

Health Tourism: A Healthy Policy in Argentina

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ABSTRACT

Exploitation of geothermal resources allows the development of several diverse endeavors in Argentina by direct use of modality. However the most extended use of low temperature resources is related to balneology. After the social and economical crisis in 2001 -2002, tourism turned into one of the most significant industries in the country, being considered as an important tool to generate real income and create new jobs, so urgently needed in the country. Besides Argentina's traditional wide variety of scenery and attractions, thermal complexes and health tourism had a significant development during the last five years, turning into a new economic alternative that contributes to the development of regional and local economies. This phenomena and interest has widespread extend to different areas of the country. However in order to offer a worth product, some items related to medical and therapeutic aspects remain unruly but under consideration.

1. INTRODUCTION

Due to its location in the southern hemisphere and its latitudinal and longitudinal extension, Argentina is the country with the most varied geography and climate in south America, fact that made some people to call it the land of the six continents. Besides its wide variety of scenery and attractions such as subtropical rainforests, glaciers, never ending plateau, enchanting corners and entrancing cities, Argentina has geothermal resources widespread all over the country that allow the development of diverse economical endeavors by the means of the direct uses (Miranda et al., 2002). Among them: are space heating, greenhouses, industry, aquaculture, domestic use and snow melting (fig. 1). However, the most extended use of low temperature resources in the country is related to balneology in all its variants. This means by the exploitation of many sophisticated thermal centers or spas, or partially developed natural springs areas (fig. 1). Most of these endeavors are related to low temperature geothermal systems with temperatures ranging from 25°C up to 98°C, with a wide diversity of chemical compositions, which can offer of a great variety of therapeutic applications.

2. A LITTLE BIT OF HISTORY

Knowledge and utilization of thermal waters in Argentina was present since the pre-hispanic times, offering true references and legends remarking their "miraculous" effects over human health (INCITH, 1976; Katchikian, 1988) . At the end of XIX century and beginning of the XX, many renowned naturalists and professionals of different branches of science and from different parts of the world put their attention on this type of waters; Darwing, Haigh, Miers, Proctor, Brand, and Bonpland among others (Sussini et al, 1936). That could be considered as the starting point in the slow process of thermal waters study from the chemical and naturalist point of views.

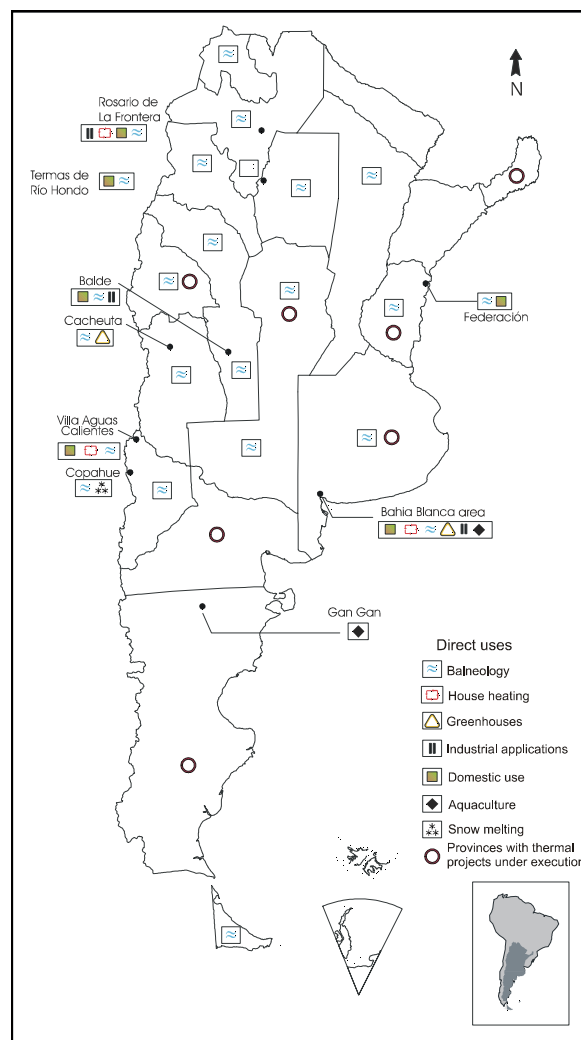


Figure 1: Map of direct uses in Argentina. Name of locations identifies more than one application. The symbol balneology, identifying provinces where these endeavors are established, does not mean quantity. Red circles identify provinces where new projects are under execution.

During the decades of 1920 and 1930, studies focused on therapeutic and medical aspects. The goal was to compare local thermal waters to those in Europe, searching for the same benefits that made the latest famous. During 1932 and 1950 the National Commission of Climatology and Mineral Waters, constituted by law 11.261, carried out an exhaustive reconnaissance over 500 mineral springs, many of which were warm and hot springs. The inclusion of some therapeutic comments and consideration are still in use nowadays.

The first thermal center used under a medical criteria in Argentina, and in South America, was Rosario de La

Frontera, in Salta province, created by the Spanish doctor Antonio Palau in 1878 (Canton, 1896). Many areas with warm springs such as Cacheuta and Puente del Inca (Mendoza province) and Rosario de La Frontera (Salta province) were well known by indigenous people. They had their booming time from the end of XIX century up to the decade of 1930, lapse when thermal centers established in these locations were at the same level of magnificence of these in Europe.

Factors that pushed to their decadence could be recognized by economical crisis of 1930 and the development of the net of roads; and in the following decade the popularization of tourism that changed rest destinies to the Atlantic beaches and Cordoba hills. Also by the middle of XX century, the European medical-preventive tradition yielded to American pharmacological therapy. As a result, thermal baths practice was abandoned to some extent and warm springs prestige fall down; in some cases at the point to be considered merely garrulity.

By the middle of eighties, a movement that can be defined as a "return to nature" began at global level. Thus, at the beginning and middle of nineties, thermalism, as part of this movement, started to gain impulse and adepts by the means of reopening and recovering of old fashion thermal installations and creation of new thermal centers that respected the architecture and natural environment in which they were hosted.

3. THE 2001 ARGENTINE CRISIS

It is difficult to summarize all the factors that pushed Argentine to 2001 crisis. Among them we can remark: four years of deep recession, unemployment -almost 40 % of population had no chances to find a job-, 14.500.000 of a total 37.000.000 people were under the poverty baseline, popular disgust to politicians and decision makers, and external economical factors. These facts led people to gain the streets and manifest their disconformities. A period of social and institutional disorder hit the country. As time went by, during 2002 social protests and claims slowly calm down but did not end continuing even today.

4. TOURISM IN NUMBERS

After the 2001 -2002 crisis, tourism turned into one of the most important industries in the country and nowadays is conceived as a government policy. Actually it represents more than 500.000 direct employments and many other indirect ones. It is worth mentioning that the 93 % of tourism activities are represented by small and middle enterprises, fact that explains its strong incidence over the employment index. A national level consultation showed that 6 % of people interviewed work in the area linked to tourism.

The National Tourism Secretariat informed that during the period between December 15 of 2003 and March 15 of 2004 (summer holidays), an increment of 7.5 % was registered in the movement of tourists within the country. This means a total of 19.067.152 tourists with an estimated economic movement of US\$ 2.930 millions (May 2004 peso/dollar currency) visited the country. For the year 2003 the total of foreign tourists was 3.328.485 (18% more than in 2002) what can be traduced in an income of US\$ 2.018 millions (37% more than in 2002). This fact shows that in Argentina tourism consolidates as one of the main exports, with three times the annual income of meat exportation, almost the same of crude oil sales and quite similar to the total income from cereal commercial transactions towards

other countries. It must be mentioned that during these years the great internal tourist movement was in direct relation to the new exchange peso / dollar (3 / 1). Since May of 2002, this made more difficult for local people to travel overseas and facilitates the access of foreign ones.

5. HEALTH TOURISM IN ARGENTINA

The WTO (World Tourism Organization) considers tourism, in its wide sense, as the activities that people perform during their travels and stays in places different from their habitual environment for a consecutive period of time -inferior to one year- and with a goal of having fun, business and other non related to the exercise of a salaried activity. During 2002-2003, national authorities recognized in thermalism and health tourism a potential source of economic activity, based on the success of many spas developed since middle nineties. But going further, health tourism involves high quality services that during vacation stays, specific (treatments related to balneology, prevention or rehabilitation) or unspecific (esthetics, beauty, etc), aims to the conservation or reestablishment of the physical well being state or health of the visitors.

Growing interest for the exploitation of thermal waters as a tourist attraction, quality, diversity and real possibilities of development are conditioned by the unclearness of its real objectives, achievements and potential. This fact leads to an incorrect use of the resource and to heterogeneous and diffuse offer, with promises of health and wellness, but in most cases without the intercession of any kind of health professional nor official control.

Orally transmitted benefits are only limited to individual experiences and thus are not relevant from the scientific point of view. As a result, this plays against the real objective of positioning thermalism as a health tourism product in the market. Against this fact, Ministry of Health and Social Development -as well as other NGO's linked to thermalism - take as a state policy the task of elaboration of normative body that involve installations as well as treatments offered in thermal complexes. The objectives are related to: 1) identification and classification of therapeutic thermal resources (waters, mud, vapour) linked to their chemical composition and related therapeutic possibilities based on medical follow procedures, 2) recognition and categorization of thermal complexes installations in order to make them suitable for illness treatments in case of therapeutic purpose of the center and 3) diffusion of the correct use of thermal baths (non therapeutic uses included), etc.

6. THERMAL COMPLEXES: THEIR INFLUENCE OVER COMMUNITIES

Apart from medical aspects, it is interesting to comment on the significant positive impact that thermal complexes had on the communities where they are located. In the case of relatively young thermal complexes, the most noticeable case occurred in the northeast area of the country, precisely in the Entre Ríos province (fig. 2). Since 1997 seven new thermal complexes arose in this province: three are near to its launch (drilling operations are already finished), another one is in its drilling stage and many areas are in its geophysical exploration or project design stages. It means 7 new endeavors in 8 years, 4 of them opened during 1997 - 2001, and the rest during or after the crisis.



Figure 2: Entre Ríos province. Symbols are as in figure one. 7 thermal complexes are finished, at least seven advanced projects are under execution.

6.1 The Federación and Villa Elisa cases

These two cities, located in the Entre Ríos province, were chosen in order to give an example of how the development of thermal complexes facilities impacts the communities (similar processes can be extrapolated to the rest of the locations in the same province). The first thermal complex in this area is located at Federación (fig. 2). This riverside city is located 480 km from Buenos Aires (capital city of Argentina) and was greatly transformed since the opening of its thermal complex. Before drilling of the thermal well, tourist affluence was negligible, mainly attracted by fishing facilities. However, opening of thermal complex changed everything. A tangible effect of this can be observed in the number of hotels and hostages. In 1995 (year when drilling began), Federación had less than 150 hotel beds, number that for the year 2004 will overpass the 4000 formal (qualified) ones distributed in 25 % hotels, 30% apart hotels, 4% houses, 34% huts, 4% residential, 3% hostages. However, taking into account informal (non registered, according to local and provincial laws) it is estimated that this number could double. The investment in hotels is directly related to visitor' affluence and demand. During short holidays (3 days) on April of 2004, the thermal complex was visited by 17.600 people: almost 5.000 thousand more than in 2003. Since its opening there has been a constant increment of tourist affluence (fig. 3 and 4) with a direct favorable impact on the community.

Villa Elisa tourist activities, prior to the opening of the thermal complex (December 1999) were also negligible: with low level and not much interesting attractions for visitors whose stays at this place were just for a few hours. Opening of thermal facilities mark a clear inflection point evidenced by the new investments in basic tourist services (hotels and gastronomy) and complementary ones (craftsmanship, real state business, travel agencies, etc). As in the previous case, substantial impact can be observed by

the increment of 750 % in the number of hotels beds since the opening of thermal complex up to year 2004 (fig. 5)

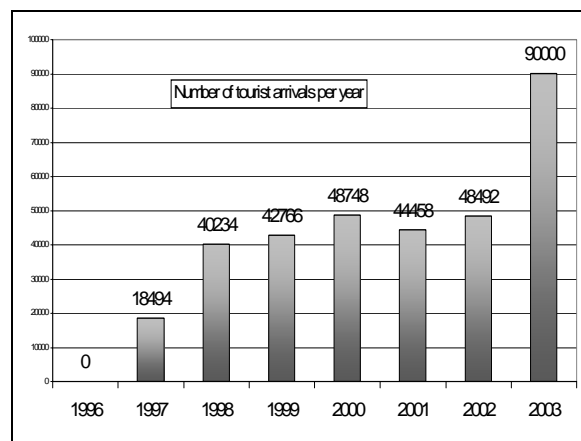


Figure 3: Number of visitors arrival per year to Federación city.

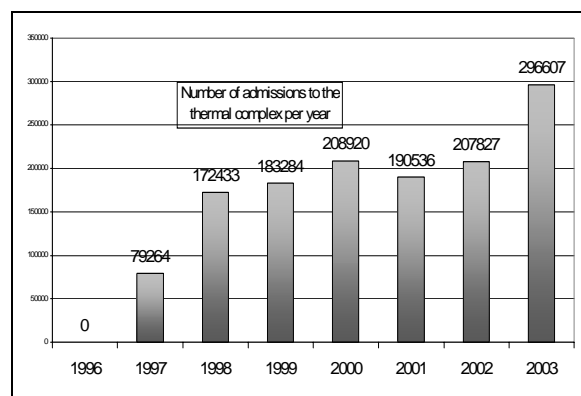


Figure 4: Number of admissions per year to Federación thermal complex.

7.5 % of residents at Villa Elisa are directly linked to tourist activity, but the multiplier effect (complementary activities) widespread it to almost 50 % of the population. The number of visitors is increasing year after year (fig. 6 and 7). Average stays (nights) at the city increased and expenses left by tourist (per day) showed an increment of 37 % during the period 2002-2004.

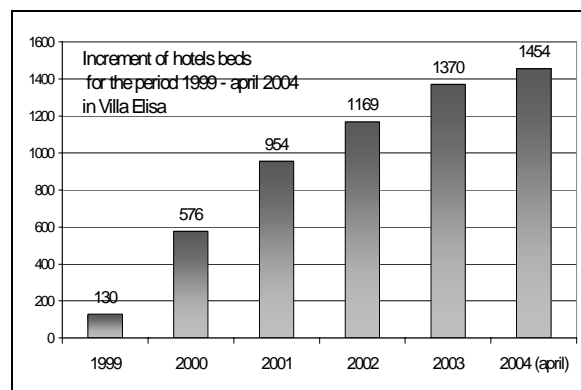


Figure 5: Increment of hotel beds since the opening of thermal facilities at Villa Elisa city.

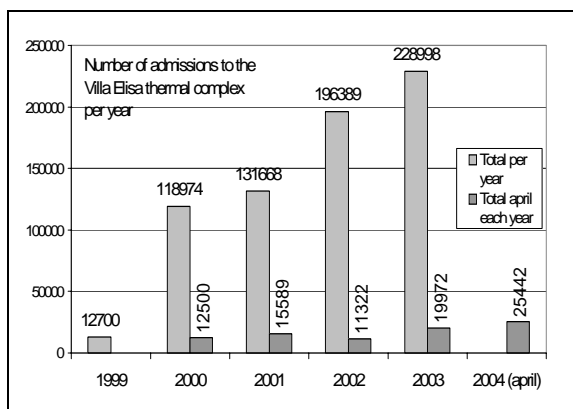


Figure 6: Number of admissions per year to Villa Elisa thermal complex. April data is given for comparison and include the 2004 data.

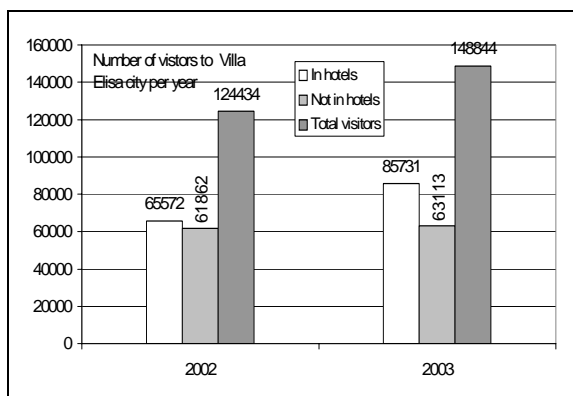


Figure 7: Increment of visitor arrival during the period of 2002-2003 per year.

Besides the Entre Ríos province case, other places made investments to renew their offers. The old hotel Rosario de La Frontera (Jujuy province) made infrastructure improvements in order to amplify its offer to a wide segment tourism. Remodeling, design and selection of building materials points to a more sophisticated offer, oriented for relaxation and fitness of people (including younger generation). In Córdoba province, the first thermal complex with natural thermal waters near quite visited tourist place Capilla del Monte supplied by a 400 meters of deep thermal well was created

The traditional Termas de Río Hondo (Santiago del Estero province) and Copahue (Neuquén province) are offering new treatments and activities as well as several sophisticated spas. Its worth mentioning that these two areas have thermal orientation centers where the advice and recommendation to follow different therapeutic treatments can be given.

7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Nowadays tourism is one of the most important industries in the country; with which investors and decision-makers agree. It is remarkable that activities of health tourism and

thermalism are not attached to any special season, being active and enjoyable during the entire year. This is an important point because this non-interrupted exploitation overpasses –time speaking– the possibility of recovering the investments when compared to other tourism (seasonal) projects.

Nevertheless, in order to promote and offer this product, some official regulatory items related to medical and sanitary aspects must be specified. The boom of the new thermal complexes and health tourism in Argentina, besides its therapeutic aspects, started a new economic alternative, with a strong connection to the tourism stimulation, basic services and complementary activities such as, gastronomy, recreation, real state business, etc.

Besides satisfying tourism demand, thermal endeavors generate contributions to the development of regional economies, reducing unemployment and thus given improvements in life standards of small or in some cases isolated communities where these endeavors are settled. This phenomena and interest has extended to different areas of the country, where many studies and projects of this type are under execution (fig.2).

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