural Resources

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ABSTRACT

Educational leadership in higher education can translate conservation principles into sustained practices that protect natural resources and support human communities. This study explored how faculty members in Jolo, Sulu exercise conservation-oriented educational leadership through a qualitative exploratory design, semi-structured interviews, and reflexive thematic analysis involving eighteen (18) purposively selected faculty members in Jolo, Sulu, Philippines who teach Environmental Science or related environmental and sustainability courses or are actively involved in environmental sustainability, conservation, or community-based environmental initiatives. Data was generated through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Results revealed four connected processes: initiating feasible conservation practices, influencing responsible decisions, sustaining shared accountability, and extending conservation behavior beyond the institution. Conservation was linked to natural-resource protection, community health, safety, livelihoods, and quality of life. The findings establish faculty-led educational leadership as a practical pathway toward sustained stewardship for shared futures.

Keywords: educational leadership; conservation practices; faculty stewardship; natural-resource protection; community welfare; higher education; sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Although substantial research has been done into the role of sustainability leadership in higher education in relation to institutional policies, curriculum development, organizational transformation, and university-wide sustainability efforts, much less attention has thus far been given to the individual efforts of faculty members in exercising educational leadership when it comes to introducing, developing and maintaining conservation practices aimed at protecting both communities and natural resources. Corpuz et al. (2022) has studied the development of environmental education in Philippine higher education and its main challenges in taking environmental education beyond the confines of the university curricular design. More recent research defines sustainability leadership as an institutional process that has to do with strategic orientation, commitment of stakeholders, systemic thinking, and organizational development (Suriyankietkaew et al., 2022). However, such studies often focus on institutions and senior leadership, ignoring the contribution of faculty members involved in teaching environmental courses and participating in sustainability programs in actualizing educational

leadership into conservation practices. Therefore, the issue in question is not about whether higher education supports sustainability efforts anymore, but rather the way teachers practice leadership in implementing conservation measures.

Higher education institutions enjoy a unique opportunity to blend environmental knowledge with action as their impact goes beyond classroom learning to embrace community work, decision-making processes, professional preparation, and public projects. Hassan and Ahmad (2025) refer to sustainability leadership in the academic environment as systemic thinking, long-term orientation, innovation, and interdisciplinary approach. Sustainability in universities demands not only declarations but change in the university outlook. The role of the teaching staff becomes most important here as faculty often find themselves in the crossroads of everything related to education, learning, institutional programs, and community outreach. At the same time, Mangayarkarasi et al. (2025) show that sustainability leadership and transformational leadership among teaching staff allow for introducing sustainability into learning and establishing sustainable development priorities. It shows that leadership of the faculty is not restricted to the authority of administration but perceived through pedagogical influence, initiatives,

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cooperation, advocacy, mobilization of resources, and persistence in performing environmental activities. Faculty leadership may also influence the continuity of institutional initiatives by motivating colleagues and strengthening their participation through appropriate faculty development and leadership practices (Ang et al., 2025).

The difference between institutional sustainability and the sustainability led by faculty is vital since sustainability entails more than just knowledge about the environmental issues. According to Rosário and Boechat (2025), sustainability leadership is characterized by extensive engagement of stakeholders and balancing ecological, social, and organizational interests. Likewise, Martins et al. (2022) stress the importance of interdisciplinarity of sustainability education since sustainability education works better when knowledge from various disciplines is used rather than just limited to one field. In other words, faculty could act as the bridge between the environmental knowledge and practice in higher education by turning environmental principles into initiative on campus, mobilizing students to perform restoration activities, establishing partnership with community organizations, influencing institutional decisions, and supporting conservation activities despite other obstacles in academia. The influence of faculty members can likewise operate through deliberate behavior modeling, whereby educators demonstrate practices that students can observe, interpret, and potentially reproduce within their own academic and social activities (Legarde et al., 2025). Nonetheless, we still do not know how the relevant mechanisms function, how they are negotiated, and how they are maintained, especially when conservation is analyzed in relation to human welfare. In this context, the Philippines looks very urgent. The country is rich in biodiversity, but it suffers from many climate-related calamities and ecological degradation.

The Philippine Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (PBSAP) 2024–2040 recognizes the connection between biodiversity conservation and human well-being and establishes national directions for protecting and restoring biodiversity and ecosystems (DENR-BMB, 2025). The PBSAP 2024–2040 further promotes the integration of biodiversity objectives into national, regional, and local development planning, climate strategies, and sectoral programs, alongside coordination and partnerships among government institutions, Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities, civil society, and other stakeholders (DENR, 2025). This policy direction is consistent with Philippine evidence demonstrating the potential relationship between ecosystem protection and human well-being. Therefore, universities and colleges can serve a vital role in the present situation, as they can train people in ecological competence and act as

sites and points for community partnerships and applied conservation programs. The Philippines has already done some steps in this direction. The University of the Philippines applied the idea of environmental sustainability in its campus operations, eco-education, sustainable use of resources, and community engagement, treating its campuses as socio-ecological systems. Córdova-Vera et al. (2026) studied sustainability awareness patterns among educators in the Philippines higher education institutions, showing that the concept of sustainability is being viewed positively. Even if there are different programs on institutional level aimed at improving sustainability, the fact that such programs exist does not necessarily mean that educators engage with sustainability in their daily routine practices.

This is significant as these practices have impacts that are larger than simple ecological impacts. Thus, the Philippines environmental programs tend to link ecosystem conservation with community sustainability, livelihood security, disaster risk reducing, and sustainability. Therefore, DENR initiatives have increasingly adopted integrated approaches encompassing environmental conservation, forest and landscape restoration, biodiversity management, and sustainable natural-resource governance. For instance, the Philippines Sustainable Interventions for Biodiversity, Oceans and Landscapes (SIBOL) project supports science-based conservation planning, protected-area management, forest and landscape restoration, local government engagement, and Indigenous and community participation in natural-resource management (Department of Environment and Natural Resources–Biodiversity Management Bureau [DENR-BMB], 2024). Complementing these initiatives, the DENR-BMB Communication, Education, and Public Awareness (CEPA) Plan 2024–2030 identifies youth, Indigenous Peoples, local government units, academe, civil society organizations, and other stakeholder groups as audiences for coordinated biodiversity communication, education, and engagement (DENR-BMB, 2023). Consequently, it has become apparent that conservation needs to be understood not only as ecological practice but a stewardship that connects to human safety, community resilience, resource security and intergenerational stewardship.

However, the concept of sustainability leadership in higher education institutions is not necessarily straightforward. The issues of institutional priorities, limitations, administration support, competition for academic efforts, fragmentation and uneven involvement of stakeholders can hamper the sustainability initiatives. Peñaranda et al. (2026) report that among the key issues preventing sustainability leaders from implementing their ideas are resistance from the administration, lack of knowledge, resources and

commitment to sustainability on the institutional level. Similarly, Bharati (2026) make the point that sustainability leadership doesn't rely on isolated efforts and instead involves restructuring of the institutional mission and creating commitment for stakeholders. Sustainability leadership in the scope of institutional change, cooperation and social innovation processes. In this regard, the experience of faculty members is of interest because although conservation initiative starts from the activity of a single instructor the sustainability of this initiative will depend on whether it attracts people's participation, institutional support, community action and continuity.

Thus, this investigation focuses on the ways faculty members of higher education institutions act as educational leaders promoting conservation. The investigation is focused on the faculty teaching Environmental Science and related subjects and those who undertake activities in the sphere of environmental sustainability or some community activities. Instead of focusing on institutional policies and presence of environmental programs this research examines the leadership initiatives and actions that academic staff undertake to implement the principles of conservation. The investigation looks at the ways how these practices move beyond the boundaries of the campus contributing to environmental activities beyond the educational institution.

In this regard, this particular orientation corresponds to the need for identification of forms of educational leadership that can connect knowledge, institutional action and community stewardship in the context of the Philippines. Therefore, there are three dimensions of the study: how faculty members initiate conservation practices; how their decisions and approaches influence the processes of adoption and continuity of these practices in their institutions; and how initiatives launched by these academic leaders contribute to welfare of their communities. The focus of the research is the experiences of faculty members rather than viewing institutional sustainability as an exclusively administrative issue, thus shedding light on the ways in which educational leadership transforms into environmental stewardship.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Qualitative exploratory research design were used in the study to find out how faculty members in the higher education system have been using educational leadership to promote conservation actions that help in protecting the environment and natural resources. An exploratory method was found to be appropriate for the purpose

of the investigation because it was focused on understanding the way faculty members have used their personal experiences to practice educational leadership instead of establishing relationships among the variables mentioned in a previous research. The design allowed participants to discuss how they undertook environmental projects, impacted others, made decisions in terms of leadership, continued working for conservation projects, and connected conservation projects with environmental protection. The research was done among the faculty members of higher education institutions in Jolo, Sulu, Philippines and therefore, it is possible to gain a better understanding of conservation-related educational leadership in an environment where environmental sustainability is of great importance. This research relied on the method of collection of data through individual semi-structured interviews and analysis of the information received through reflexive thematic analysis.

Purposive Sampling

The study used the method of purposive sampling for the recruitment of 18 participants in Jolo, Sulu, Philippines who have direct experience relevant to the research. Faculty members who taught Environmental Science and similar courses or have been engaged in environmental activities could participate in the inquiry. The experience of the faculty members was of great importance in terms of the students' ability to present the information and provide meaningful and rich explanations. The faculty members who had not participated in environmental activities have not invited to take part in the research because their experience was not enough to help them in completing the task. The number of participants, such as 18, was chosen to provide a variety of experiences related to the topic of investigation while maintaining sufficient information for analysis. The selection of 18 participants was intended to provide varied experiences across faculty members while maintaining a manageable volume of detailed interview data appropriate for an exploratory qualitative inquiry.

Research Instrument

The primary instrument was a semi-structured interview guide aligned directly with the objective of the inquiry. The guide contained three principal questions addressing: (1) how faculty exercised educational leadership in initiating, influencing, or sustaining conservation practices; (2) the leadership decisions and approaches that shaped their adoption and continuity; and (3) how the conservation practices they led or supported contributed to safeguarding human communities and natural resources. Probing questions were used to obtain concrete descriptions, examples, decisions,

challenges, collaborations, and outcomes when participants provided brief or unclear responses. The interview guide was reviewed by qualified individuals with relevant expertise in environmental sustainability, educational leadership, and qualitative inquiry to assess its clarity, relevance, alignment, and appropriateness to the participants. Below is Table 1. Table 1 presented the research objective and corresponding interview questions. Table 1. Instrument of the Study

Objective	Interview questions
1. To examine how higher education faculty exercise educational leadership in advancing conservation practices that contribute to the protection of human communities and natural resources.	1. How do you exercise educational leadership in initiating, influencing, or sustaining conservation practices within your higher education institution? 2. What leadership decisions or approaches have shaped the adoption and continuity of conservation practices in your institution? 3. In what ways do the conservation practices you lead or support contribute to safeguarding human communities and natural resources?

Data Gathering Procedure

Prior to data gathering, the researcher took approval from relevant institutions and ethical clearance when applicable, and established coordination with numerous high education institutions located in Jolo, Sulu. Possible respondents were provided with an information sheet with the explanation of the research purposes, criteria for participation, procedure of interview, the fact that participation is voluntary, provided conditions for confidentiality pertaining participation and withdrawal. Participants were informed and permission was obtained for conducting interviews in person at a designated site which guarantees privacy or online via a secured platform in case interviews could not be conducted in person. Each interview lasted on average for 30-45 minutes and was done based on the authorized script. With the consent of interviewees, audio recording was made during the interviews. Additionally, the interviewer took notes based on his observations. Recordings were subjected to verbatim transcription.

Data Analysis

The collected data underwent analysis which was done with the aid of reflexive thematic analysis approach elaborated by Braun and Clarke. The researcher thoroughly read the transcripts multiple times and noted down his observations. The researcher analyzed the transcripts by highlighting questions from it. The study identified themes and codes from interviewees' narratives. Despite the fact Braun and Clarke (2024) argue that the validity of reflexive thematic analysis depends on the research process and engagement of researchers in the process of analysis, the study followed the rigidity of the coding process and procedures. Consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, interpretation acknowledged the researcher's active involvement in constructing meaning from the participants' narratives rather than treating themes as objectively discovered categories.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical standards were followed throughout recruitment, interviewing, handling, analyzing and reporting the data. Participation was voluntary and all participants signed the informed consent form before the interview. The participants were told that they might skip any question of an interview or quit participation if they chose to do so. Identification data, including names, names of participants' institutions and other sensitive information were removed from the transcripts. Data were collected only for the declared purpose and were retained only for the period necessary under the approved research protocol. A particular care was also exercised in reporting statements concerning institutional practices or community conditions so that participants were not inadvertently exposed to professional, social, or reputational risks.

RESULTS

Objective. To examine how higher education faculty exercise educational leadership in advancing conservation practices that contribute to the protection of human communities and natural resources.

Question 1. How do you exercise educational leadership in initiating, influencing, or sustaining conservation practices within your higher education institution?

1.1 Leading Conservation

Seven (7) participants highlighted that they exercise educational leadership by actively participating in and initiating conservation-related activities within the institution. Faculty leadership extends beyond classroom instruction to organizing students, participating in environmental programs,

coordinating with institutional personnel, and integrating conservation into existing academic activities. Rather than treating conservation as an isolated responsibility, the participants described their involvement as a means of translating environmental principles into observable institutional practices.

"I try to involve students in finding workable solutions. If there is too much waste during an activity, I ask them to redesign the process."

"I also participate in institutional and student-led environmental activities whenever my schedule permits. There are tree-growing activities, campus clean-up drives, waste reduction campaigns, and community activities where faculty participation is needed."

"I exercise educational leadership by making conservation something that students experience through actual activities rather than something they only encounter in lectures."

1.2 Influencing Responsible Conservation Decisions

Nine (9) participants shared that educational leadership involves influencing students and fellow faculty members toward more responsible environmental decisions. Their responses demonstrated that faculty members exercise influence by modeling resource-conscious behavior, questioning unnecessary consumption, and encouraging students to examine the environmental consequences of their choices. This influence is enacted through both personal example and deliberate guidance, allowing conservation principles to become part of everyday academic decision-making.

"I may not be the person with technical expertise in, but I can influence how students think, how they make decisions, and whether they become passive participants or responsible members of the institution."

"These may seem like small decisions, but they help students realize that environmental responsibility begins with ordinary choices."

"I also try to influence other faculty members by integrating environmental concerns into

activities that are already part of the academic program."

1.3 Sustaining Conservation

Eleven (11) participants explained that sustaining conservation requires attention to what happens after environmental activities are completed. It emphasized continuity, follow-through, and examination of recurring environmental problems rather than merely fulfilling institutional requirements. The participants encouraged students to consider maintenance, identify the causes of persistent problems, and develop practices that can continue within regular academic and institutional operations.

"I do not want conservation to become something we only do because there is an environmental celebration or because it is included in the annual calendar."

"I have therefore become more conscious of using digital submissions when appropriate, reducing unnecessary materials, and reminding students to be responsible with resources."

"I have found this more sustainable because faculty members are already managing several academic responsibilities."

Question 2. What leadership decisions or approaches have shaped the adoption and continuity of conservation practices in your institution?

2.1 Prioritizing Feasible Conservation Initiatives

Six (6) participants claimed that leadership decisions supporting conservation are shaped by the feasibility of proposed initiatives within available institutional resources. A considering budget, personnel, facilities, time, and existing academic responsibilities before adopting environmental programs. Rather than favoring ambitious initiatives that may lose momentum, they described choosing manageable interventions that can realistically be implemented and maintained over time.

"Rather than immediately rejecting their ideas, I guide them toward a smaller intervention that can actually be maintained."

"I have learned that it is better to begin with something achievable and maintain it consistently than to launch a large program that cannot be sustained."

"I strongly believe in not supporting an environmental

initiative simply because it looks good on paper.”

2.2 Building Collaborative Conservation Responsibility

Eight (8) participants highlighted that continuity is strengthened when conservation responsibilities are shared among faculty members, students, administrative personnel, maintenance staff, and community partners. Their responses showed that consultation and coordination allow decisions to incorporate practical knowledge while preventing environmental initiatives from depending solely on one individual. Shared responsibility was therefore described as an approach that strengthens participation and allows conservation practices to remain operational despite changes in personnel or availability.

“I coordinate with other faculty members, students, administrative personnel, maintenance staff, and, when the activity extends outside the campus, community partners.”

“I try to coordinate with colleagues and student leaders so that responsibilities are distributed.”

“One approach I use is giving students greater responsibility through our activities or environmental initiatives performance task”

2.3 Strengthening Continuity Accountability

Thirteen (13) participants noted that conservation practices require clear responsibility, monitoring, and accountability to prevent initiatives from ending after their initial implementation. A leadership decisions should include mechanisms for determining who will oversee an activity, how progress will be assessed, and whether the practice remains effective after its original proponents are no longer involved. This approach shifts conservation from temporary activity completion toward sustained institutional practice.

“Continuity happens when conservation becomes part of the institution's normal way of operating rather than remaining an activity conducted only during an environmental celebration or a designated month.”

“An environmental initiative becomes difficult to sustain when only one person is carrying the responsibility.”

“For me, continuity requires accountability. There should be someone responsible, there

should be monitoring, and there should be an expectation that the practice will continue even when the people who started it are no longer there.”

Question 3. In what ways do the conservation practices you lead or support contribute to safeguarding human communities and natural resources?

3.1 Protecting Natural Resources Conservation

Fifteen (15) participants explained that the conservation practices they lead or support contribute to protecting natural resources through practical interventions addressing waste, vegetation, water, and resource use. It demonstrated that faculty-led conservation extends beyond awareness by encouraging students and institutional members to observe environmental conditions, identify problems, and implement manageable responses. These practices help reduce environmental pressures while promoting more responsible stewardship of resources within and beyond the institution. Thirteen (13) participants noted that conservation practices require clear responsibility,

“A campus waste audit, reduction of single-use materials during activities, regular monitoring of a small green area, or a community information campaign can produce more sustainable results when there are people who will continue the work.”

“I ask students to observe how waste is actually handled in our campus.”

“Students may follow a rule because an instructor requires it, but the deeper goal is for them to understand why the rule exists.”

3.2 Conservation Community Wellbeing

Six (6) participants emphasized that conservation contributes to safeguarding human communities because environmental conditions directly affect health, livelihoods, safety, and quality of life. Their responses showed that protecting natural resources cannot be separated from protecting people who depend on those resources. Helping students recognize these connections, faculty members strengthen an understanding of conservation as a social responsibility with consequences for communities.

“They know which areas accumulate waste, which facilities frequently experience problems, and what practices are difficult to maintain on a daily basis.”

"I usually start within my classes because students are more likely to understand environmental responsibility when they can connect the lesson to what they see around the campus and in their communities."

"Natural resources directly support communities."

3.3 Extending Conservation

Ten (10) participants shared that conservation leadership can safeguard communities and natural resources by developing students who carry environmentally responsible practices into future workplaces and communities. It indicated that the influence of conservation education does not necessarily end with campus-based activities. Instead, students can transfer practices involving waste reduction, water conservation, vegetation protection, and environmental consideration into community and professional decisions, extending the reach of institutional conservation efforts

"For me, continuity happens when conservation becomes part of the institution's normal way of operating rather than remaining an activity conducted only during an environmental celebration or a designated month."

"Instead of creating another activity that would require additional resources, we can incorporate conservation into fieldwork, community extension, student projects, or laboratory activities."

"A student who learns to assess waste generation, conserve water, protect vegetation, or consider environmental impacts when planning a community project can eventually bring those practices outside the university."

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that the higher education faculty practice conservation-oriented educational leadership through participating, influencing, and integrating. Educational leadership includes strategies to help faculty attain high levels of participation and achievement, meaning that the influence of leadership can be expressed through different methods of support and management without relying on formal authority (Amerol et al., 2025). Among the faculty members, conservation was seen as a concept embedded in students' activities, routine decision-making, and normal everyday work instead of a separate ecological

program. This confirms the idea of Boeske (2023), who perceives sustainability leadership as long-term commitment and institutional actions, whereas Coştu and Karakuş (2025) stress the role of faculty in implementing sustainability in education. In addition, Arntzen et al. (2026) highlight the deposition and action-based character of sustainability education. The current findings also provide more proof of these ideas since faculty leadership can bring environmental concepts into practice on the institutional level.

The findings also confirm that the quality of conservation is influenced by feasibility, shared responsibility, and accountability. The participants expressed their preference for ideas that could be realized using available resources and incorporating academic demands. At the same time, collaborating with faculty, students, staff, and community partners enables them to reduce reliance on one person. The same ideas are supported by Attah et al. (2026), according to whom sustainability leadership is connected with stakeholder engagement and institutional changes, while López et al. (2025). According to (2021), an increase in environmental knowledge-sharing among educators happens if certain conditions are met. This implies that conservation ideas will be more lasting if environmental practices are implemented collectively and tracked properly. We also ascertain that there are certain perceptions of positive outcomes of conservation implementation such as wealth and safety of people. Thus, according to participants, waste management, vegetation preservation, water saving, and resource consumption forms positive perceptions concerning conservation, while others connect environmental protection with wellness, safety, life opportunities, and quality of life.

This corroborates the aims of Mohammadi et al. (2023) and their claims that sustainability as part of university life means not only sustainability and ecology but also socially responsible activities that promote sustainability competencies acquired through higher education. Likewise, Xing (2024) claims that students can get competencies related to sustainable actions in relation to environmental issues. Thus, it can be stated that faculty-driven conservation implies much broader application than just mere conservation in educational settings. Another valuable insight is that conservation will extend beyond the university. Ten respondents stated that students practice waste minimization, water saving, vegetation preservation, and environmentally sensitive decision-making outside the educational institution. Nurwidodo et al. (2026) stress that sustainability competencies are the abilities to behave responsibly outside formal education. At the same time, Aljatlawe and Kiraz (2026) found out that the recycling behavior is based on moral norms and behavioral control perception.

Therefore, the findings suggest that conservation education will acquire wider sense through practice implementation in students' social life.

The findings serve the purpose of the research as they demonstrate educational leadership in the conservation field functioning via four interacting processes: establishing manageable practices, influencing responsible decisions, sustaining common accountability, and expanding conservation practices beyond the institution. This adds a faculty-level perspective to sustainability leadership which has been predominantly discussed in terms of university management. The findings demonstrate that the idea of stewardship is visible when teaching environmental responsibility by converting environmental principles into actions and involving other stakeholders into sustainability practices.

CONCLUSION

The findings demonstrates that educational leadership in the context of higher education serves as a channel through which conservation is furthered by means of actionable initiation, responsible influence, shared accountability, and continuous involvement in conservation campaigns. Apart from attending environmental activities, faculty members implement conservation into their academic work, stimulate responsible decision-making, share responsibility, and promote continuity of their initiatives. Since during all processes conservation-oriented leadership is exercised via educational practice, the faculty members do not need to be formally appointed to an administrative position. The results of the research also demonstrate that the concept of conservation is perceived by the research participants as an entity that cannot be separated from the welfare of human community and environmental resource protection. Waste management practices, water conservation measures, and how vegetation is organized and managed are being interpreted by the participants in relation to health, safety, and livelihood. Thus, the study fills the gap in research investigating how educational leadership becomes conservation activity and how instead of seeing sustainability as a concern of institutional policies faculty members become successful in implementing environmental concepts.

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