

EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL OF HERBAL TOURISM IN SABAH: A CASE OF DAI-C-RECREATION CENTRE, KIULU

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ABSTRACT

The research explores the potential of herbal tourism as an emerging niche tourism in the rural area of Sabah. It describes the various recreational activities offered by Dai-C Recreation Centre and discusses the issues and challenges faced in developing and promoting herbal tourism in rural sites. Two fieldwork and interviews were conducted at the study site from December 2020 to March 2021. The preliminary findings showed that the availability of vast local herbs, the aesthetic landscape, the dense green forest environment and the pristine atmosphere of the Dai-C Recreation Centre are the key factors attributed to the herbal tourism. Based on the findings, Dai-C Recreation Centre has great potential to be recognized as a distinct herbal tourism destination. In addition, the centre provides activities related to herbal tourism which include herbal garden walk, making herbal drink, tea and soaps, cooking herbal dishes as well as education and interpretation centre that features local herbs medicinal and health values. The potential main market segments include the special interest group and researchers who are interested to explore and learn about herbal plants and tourists who are seeking for relaxation and an escape from busy work life or urban cities. Herbal tourism is not only a tourist attraction, but it also generates a range of economic opportunities, income and employment at the rural site. Key issues and challenges faced in developing herbal tourism relate to financial, labour, environmental and climate changes. Hence, support from local government agencies and tourism promotion boards is crucial in ensuring sustainability of herbal tourism. The research adds to existing literature by contributing to a better understanding of herbal tourism and its economic opportunities and benefits to the rural community.

Keywords: herbal tourism; herbal industry; Kiulu; Dai-C Recreation Centre; rural site

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is widely recognized as a country rich in biodiversity and rich in rainforest with plants that have medicinal values. Herbal industry has been recognised as a potential industry for economic growth as documented in one of the entry point project (EPP) under the agriculture new key economic areas (NKEA) in the economic transformation programme (ETP) in 2011. The existing herbal resources along with the local heritage in herbal knowledge contributes to a great value of herbal products. The importance of herbal industry has been well documented in an increasingly research publications on herbal products on the preclinical and clinical studies. In addition to herbal industry being a potential industry, herbal tourism also has remarkable potential for employment generation, conservation of forest resources and preservation of traditional medicine practices (Abraham, 2012).

Sabah is located in the island of Borneo and is blessed with attractive geographical landscape and rural sites with diverse natural resources that have potential to be developed as unique, attractive and authentic tourism attractions and products or places (Chan, 2020). Rural sites and existing natural resources offer vast possibilities for developing unique tourist attractions and packages. Broadly, the rural sites of Sabah are also blessed with great varieties of local herbal plants that have medicinal values and has potential to be developed as tourism attraction known as herbal tourism. Herbal tourism can be developed as a special interest tourism to target a special group of visitors, especially tourists from urban cities to get away and be in a new environment or researchers interested in herbal plants. Often, herbal plants are found within rural sites in Sabah. As rural sites are fast turning themselves as important rural tourism destinations in Sabah, thus, creating unique rural tourism experiences and generating economic opportunities and benefits to the local communities are crucial and ensures competitiveness and sustainable growth.

Herbal tourism is associated with herb plants found in specific places in rural areas in the jungle environment. It attracts tourists who are not only interested in plants, but also the appreciation of the pristine environment and beautiful landscapes for relaxation and escape. This is similar to the concept of ecotourism that entails travelling to natural areas that conserves the environment and engaging in environmentally sustainable activities for the benefit of the local people (Meniga & Ousman, 2017). It fosters environmental conservation and supports the economic and social development of the local communities through improvement of livelihood, increased empowerment and poverty alleviation (Menbere & Admassu, 2020). According to Farsani et al. (2016), the complex and competitive nature of tourism may require the emergence of a niche tourism for industry stakeholders to survive commercially. Niche tourism can serve as a catalyst for integration and diversification across other non-tourism sectors such as the education and medical sector. Herbal tourism or herb-based tourism could fit the bill as not only can it provide balance between the needs of tourism industry, environmental protection and local communities, it also presents potential for inter-sectoral linkages.

Herbal tourism is a nature-friendly tourism and can be defined as "provision of sustainable and responsible collecting of curative, aromatic, edible and seasoning plants to general public and organised groups, supported by interpretative and educational services and facilities, based on ethnopharmacological tradition" (Vasiljević et al., 2012). This form of tourism emphasizes on medicinal plants and has gained increasing popularity in a number of developed countries, particularly in cultivation of medicinal plants for both export and domestic use. In the long run, promotion of herbal tourism could increase the export demand for medicinal plants and thereby, creating job opportunities for the local people (Abraham, 2012). However, growing demand of medicinal herbs in the global market must be treated with caution. Increased cultivation of medicinal herbs may lead to over-exploitation of resources in natural habitat and consequently, result in the extinction of some species (Ratknic & Milovanovic, 2016). Therefore, sustainable development of herbal tourism is crucial to ensure that pursuit of employment and revenue derived from these natural resources are not done at the expense of the surrounding environment or local culture (Abraham, 2012; Banerji et al., 2011).

Herbs have gone beyond than just as consumer products for local consumption and as export products; they have also become a tourism resource. Commonly managed at agri- and ecotourism sites and educational centres, various tourist activities and experiences fall under the realm of herbal tourism. These include the herb recognition workshops, presentations, field trips, herbal specials tasting and even wellness facilities based on natural medicinal substances (Woś, 2017). To remain viable, several product innovation and diversification strategies are necessary to promote herbal tourism. According to Farsani et al.

(2016), these strategies are categorized into 5 types namely: (i) product innovation – providing brochures, souvenirs, or local products from medicinal plants; (ii) process innovation – restoration of events and traditional festivals focusing on medicinal plants; (iii) management innovation – educational sightseeing tours, workshops on medicinal plants and traditional medicine, establishing medicine herbal stores in sites; (iv) logistic innovation – introducing herbal tourism destinations and supplying products such as tours via websites, online shops or virtual tours; and (v) institutional innovation – engaging visitors and tourists in medicinal plant planting and harvesting activities, creating a network for rural herbal tourism destinations, and involving and supporting locals and small businesses in herbal tourism.

2.0 TRENDS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF HERBAL TOURISM

As a key source of income and employment, tourism often provides strong incentives to protect biodiversity especially in the context of ecotourism and herbal tourism. Likewise, sustainable tourism can further generate significant revenues for conservation and community development and help to raise awareness of biodiversity issues. Thus, tourism and biodiversity are mutually dependent (World Tourism Organization, 2010). Herbal plants offer wide range of benefits in the field of medicine, food and beverage as well as spa and wellness treatment. Literature documenting herbal plants with values in medicines have been extensively studied in the field of medicines (Ekor, 2013) and commercial herbal beverages (Wibawa et al., 2016). Also, it has been widely used as herbal therapy to promote healthier living or spa and wellness treatments (Ekor, 2013). Aside from these usages, herbal plants afford aesthetic values and develop unique environment and landscape as place attractions. Hence, it is postulated that herbal plants can add values to the tourism as an attraction.

Herbal tourism generates potential economic opportunities from incomes and employments, retention of employment, preservation and conservation of wild plants, flower and herbs, education and environmental values and beautification of landscape and site. Herbal tourism has remarkable potential for employment generation, conservation of forest resources and preservation of traditional medicine practices (Abraham, 2012). For example, Herbal Center in Surabaya – one of the industrial centres that sells drinks and snacks made from various natural herbal plants – was transformed into a tourist attraction to improve the centre's competitiveness (Wibawa et al., 2016).

Moreover, herbal tourism can be used as a tool for biodiversity planning and conservation. About two million hectares of forest area on intensive management can produce medicinal plants for export and domestic use to provide health for our millions. Such effort will enhance greenery, generate employment and income to the people and conserve biodiversity (Kumar, 2000). Popularisation of herbal tourism could encourage people to invest in the cultivation of medicinal plants by ensuring a stable market for their produce.

Herbal plants as a form of tourism attracts special group of visitors who are interested in herbal plants and can serve as a platform for education, learning and research. As the Malaysian government is gearing to tap the high-end of the herbal industry as highlighted in the ETP, promoting herbal tourism is deemed as an important and synergy approach to herbal industry as it can be used as a tool for biodiversity planning and conservation. At the same time, herbal tourism will encourage people to invest in the cultivation of herbal medicinal plants as a way to diversity tourism sites. However, little has been done about how rural sites rich in herbal resources can be turned into herbal tourism as an attraction and the potential contribution of herbal tourism in rural development.

Hence, the paper fills up the said gap by exploring the potential of herbal tourism as a new form of rural tourism site and product in Sabah, with a special focus on the Dai-C

Recreation Kiulu Centre, an emerging herbal tourism destination. It describes the herbal tourism development as well as issues and challenges faced in promoting herbal garden as tourism attraction. The research will give insight into the process of development and design of herbal tourism concept, essential support facilities and amenities in making herbal tourism as centre for education and learning besides relaxation. It shares the potential contributions of herbal tourism destinations that could further support scientific research of plants and enhance rural economic development.

3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism has been identified as a critical sector capable of accelerating the process of rural economy diversification (Stankov et al., 2011). Ratknic and Milovanovic (2016) highlighted the possibility to develop a significant economic activity surrounding existing natural resources; which includes collection, processing and final processing of wild fruits and medicinal herbs. The processing activities of medicinal herbs will open up employment opportunities and facilitate in the relocation of manufacturing plants from industrial centers to smaller plants establishments in rural areas. Activities related to preparing attractive herbal products and offerings enables activation of the local community by creating additional jobs in the field of tourism, development of agri- and ecotourism sites, local processing plants and drying plants (Woś, 2017).

Herbal or medicinal plants can create entrepreneurial opportunities in the tourism sector and become significant tourist attractions (Kala, 2015; Butthongdee, 2015). Provided that critical conditions such as road network are fulfilled, Ratknic and Milovanovic (2016) noted that medicinal herb resources offer great potential for development of tourism and the related activities that would consequently boost the development of rural areas. In the case of India, Deka et al. (2015) stated that herbal garden development for tourism presents a new potential to cater to current tourism trend. Herbal gardens serve as both a source of income for villagers and educational centres for the general public. Not only can herbal gardens educate tourists on the vast array of herbal properties, establishments of tourism and learning centers can also help indigenous knowledge of herbs and medicinal plants to be preserved. Nevertheless, maintaining gardening standards and providing accurate and useful herbal knowledge to tourists remains a challenge for herbal gardeners.

Dzida et al. (2014) conducted a study to assess the opinions of potential recipients of agritourism services on the importance of herbal gardens and potential uses of herbal plants. Based on their findings, 89% of the respondents believe that herb gardens are important in enhancing the attractiveness of agritourism farms. In addition, 91% of the respondents perceived the potential uses of fresh herbs as an advantage for such herbal garden establishments, while majority of them believe that natural aromatherapy can be an original part of the agritourism offering. On the other hand, there were difference in opinions on the usefulness of herbs on the farm whereby 43% of the respondents considered the herbs as spice plants, 33% considered them as medicinal plants, and 24% considered them as ornamentals.

4.0 STUDY SITE

Situated in Eastern Malaysia, the state of Sabah is blessed with a vast array of natural resources thus, making it an ideal site for sustainable ecotourism venture. Sabah has the potential to leverage on its rich biodiversity by setting up botanical or herbal gardens, which can be a major tourist attraction and a research and development centre for knowledge

transfer and education. As outlined in the Third Sabah Agricultural Policy (2015-2024), increase in demand for natural products such as herbs for use in general health or as alternative medicinal treatments implies an increase in value of herb products as well as the growth of agritourism in the state (Ministry of Agriculture and Food Industry, 2015).

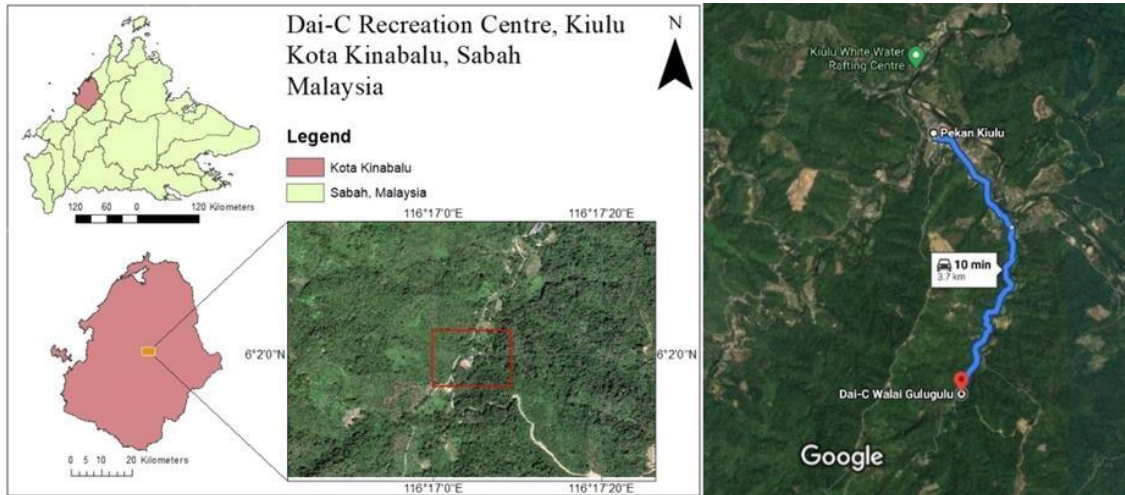


Figure 1: Google Map direction to Dai-C Recreation Centre in Kiulu, Sabah, Malaysia

In Sabah, Dai-C Recreation Centre is a tourism site located at Mongkonihab Village, about 3.7km from Kiulu Town and about 57km from Kota Kinabalu International Airport (KKIA). The site is blessed with a wide range of herbal plants, wild flowers, orchids and fruits with 3 manmade ponds that provide food and habitats for insects, small animals, birds, bees and stingless bees. With this wealth of biodiversity, Dai-C Recreation Centre aims to offer nature-based tourism products and experience by developing into a rural herbal garden and guesthouse.

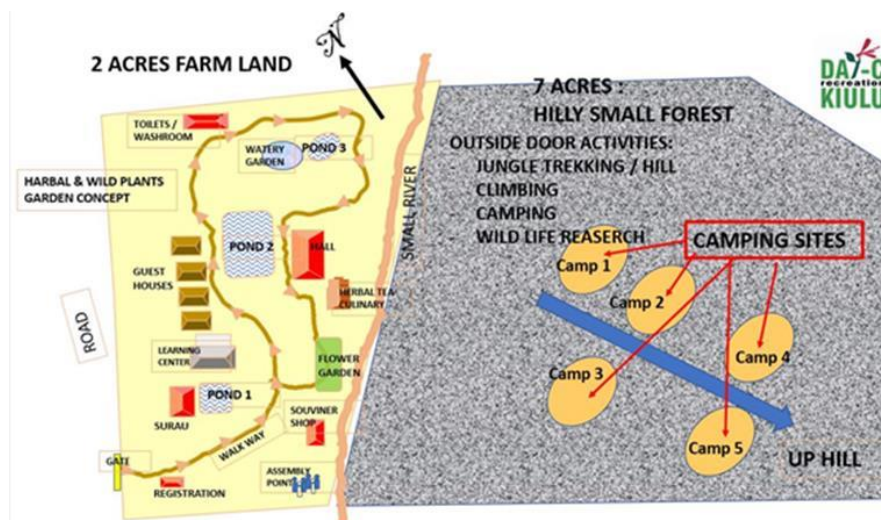


Figure 2: Herbal Tourism Development Plan of Dai-C Recreation Centre, Kiulu

5.0 METHODOLOGY

Data collection through site visits were carried out on 4 December 2020 and 26 March 2021 to identify the key resources and development stage of the Dai-C Recreation Centre. At the same time, face-to-face interviews with the owners were conducted to explore the herbal tourism concept as well as the issues and challenges faced in developing herbal tourism at Dai-C Recreation Centre.

Photos taken by the owners during the development process since January 2020 as shown in Figures 3, 4 and 5 show that important facilities such as accommodation in the forms of homestay, campsite, cooking place, meeting hall, toilet and shower facilities were already in place. Key attractions and leisure activities offered at Dai-C Recreation Centre include herbal garden walk with different types of local herbal plants, fish pond, honey house, jungle trekking, swimming and night walk.



Figure 3: Herbal garden facilities at Dai-C Recreation Centre



Figure 4: Outdoor activities at Dai-C Recreation Centre



Figure 5: Herbs and wild plants at Dai-C Recreation Centre

6.0 PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Based on the photos taken during site visits in December 2020 and March 2021 as shown in the following Figures 6 and 7, it was found that existing herbal plants and environment in Dai-C Recreation Centre are suitable to be developed as herbal tourism. This is due to its availability of wide varieties of herbal plants, good weather and environment as well as sufficient space within the Dai-C Recreation Centre. Figures 6 and 7 below show the current development and progress of the Dai-C Recreation Centre which include essential facilities, buildings and attractions of herbal plants, fish pond and river.



Figure 6: Current facilities at Dai-C Recreation Centre (huts, pathways, hall and rest area)



Figure 7: Plants, river and fish pond at Dai-C Recreation Centre

Preliminary findings obtained from face-to-face interviews with the site owners reveal several economic opportunities and benefits generated by Dai-C Recreation Centre. These include (i) enhancing the landscape and aesthetic value of the rural site in Kiulu, (ii) a platform for education, learning and research on local herbal plants, (iii) conservation of local herbal plants, (iv) diversify rural tourism products and complement herbal industry, (v) employment and income generation, and (vi) value creation from the herbal plants. Additionally, findings from the interview also reveal that the issues and challenges faced in developing herbal tourism at Dai-C Recreation Centre involve financial constraints, lack of labour and purchase of building materials needed to construct other support facilities, poor Internet connection, climate changes (activities allowed at the site may be limited during rainy seasons) as well as other environmental concerns that relate to presence of wild animals such as snakes.

7.0 CONCLUSION

The preliminary findings appear to suggest that herbal tourism generates economic opportunities and benefits to the rural sites. It suggests that rural sites with unique herbal plants can be developed as attractive herbal rural tourism. Local community can create and innovate these unique environment and natural resources as unique and authentic rural tourism products. Besides the aesthetic landscape and environment of rural sites, one of the promising resources that can be transformed into tourism attraction is the existing abundant herbal plants in rural sites as found in Dai-C Recreation Centre in Kiulu, Sabah, Malaysia. The rural sites can enable the rural community to be suppliers of the specific herbal plants, facilitate production of various herbal products such soap, tea, nutrient drinks, mini market outlet for direct sales, serve as education and learning centre, exhibition and booth – all of which can create new and authentic tourism experience.

Indeed, herbal tourism can be defined as provision of sustainable and responsible collecting of curative, aromatic, edible and seasoning plants to general public, special organized groups, educational group as well as researchers. However, it must be supported by interpretative and educational services and facilities, based on ethnopharmacological

tradition. Several pertinent issues need to be addressed to ensure the sustainability of herbal tourism. These are issues related to safety and efficacy, cost and return of investment, unethical practices in the herbal tourism sector and conservation of herbal plants consumption.

Therefore, development of herbal tourism requires strong support from the state and district government agencies in terms of financial, facilities and proper regulations for conservation and unethical practices. Not only should there be a dedicated initiative in promoting herbal tourism, but efforts should also be taken to construct regulatory measures for controlling over-exploitation of natural resources and for handling unethical practices prevailing in the herbal tourism field. Community development and conservation of natural resources could be brought by encouraging herbal tourism in the rural areas, developing clusters of medicinal plant cultivators and forming subcontracting agreement.

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