

Development of Wellness-Village Tourism: An Exploratory Study of a Small Town

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The word ‘wellness’ itself clearly reflects the significant meaning of health and well-being of a human body as well as the mind. From the tourism outlook, the term wellness tourism is concomitant with travel activity or behaviour with the purpose and motivation of maintaining as well as achieving the highest state of wellness of mind, body and soul. In parallel, village or rural tourism is known to be a tourism product that is tucked inside the rustic or pastoral environment, which entails the local community participation, preservation of natural resources and experiencing the richness of the local culture. Moreover, it is deemed to be the most sustainable tourism product. The purpose of this study is to explore wellness-village tourism through the elements of natural and cultural resources through engagement with a semi-structured interview method. The result of this research shows that the above-mentioned elements have significantly influenced the development of the wellness-village tourism concept in the target study area. In short, the outcomes shall make a contribution in terms of understanding the community uniqueness and supporting the development of the study area and the wellness-village tourism industry itself.

Key words: *Wellness, rural, local community, natural resources, culture resources.*

Introduction

The tourism industry which is one of the world’s fastest growing sectors is revealed as the sector accounting for 10.4% of global GDP and 319 million jobs, or 10% of total employment in 2018. The industry overall spend contributed more to the leisure market, which represented 78.5% of the total compared with 21.5% for the business market. Leisure tourism could be categorised into different types: cultural tourism, visits to friends and relatives, ethnic tourism, historical tourism, recreational tourism, village tourism, urban tourism, ecotourism, adventure tourism, wine tourism and other emerging leisure purposes. Village or rural tourism is a sub-sector in the tourism industry and it somehow has a significant connection with wellness



tourism. This type of sub-sector is related to the village or rural areas, as is a potential industry providing employment, income to the local community and can be a part of contributing an individualised or unique holiday experience to a holiday seeker as well as to wellness travellers. In addition, village tourism mostly caters to accommodation service and is accompanied by extra facilities or services depending on the cultural, local community or social, natural resources and is being utilized according to the values of responsible-sustainable development. According to the study by Dillip Kumar Das and Nilanja Ray (2014), who underlined that tourism is associated with lifestyle, such as that village tourism can somehow benefit other sub-sector as most of the villages are able to cater to tourism needs because of their villager hospitality values. Hence, this type of tourism segment shall become one of the emerging markets in the tourism industry.

From the point of the World Health Organization (WHO), health is “a combination of mental and physical well-being, as well as social well-being. It is not merely the nonappearance or absence of illness” (as per stated in World Health Organization webpage). In agreement with this definition, wellness can be paralleled with health. The contribution of both health and wellness vis-à-vis cover several magnitudes of well-being which include physical, mental, social, sexual, emotional, cultural, spiritual, educational, occupational, financial, ethical and existential lengths. Likewise, the health and wellness tourism industry includes consideration of travel both nationally and internationally to places and facilities, such as hospitals, clinics, ‘thermae’, ‘thalasso’, wellness SPAs, and fitness centres and wellness resorts (Medical Tourism Magazine, 2013).

In recent years Malaysia has see a flourishing this sector within the travel industry which has taken centre stage. However, the village or rural tourism elements which are associated with the essence of wellness are still an infancy industry in Malaysia. It needs to be vastly explored, like the rest of the sub-trades that have been introduced such as eco-tourism, agritourism, weight-loss camp, health-agriculture farm, spa and fitness boot camps. Village tourism has been under development for quite a long time and several main gaps and hiccups still occur within the industry. The further intricacy is the issue of sustainable or responsible village tourism. However, there are still several positive efforts from the industry, such as improving planning, promoting, managing and development in order to boost the demand for village tourism

As cited by Malaysia Minister of Youth and Sports, Khairy Jamaluddin (The Sun Daily, 2016) "Malaysia should try to capture a slice of the market by developing wellness tourism alongside medical tourism, which the country has been promoting aggressively" He then added that Malaysia's wellness and fitness industry has the potential to become a big revenue earner for the tourism sector.

In the other analysis by Oxford Business Group, via their website, it is highlighted that the Malaysian government has aimed to create almost 3540 jobs in this industry with a gross national income of RM374.1m by 2020; this strategy is to develop the industry to become part of the tourism national main economic area.

Problem Statement

The idea of health-wellness oriented holidays or vacation is nothing new, especially in the Asian region, however this segment is still an infancy industry in Malaysia. It needs to be vastly explored, like the rest of the sub-trades that has been introduced such as eco-tourism, agritourism, weight-loss camp, health-agriculture farm, spa and fitness boot camps. Village tourism has been under development for quite a long time and several main gaps and hiccups still occur within the industry. The further intricacy is the issue of sustainable or responsible village tourism. However, there are still several positive effects of the industry such as improving planning, promoting, managing and development in order to boost the demand for village tourism. Hitherto, the efforts have been considered inadequate and most of have not mirrored best practices in sustainable village tourism as there are still alarming issues occurring (Jaini, Anuar, & Daim, 2012; Manaf & Ibrahim 2017). Moreover, the Malaysian government has also emphasised this tourism segment via the Malaysian Rural Tourism Master Plan, as expressed in 2001, were:

“ . . . Tourism that provides opportunities for visitors to visit rural areas and rural attractions, and to experience the culture and heritage of Malaysia, thereby providing socioeconomic benefits for local communities. . . The proximity of many of these rural areas to the hinterland and rainforest also offers visitors an opportunity to extend their holiday and enjoy those unique natural resources” (RTMP, 2001: p. 22)

Study Objectives

The objective of this research is to analyse the concept of wellness-village tourism in the target study area to determine what the area can offer in order to become the wellness-village tourism hub. Overall the research outcome or findings shall provide the potential information for government, local state tourism, travel marketer, and tourism trade entrepreneur to develop, produce and promote the wellness-village tourism industry. The study is an exploration, of the development of the wellness-village tourism concept as there is a substantial lack of awareness amongst the industry as well the local community. Furthermore, there is no such concept within the study area. The exploration which entails the study of a small town in Seremban, Negeri Sembilan – Mukim Pantai, thus, apart from exploration purposes, aims to measure the attractiveness in becoming the potential wellness-village tourism hub in that success will elevate the local community economy. In addition, the study will lead to an understanding of

community characteristic, social well-being, and image of the said local community and will helps to strategize in terms of promotion, marketing, and creating branding toward the area as entirely. Hence the study will provide pertinent information to the underlined objectives.

Literature Review

Wellness-Village

As a single common category, the term “wellness tourism” is literally integrated with medical and health tourism. This is whereby, the medical or health tourists, mainly travel (domestically or internationally) to undergo treatment for curing certain illness or medical condition. In contrary, the wellness tourists or travellers who travel for vacation or leisure are to maintain or improve their health and welfare (Mu¨ller and Lanz Kaufmann, 2001). The term between “illness” and “wellness” are somewhat contrasted as it unchanging with a recent definition of wellness tourism (Mu¨ller and Lanz Kaufmann, 2001; Henderson, 2004; Nahrstedt, 2004; Puczko´ and Bacharov, 2006; Smith and Puczko´, 2008; Voigt, 2010). In addition, wellness tourists can also known as medical tourists; however, this is based on different basic needs, whereby the term “wellness tourism” is normally used and associated with a huge type of various tourism activities which also applies to the sub-trade of spa tourism (Letho et al., 2006; Malik & Khan 2013). On the other hand, wellness tourism is a new emerging era of tourism (Pernecky and Johnston, 2006), volunteer tourism (Devereux and Carnegie, 2006; Lean, 2009), outdoor, sport and adventure activities such as hiking (Hall, 1992; Kulczycki and Lu¨ck, 2009; Sheldon and Bushell, 2009), yoga tourism (Letho et al., 2006; Ali-Knight, 2009), same goes to spiritual and religious tourism (Smith and Kelly, 2006). In summary the main focus is on the wellness of mind, body, and soul.

Village or rural areas are defined as clustered of human settlement or community, larger than a colony but smaller than a town. The occupancy rate is from small to medium range, which would be within the range of a few hundred to a few thousand. Habitually, the rural area is some form of countryside, outside of the city. In the context of tourism, few researchers (e.g., Aref & Gill, 2009; Khound, 2013; Wani & Shafi, 2013), have defined as a tourism activity that type which involves and influences the preservation of the un-touched nature, local community norms, art, culture, heritage, tradition, and food surrounded by the pastoral atmosphere. Hence this research is deemed of benefit to both local community and the tourism industry, in that tourist will be able to experience richness of culture (via interactive with local community) and enhance the living standard (economically and socially) of the local community.

Natural Resources

Hypothetically, fresh natural environments can increase or reduce our stress, which in turn impacts our bodies and mind. The changes of human mood, behaviour as well as the nervous

system, are dependent on what and how people are seeing, hearing and experiencing. This consecutively can affect reading of blood pressure, the percentage of heart rate, and trigger muscle tension and consequently overwhelm immune system. A pleasing green ambiance or environment can cure the above-mentioned and, in some cases, may even reduce mortality (Mitchell, 2008; Stamatakis, 2011). According to studies by Ulrich (1991), Kim (2010), and Cervinka (2012), greenery-fresh-beauty of natural resources is ultimately linked to human psychological well-being and strength (physically and emotionally).

Local Community

Local community is a cluster or group of interrelated individuals that share an environment. This group of people may be present and mutual or common, that includes intent, belief, resources, preferences, requirements, risks, and several other conditions, as it affects the identity of the members or participants as well as their degree of cohesiveness. According to term tourism, the local community is a cluster of people living and sharing the boundaries in areas, premises or places that entangled to tourism activity (Abas & Mohd Hanafiah, 2014). Moreover, this entity is very important in tourism development as it considers the service provider or brand-carrier that is the impetus toward visitor volume or tourist arrival into that particular tourism area. Therefore, this type of tourism is perceived to encompass friendliness expressed: between local community and tourist; through the sense of warmth and welcomeness from the local community towards the tourist; through the willingness and enthusiasm to help in providing as well as sharing information for tourism purposes and the entire attitudes (toward tourist and industry) (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Mabika, 2016; Afthanorhan, Awang, & Fazella, 2018) all of which are much vital to tourist's feeling and impression as these factors affect the ability to attract the tourist to a destination.

Cultural

Culture naturally involves the local communities as a fundamental essence in becoming an emerging tourism product (village tourism). Previous research states the importance of empowering the value of local cultural heritage, as it is deemed to be the most treasured property in a community. Thus, if it properly planned and well-managed, it shall be also the greatest asset for the national tourism industry (Ashworth and Larkham, 1994; McKercher and du Cros, 2002; George, 2004; Awang et al., 2015). The authenticity of a cultural and its heritage is referred to as something real and original. This, however, is the main aspect in promoting as well as attracting the tourist, especially tourist from the modern western country (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). In addition, the uniqueness and authenticity of a culture and heritage are a vital asset in the tourism industry (Kolar and Žabkar, 2007) and the motivation factor for tourists to travel to that particular destination in order to experience the culture authentically (MacCannell, 1973; Cohen, 1988; Naoi, 2003).

Sustainable Development

As per the common definition, sustainable development was posited by the Bruntland Commission in 1987 who defined it as “a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the needs of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). In relation to the foregoing statement, most of the research sourced in the literature review agrees that the sustainability in the tourism industry is purely meant toward the environment concern (Jaeger, 1995; Kajikawa et al., 2007; Savag, 2006; Kajikawa, 2008). Moreover, De Albuquerque and McElroy (1995), have modified the definition by emphasizing the importance of maintaining and preserving the integrity of sociocultural toward the destination apart from creating cohesiveness among the community and stakeholders in terms of planning and development. The definition is quoted as below.

“Sustainability ideally seeks to preserve a permanent and widely shared stream of income by creating an adaptive competitive destination niche market through the ongoing guidance of participatory community planning without unacceptably sacrificing the socio-cultural and natural integrity of the asset base (McElroy and de Albuquerque, 2002, p. 16)”.

Research Methodology

Qualitative method, entailed face to face or individual interview to encourage participants to give their feedback and responses. The procedure includes developing the semi-structured/open-ended questions by guaranteeing the discussion topic is sustainably relevant, time management and selection of participants as well as observation. In addition, observing the participant's behaviour, body language and even tone of voice is also being used in this research. It helps the researcher to learn about the activities within the participant's natural setting (DeWALT & DeWALT, 2002) and this can be described as existing situations using the five senses, through providing a "written photograph" toward the discussion topic (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). Those senses consist of active looking (sensitive), improving memory, informal interviewing, writing notes, and patience (DeWALT & DeWALT, 2002). In this research, the convenience sampling has been adopted, whereby 10 village people (*orang kampung*) who reside in Mukim Pantai, consisting of all races, age group, gender, working and education background were selected.

This relates to the concept of data saturation, which is the point at which no new data and information are observed in the data findings from the conclusion of the additional interview session, is a valuable one in determining the sample size (Guest et al., 2006). There is one single instruments used in this research, which is interview. It consists of 3 segments

(demographic, general questions, and variable questions). Data was collected by taking notes, audio recording, taking photos and observation during approximately 2 hours of interview sessions for a 1 week duration. Thematic manual analysis has been used to analyse the data collection. The method was used in order to make the research more reliable, by reporting both (a procedure used in the review and adequate guides), through coding the instrument for a thematic study, or coding categories (Lombard et al., 2002; Krippendorff, 2004).

Findings

Ample yet Attractive Natural Resources

The attractiveness of natural resources with regard to the visible surroundings in local community natural living includes the forest, river, stream, waterfall, soil, water, and mountain. However, the mountain is the main natural resources as it is considered to be the mother of all resources, as claimed by respondents. To be exact, Mount Berembun or “Gunung Berembun” is the main actor among others. In addition, especially due to the minimal-pollution issue affecting the river area (illegal sand mining), the breathtaking picturesque natural landscape is still intact and has been tarnished; the beauty of the entire natural resource is still fundamentally attractive as perceived by a diverse range of the participants.

Natural resources are found to be vital to the quality of local community’s socio-economy (enjoying the nature, farming, gardening, and agriculture businesses) and local community’s well-being (fresh and non-polluted nature-leisure recreational area). Nevertheless, the attitude and behaviour toward preservation of the natural resources, has its space toward the attractiveness issue. This is where, the participants have strongly emphasized that the local community is concerned with preservation as it is “naturally-inherited” as a villager. Moreover, the preservation consciousness is associated with the spirit of togetherness among the local community. Thus, the condition of natural resources, their benefits and preservation are agreeable effects and relate tow the wellness-village tourism concept. This is where, if without a decent condition of natural resources and preservation concern, there is minimal or even damaged benefit for the local community (social-economy) affecting their daily life and causing natural resources to become unattractive.

In summary, the element of natural resources is the most essential core of the wellness-village tourism concept in Mukim Pantai. As a reaffirmation, the attractiveness of a tourism concept is interrelated with visitor’s satisfaction and motivation, whereby it is concomitant with physical appeal of natural resources, which consists of unspoiled nature, the richness of flora and fauna, relaxed climate and fresh ambiance (Buckley, 1994; Heath,2003), hence reflecting the positive impact on reducing stress, relaxation and self-restoration and encouraging physical activity (wellbeing) (Verheij and Maas,2007).

Supportive Local Involvement

The local community characteristic in certain communities is commonly measured by the relationship among the community, attitude and cohesiveness. In this research, it is assumed that participants have accentuated the meaning (local community characteristic) by their close relationship to the topic. Also the closeness among the local community is primary caused by most participants being related to each other (family) as well as being part of the local community and they were born, raised and have lived together as neighbours, ever since. Added to the family factor, the sense of welcoming the outsider is also shown in the local community characteristic. This positive attitude and behaviour is shared with the new comers (newly move to this village) and outside/foreign visitors. Overall, local community in Mukim Pantai demonstrate decent attitude, behaviour and hospitality manner. In summary, local involvement is influenced by active community society or JKKK as well the cohesiveness and participation among the people in Mukim Pantai, hence portraying the sense of local community. Therefore, active and supportive local community is a predominantly significant and vital component in wellness-village tourism concept. According to Mannelli, Iso-Ahola, (1987) and Hallab (1999), visitors who tend to experience this kind of tourism concept (wellness-village) are motivated by personal reasons related to self-enrichment, self-seeking, challenges and recreation, as well toward sense of human interaction, such as learning and exploration (experience, socializing).

Authenticity and Modest Culture Lifestyle

The authenticity or originality of a certain culture in a community is not just merely about numbers or amount of cultural activity, as it also can be recognized through daily lifestyle (way of life) and unique customs. In the case of Mukim Pantai, the daily lifestyle of the local people is literally characterized as “typical-simple-village life”, which was exhibited via their normal daily socio-economy activity, whereby it is more important to “take your time” and “relax”. Even though, their daily lifestyle is relatively moderate, their custom or tradition (“adat”) on the other hand, is well preserved and practiced by the locals across generations. Mukim Pantai, as for all other district in Negeri Sembilan state, who practise the matrilineal custom or ‘Adat Perpatih’. Therefore, the uniqueness and authenticity of culture values in a local community can be associated with elements in the wellness-village tourism concept. To reaffirm, both wellness and village tourism are naturally connected with culture element (experiencing culture otherness) as are other leisure and wellness activities (Craig, 1997 ; Pakurar and Olah, 2008).

Balance and responsible local development

Sustainable development in the tourism industry is very much related to the stability and balance in social, economic and environment factors. The tourism product of wellness-village

concept is naturally associated with sustainability. In the case of Mukim Pantai, sustainable values can be classified as balance, as is exhibited via the moderate local development. In addition, most of the development is on minor scale, as it mainly involved the public infrastructure, utilizing the land for agriculture purposes and the emerging businesses of private eco-villa at the foothill of Mount Berembun. In general, the past and current development in Mukim Pantai has not giving any major negative impact toward the local community and the entire area. Furthermore, the development (past and present) has benefited the local people in term of social and economy. This is where it as benefited the local people toward bridging the social gap and widen their economic values. In addition, the development (past and present) has also preserved the surrounding environment as well the natural resources with no serious effect (negatively).

In conjunction to this, the future plan is significantly focused on sustainability, not only for the benefit of all three main elements (social, economy and environment) but as it will instil the sense of gratefulness towards the natural environment among the local people and to the public as an entity. The element of sustainable values is very much interconnected with the wellness-village tourism concept and hence it is believed to be the core attribute in the sustainable tourism concept. Nevertheless, such sustainable tourism products should be able to minimize the negative impact of the natural tourism environment as well enhance the socio-economy of the local communities (Egballi, Nosrat, & Sayyed Ali, 2011).

Discussion

The natural resources in Mukim Pantai are reasonably appropriate for the development of the wellness-village tourism concept. This had been exhibited via the decent-sustainable quality of the natural resources and supported by the local community awareness and natural behaviour towards conserving the natural resources as well as the entire natural environment. This will affect the wellness-village tourism concept as the natural resources are connected with human well-being as well as being a dominant component of village tourism.

In the perspective of local community characteristic, this is somehow related to local community participation or involvement and sharing common interests and relationship among the local people. However, in the case of Mukim Pantai, the common interest was not a significant feature compared to the relationship and local community participation. This has been exhibited via the closeness, helpfulness and cohesiveness demonstrated in the local community. Helpfulness and cohesion were also portrayed through the warm-sincere and hospitable attitude to outsiders or visitors (local and foreign) and evidenced through such related programs such as the foreign exchange student program. Moreover, the local participation value is also demonstrated through active local community involvement in several activities and events, conducted by the local JKKK as well as local state government agencies. This, would affect the wellness-village tourism concept as it habituates human interaction and

experience whereby the local activity and socializing (mingling with local people) is deemed to be paramount.

Moreover, the cultural values were commonly associated with the local community lifestyle, culture authenticity and cultural activity. In the case of Mukim Pantai, the cultural activity was not reflected in the dominant values towards the study area compared to both local community lifestyle and culture authenticity. The lifestyle was been measured and exhibited via their moderate-simple '*kampung*' way of life. In addition, local community perceived that "simple life" had not hindered them in becoming the active community. Apart from simple-moderate lifestyle, culture authenticity is also a significant value for the local community. This is shown through the preserved Negeri Sembilan's heritage custom of "*Adat Perpatih*" or matrilineal custom. The authenticity is based on their way of life, food, dialect and architecture (design of the house) as well as the pride taken in their customs. These factors all affect the wellness-village tourism concept in that they create the sum of experience, knowledge and exposure to local culture that the potential visitor seeks.

Sustainable development is habitually interrelated to the three balanced factors: social, economy and environment. In the case of Mukim Pantai, all three elements were significantly found to be beneficial to both local community and natural environment or resources. The sustainability element is evidenced through the elevation of local community socio-economy (via development of infrastructure) profile, controlled development (land use) and environmental preservation awareness (via good practice of agriculture activity and eco-tourism product). In addition, past and present development have not negatively impacted the local community well-being and the serenity of the natural environment. Future development plans are required to be sustainable by developing more nature-based tourism attractions within the study area which will benefit the local community as well as promoting awareness of conserving the environment. This affects the wellness-village tourism concept in terms of benefiting the local community (socio-economic) by encouraging collaboration between both local people and host product (e.g. sharing ideas), preserving and protecting the natural resources from negative influence and most importantly, presenting the concept as the most sustainable tourism product.

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