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Hot springs for health tourism destination in perak, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the potentials for developing health-based tourism in the state of Perak. The discussion begins on the distribution of hot springs frequented for various ailment treatments in Perak. The second part of the paper identifies and analyses challenges and opportunities for potential development of health based tourism in the state. Lastly, it discusses issues associated with developing policies promoting tour sites. Current global trends in tourism activities leads into increased domestic trips for short distance tourism. The fast changing lifestyles among state residents help increase awareness and concern for health care activities that utilise natural resources uniquely available in different hot spring parks. This situation increased competitiveness among tour locations. Each individual hot springs has the potential to market its own strengths and uniqueness by promoting the local content either based on natural resources or man-made physical attractions. In this context, marketing strategies must identify and emphasise strengths and characteristics of each location to stimulate increase in tourist return. Quality issues are also one of the main attractions to be considered in future global tourism policies. Using SWOT analysis, factors influencing site selection and priority development strategies based on place consumerism factual information, consumer perceptions and capacity of place, and future potential hot springs in Perak state as a health tourism destination will be evaluated and discussed.

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Introduction

Recreational activities have fast expanded throughout the world into a necessity for various reasons and covering various destinations. Increasingly too, recreational facility demands have made economic importance for these destinations. This large demand resulted in tourism to expand and taken a major seat in the economic growth for these areas. This resulted in the expansion of mass tourism in the 1950s. Since then, the tourism market have gone through changing phases and increase in numbers. Of the late, this mass tourism has not met any increasing and more complex tourism product.

Tourism has moved into active participations and includes real experiences from basic travels and visitations. These activities must offer not only display products but also the vast experiences. Homestay for example has fast attracted foreign tourists keen to experience the unique multicultural society in Malaysia. According to Krippendorf (in Hall and Weiler, 1992), these new era tourists want in-depth satisfaction tourism products not available elsewhere. This satisfaction can only be achieved by providing special interest tourism. In this discussion, the focus shall be on hot spring pools associated with interest in healthcare and fitness activities that have high potentials for future growth and expansion (Standeven dan Knop, 1999). For example, Cuba, a developing nation has developed her healthcare tourism into an economic growth catalyst mostly from foreign money inflows (NACLA, 1997).

In Malaysia, tourism began to develop progressively since the seventies and has now contributed significantly to the economic growth. With her diversified and distinct cultural heritage as the main asset, tourism marketing strategies in Malaysia have included festivals, ethnic and heritage practices,

sports, environment and shopping as part of the worldwide marketing activities. Health tourism in Malaysia is more for medical treatment (Malaysia, 1999). This tourism may actually include beauty treatment and recreational activities that include health services (Goodrich, 1993).

Hence, health tourism concept has been developed into:

‘efforts to introduce tourism facilities or destinations to attract tourists through promotions and health care services including value added throughout the visits.’ (Goodrich, 1993)

Tourism is not phenomenal or industrial sets only. It also includes human actions and interactions, use of resources, economy and the environment including physical movements of tourists from their homes to various destinations. Most of these are for recreational purposes. Although most of the tour activities are for businesses and medical needs, high level of awareness for healthcare helps activate tour activities in the future.

Nature-based health tourism is a new product with great potentials to attract tourist to new sites. Recreational sites based on hot springs are rich in mineral resources identified to help cure various ailments and diseases including stroke, skin disease, gout, joint pains, insomnia and many others. These hot water pools contain high mineral deposits including sulphur that have been identified for external treatment. Physically, the location of these hot springs recreational parks (HSRP) a way from major urban areas provide the exclusive settings and peace of mind. The unique setting of these pools surrounded by natural vegetations and close to forest reserves rich in various species provide the quiet and cool setting associated with serene neighbourhood.

In this paper, the discussion shall identify different types, status, and potential health tourism in Perak, with special focus on hot spring as the location attraction for these locations. The location of these hot springs as health tourism locations in Perak will be identified and their future potentials based on their natural settings and added facilities.

The competitiveness of these sites depends on their uniqueness and the ability to accommodate local resources for this purpose. The changing global trend into shorter weekends and closer to home locations helps traditional healing practitioners to have more frequent trips. Natural elements of these sites have been the trend among health tourists especially with least commercialised sites. This factor has to be considered because tourists will normally seek for identities unique to these sites.

Health geography

Health geography can be associated with post-modern geography that has greatly expanded since 1990s. Main focus in health geography has been on human experiences on society facing health issues, inequalities in health conditions over various parts of the regions, and the distributions of diseases. According to Hall and Weiler, (1992) this main focus have been on issues associated with using geographic approaches, techniques and concepts. Therefore, looking at the integration of geography, social sciences and pure sciences, health geography is more complex and exposed to various changing agents. Two major themes in the study of health geography are (1) the relation between health and environment that focuses on epidemic associated with climate, lifestyle, and cultural lifestyle, (2) delivery methods and healthcare associated with differences in infrastructure facilities, and health level among spatial areas, unequal health status, accessibilities to medical facilities and health information, and perceptions on modern medicine. The relation between environment and health is the traditional theme and still relevant to the present society condition today. Goodrich, (1993) concentrates on the changing focus in the study of health geography from literature studies into a more holistic complex social problem solving. He also stresses on efforts to bring out of social problems as the result of disease impact and provide awareness on the importance to take care of the health. This is due to the different individual abilities to react and face certain diseases and self protection based on different socio economic status, education level, accessibility, transportation services, health care services and public perception towards health care. These factors will draw the line on the ability of individuals or societies to receive good and reliable health services. In conclusion, health geography pushes two key elements (1) spatial distribution of disease and death, (2) geographical obstacles facing individuals from getting health services and information over a particular area. Therefore, health geography study will be the basis for healthcare and solving techniques that trespass accessibilities and abilities to achieve social services available for the public interest.

Hot spring pools as an alternative treatment is one of the ecologically based tourism. Health based tourism has long been part of the travel industry. Based on analysis done in Europe, health and medical tourism is especially popular among Asian tourists. However, the opportunity to increase health condition, experiencing healthy food, visiting spa and health centres are the objectives of international travels. Here, the health tourism has been defined differently. Van Sliepen (1989) defines it as (1) an activity away from home, (2) with health as the objective and (3)

done in leisure time. Health tourism is defined as travel for health or getting medical treatment. This includes mud bath, hot spring pool, warm sand treatments expected to improve health condition.

Even though these travels are becoming more popular, published writings and documentations are very limited. This limits the scope of study definitions. In this study, health tourism is defined to improve one's health condition. Specifically this travel is meant to attain external treatment using hot spring in short duration. Travellers are hoping for the mineral content in these hot springs may help cure any ailment associated with skin and nerve system. Since a long time these locations have been popular travel destinations. Dead Sea in Jordan River Valley has been visited for hundreds of years by visitors who believe in its mineral content that help cure different kind of diseases by destroying germs and help extract toxic from human body.

Increase in awareness in western Europe for example resulted in small scale development in healthcare destinations. Austria, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy and Switzerland have been shown to have these special markets in health care (Hall and Weiler, 1992). However, this health tourism is not limited to a particular element but also include massage centres, health care centres, marine therapy, diet therapy, physiotherapy, beauty centres, detoxification centres, training and sport centres, steam bath, relaxation techniques, and health education (Hall, 1992). In addition, these travels are easily combined with other travel activities.

Goodrich (1993), had completed a pilot survey to identify healthcare tourism and discuss its impact based on facilities available in Switzerland, Austria, Germany, Hungary and the United States. Additionally, the study also looks at consumer factors, destinations identified, and the effectiveness of the treatment taken. The study provides a general picture of this industry in these countries. In 1995, study done by Goodrich in Cuba look at more specific issues in health tourism. Among these, health spa and treatment during vacation are discussed in more detail. According to Hall and Weiler (1992) there are five components in health tourism. First and second are the activities, while the third through the fifth components are associated with the health reasons for these travels. He also identifies each component to specific marketing. Standeven and Knop (1999) on the other hand identifies three types of travel purposes, health farm, traditional spa, and talasotherapy. Traditional spa is associated with natural springs for healing purposes. Talasotherapy uses mineral and organisms in water to strengthen bones and blood circulation. These types of tours may become professional and blood circulation. These types of tours may become professional activities with increase in demand. It has been in the human history, but less developed in the global tourism industry. With higher income and greater allocations for specialised recreations, this industry will have great potential to expand quickly in the future (Goodrich, 1993).

Malaysian health tourism returned after economic crisis of 1997. The present government is aware of the potentials of these economic activities. Malaysian government begins promoting health tourism as one major tour activities available in the country. Many advance hospitals and medical facilities become the focus for this marketing strategy. Longer stays are encouraged among the visitors. Lower health care and treatment cost in Malaysia among ASEAN nations attracts larger pool of tourists. More private hospitals start to use this marketing concept to help advertise their capabilities and expertise. Better

infrastructures give the advantage to these hospitals. Longer visitation visas allow longer recuperating stays in Malaysia. In general there are no available statistics to gauge the status and how effective are the promotion packages for this economic sector.

Hot spring in perak

Perak has nine (9) hot springs in nine different districts. They are in (1) Sungkai (HSRP Sg. Klah), (2) Tanjong Malim (Slim Village Hot Spring), (3) Kuala Kangsar (Kg. Ara Panjang Hot Spring), (4) Tambun (Tambun Hot Spring), (5) Taiping (Trong Health Pool), (6) Simpang Pulai (Lubuk Timah Hot Spring), (7) Pengkalan Hulu (Pengkalan Hulu Chalet) (8) Grik (Hot Spring Village) and Tapah (Kuala Woh Recreational Forest). From these nine hot springs, all are actively used except for the one Grik (refer map 1.1). They can be classified according to ownership, operating hours, level of commercialisation, and number of visitors. Privately owned hot springs are in Trong Health Pool, Pengkalan Hulu Chalet and Tambun Hot Spring. They were developed and operated based on customer demand. Sg. Klah HSRP on the other hand is managed wholly by FELDA and the others come under the management of the respective local governments. Many of these are not up to the commercial level. The one in Grik can be classified as abandoned.



Map 1.1
Location of Hot Springs in Perak

Based on the above map, one can easily identify the locations of these hot springs to be found distributed throughout the state. The locations are also assessable for daily trip visitors but may require proper transportation planning in order to reach and enjoy the facilities.

Hot Spring Recreational Park (HSRP) Sungai Klah, Sungkai

Sungai Klah Hot Spring Recreational Park is located in Felda Sungai Klah, one of the FELDA Gugusan Trolak administration. It is opened to the public since 2003. Hot Spring Recreational Park (HSRP) Sungai Klah in Sungkai, is the suitable location for urban dwellers to find refuge in the quiet and serene environment. The park is about 6.5 hectare and located about 90 minutes drive from Kuala Lumpur and 20 minutes from PLUS Sungkai toll plaza. It was formally known as Sungai Klah Hot Spring Park with over 100 natural springs with sulphur content of 0.005 ppm only. It also contains reflexology facilities for foot massage. They are located among the palm trees and close to the forest reserves. The park is also covered by tropical trees including durian and local herbs. Visitors will recall the typical Malay village setting with Titiwangsa range in its background at about 80 meters above sea level.

The sounds of humming birds and rushing water

downstream provide the natural twinning of the flora and fauna. Overnight, the sound of crickets and other species in the forest continues to whisper the ears of visitors. In addition to six natural jacuzzi visitors may also acquire massage services during the weekend and public holidays at a reasonable rate. Visitors may consider family picnic as part of the recreational activities. Camping packages are also available at this HSRP. Visitors will find restaurants that cater to all type of visitors. In addition, there are travel packages for those who would like to spend overnight at Trolak Country Resort which is 16 kilometres away. TRAP in Sg.Klah remains committed to provide the natural setting. Those who wish to sleep closer to the pools may choose to rent chalet in the site itself. Visitors are also provided with jungle trekking package and tour over Orang Asli village in Kampung .



Photo 1.1
Natural hot spring within reach by a bridge

Photo 1.2

Each pool has different temperature

Kuala Woh Recreational Forest also known as Seventh Mile Recreation Point is located about 13 km from Tapah town. It has both cool and hot water pools. The main attractions are its shallow stream, and have a forest museum in the park. The main attraction to this HSRP is the shallow and smooth flowing river and less steep river banks. This site is surrounded by wood trees about 20 meters high. A forest museum was built at this location and provides exhibition materials from the forest reserve. The location of this museum further increase number of visitors into the hot spring. Users have both cool and hot water pond to bath and relax (see photo 1.6). The local government has provided sufficient warning signs to warn visitors against potential dangers of the rapid water. This recreational site has attracted various government and private agencies to conduct recreational activities based on its outdoor setting.

There is also an Orang Asli village adjacent to Kuala Woh Recreational Forest. It includes a hall, chalet, shower rooms, restrooms, camping sites, caravan parking, and other extras to accommodate various needs of visitors. These recreational provide the unique experience but looks less promoted and will inadequate signboards to direct visitors to the site.



Photo 1.3
Surroundings of recreational forest in Kuala Woh

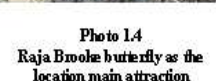


Photo 1.4
Raja Brooke butterfly as the location main attraction



Photo 1.5
Signboard showing the hot spring



Photo 1.6
The actual location of the hot spring in the mountain water pool which many visitors are not aware of

This pool is privately owned and run by a couple not far from the main road to Trong, Taiping. It is inherited over the last several generations and visitors are charged moderately. Opening hours extended into late hours in the evening and limited to bath and feet soaking. Due to its size, the pool can only accommodate very few visitors and have limited potentials for expansion.



Photo 1.7
Hot spring pool in Trong in Taiping

Hot spring chalet in pengkalan hulu

Pengkalan Hulu was formally known as Kroh. It is a town bordering Thailand. Pengkalan Hulu was a restricted town due to active insurgents of former Communist Party of Malaya based in Betong, Thailand. It is close Baling, Kedah, also popular meeting ground of the former Malaya Chief Minister and CPM Secretary General Chin Peng. The town comes under Hulu Perak District Council which includes Grik and Lenggong. The whole district borders Thailand making Pengkalan Hulu the entry point into her northern neighbour. This only access also allows potential visitors from the north.

The pool with chalets which are located within the hot spring is managed by Nasdiera Sdn. Bhd and falls under Pengkalan Hulu District Council Office. Some renovations and modifications to the original pools reduce the heat of the flowing water. Poor management resulted in accumulated sulphur in the pools and quickly polluted. The high number of users made and cooler water made this centre looks poorly managed.



Photo 1.8
Pool filled with sulfur deposits and distract potential users

Photo 1.9
Development adjacent to the hot spring decreases pool water temperature

Hot spring in kg. ara panjang, kuala kangsar

Kg. Ara Panjang hot spring in Kuala Kangsar is an abandoned pool and has lower number of visitors. Study done at the site during school holidays reflects its status as being

unpopular among the visitors. The site is also known to the locals to be inhabited by the unseen spirits. These words of the locals have resulted in many potential visitors to be reluctant to utilise the resources at this site. However, from the photos shown below, the site has its own uniqueness, and may be developed in the future.



Photo 1.10
The pool surrounding

Photo 1.11
Poor condition of the pool

Tambun Hot Spring

Tambun Hot Spring is located in Tambun Lost World Recreational Park in Ipoh. It is the major attraction to Tambun Lost World Park. However, due to its highly developed setting including the characteristics of its pools are not in terms with this study. The water is artificially heated and no longer a natural flowing hot spring. Most visitors are more interested in the water park setting rather than hot spring pools for healing purposes. The actual hot spring sources are limited and require artificial heating to attract the visitors.



Photo 1.12
Man made hot spring pool

Slim village hot spring

Slim Village hot spring is administered by Tanjong Malim District Council. It is not well maintained and the temperature can reach 104°C. This is the hottest pool in Perak. It has been abandoned for a long period of time and not being able to identify users. Observations over the site have been done to collect relevant information. The site was poorly managed that it becomes a grazing ground for livestock.



Photo 1.13
Persekitaran Fizikal
Kolam Air Panas Slim Village

Photo 1.14
Pandangan kolam air panas utama

Hot Spring in Lubuk Timah, Simpang Pulai

Lubuk Timah Hot Spring Pool in Simpang Pulai is located 1 km from the of Simpang Pulai to Cameron Highlands main road. It is only 8 km from North-South expressway Simpang Pulai toll exit. Even though, no paved road from the main road, this site is considered a popular destination to people in Ipoh area. Given its contour and slope of the river, the hot spring which is located just next to the running river allows the experience of hot pool and cool fast running river water next to

it. Very similar to Kuala Woh setting, the surroundings is very natural. Due to limited advertisement and signage leading to this site, visitors are mostly locals and limited to day trips. Few fishing anglers may be part of overnight visitors in the area. Frequent visits by local police patrol cars helps ensure the safety of the visitors.



Photo 1.15
Main pool with hotwater sources

Photo 1.16
Attractive surrounding

Grik Hot Spring

Grik hot spring pool have been known to exist since 1940 based on the notice displayed. However, the hot water spring no longer produce hot running water that it used to be. It is surrounded with bush and tall grass. The site is poorly maintained and difficult to reach. No visitor found during the study trip. This pool site can be classified as ceased to function and have no more source of hot water. It can also be categorises as permanently abandoned pool.



Photo 1.17
Abandoned and lapidated pool

Conclusion

Being part of tourism industry in Malaysia, Hot Spring tourism slowly becoming a significant sector that can generate an income. But at the same time much still need to be done in term of promoting the useful of hot spring to the people health not only just from the some people perspectives but scientifically proven medicine that can slowly cure people. Maintaning infrastructure is still the main problem to the hot spring business community. To keep the insfrastructure in good condition will be a biggest challenge and this where some government agencies can help with the support in term of promoting, advicing and loan support.

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