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## **A Comparison of Agritourism Understanding among Consumers, Providers, and Extension Faculty**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Labels and meanings are important for tourism marketing as they can be the decisive factor for attracting visitors. Given the label and definition ambiguity surrounding agritourism, a study was conducted to identify a common ground between preferred labels and definitional elements for “recreation in agricultural settings” across three key stakeholders. Farmers, residents, and extension faculty from Missouri and North Carolina were surveyed about their preferences on eight labels commonly found across literature and elements to be included within a definition for these activities. Data was analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Results suggest that “farm visit” should be encouraged in marketing efforts aiming at increasing farm visitation as it was the label preferred by residents and farmers. Results also suggest that “education”, “farm” and “entertainment” are terms that should be included when defining this type of recreation, especially on promotional material to increase the effectiveness of marketing efforts.*

**Keywords:** *agritourism, labels, meanings, definitions, stakeholders*

### **INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

Labels enable the identification of products or activities by singling out particular attributes that can elicit involvement and interest of potential consumers (Hall and Boyd, 2005). Therefore, within the field of tourism, they have an essential role as a deciding factor for visiting a destination or participating in a given activity. Along with labels come their meanings, which are the attributes of a product or activity that a given label evokes in individuals (Hall and Boyd, 2005). Thus, labels and meanings shape the understanding of a given product or activity; further,

they are pivotal for tourism development because they are able to prompt the interest of potential visitors (Font and Buckley, 2001).

*Agritourism* is one of the many labels used to describe recreational activities offered in agricultural settings, and it is often used interchangeably with a plethora of other labels such as *agricultural tourism*, *farm tourism*, or *agritainment* (Colton and Bissix, 2005; Rich et al., 2010). Furthermore, there is no shared understanding of what these labels entitle as plenty of definitions can be found across the literature. Most commonly found inconsistencies relate to: (1) whether some sort of travel should occur especially when the word *tourism* is included in the label (McGehee and Kim, 2004); (2) whether the setting could be any type of agricultural facility or exclusively farms (Tew and Barbieri, 2012); (3) whether the setting should be an authentic (i.e., working) agricultural facility (Carpio et al., 2008); and (4) regarding the types of activities involved, especially related to hospitality (Fleischer and Tchetchik, 2005) and educational (Ollenburg and Buckley, 2007) activities and services.

The lack of a shared understanding of agritourism across different stakeholders is problematic. Consumers (i.e., visitors) are confused regarding the type of activities that are being offered; providers (i.e., farmers) are not reaching their target market which is affecting their ability to increase revenues; and extension faculty are not able to properly transfer technology to agritourism farmers (Colton and Bissix, 2005; Phillip et al., 2010), thus creating a cycle of confusion and misinformation. Given such a lack of understanding of agritourism and its labels among different groups, a study was conducted to uncover the preferences of three key stakeholder groups (i.e., residents, farmers, extension faculty) on labels and definitional elements of agritourism, so that a common ground can be determined. Residents and farmers were chosen because they have a key role in the marketing dynamic, and extension faculty because they represent the main source of information and advising on which farmers rely on for the implementation of recreational activities (Barbieri and Valdivia, 2010).

## METHODOLOGY

In 2011, 797 farmers, 868 residents, and 512 extension faculty from Missouri (MO) and North Carolina (NC) were invited to complete an online survey. The survey produced 1,324 usable responses. The survey queried about respondents' socio-demographics, preferences of eight labels commonly found in the literature (e.g., *agri-tourism*, *farm tourism*) through a five-point Likert scale (1 = Dislike very much; 5 = Like very much), and terms (e.g., agricultural setting, farm, education) that a good definition of *agritourism* should include. The survey also asked in an open-ended format, preferred terms to describe *visiting a farm for recreational purposes* and what comes to mind when one hears or reads the word *agritourism*.

A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was used to examine the data. Descriptive analysis was conducted to develop a demographic profile of respondents and their labels and definitional elements preferences. Analyses of variance and chi-square tests were then conducted to compare preferences of labels and definitional elements across the three samples ( $p < 0.05$ ). Content analysis was used to identify themes that emerged from qualitative data about preferred descriptions. To ensure inter-rater reliability and assist in the in-depth discussion of the findings, open-ended responses were analyzed in three separate stages by two independent

coders. From these three reviews, a final list of themes was generated and responses were categorized accordingly.

## RESULTS

### Respondent's Demographic Profile

The majority of responding residents (58%) were female and middle aged adults ( $M = 46$  years), a third had a 4-year college degree or higher (32%) and a household income of at least \$50,000 (37%); most had never engaged in agritourism in the past (69%). Most responding farmers were female (59%) in their middle adulthood ( $M = 54$  years) with a household income of at least \$50,000 (69%); most offered agritourism on their farms (92%) and considered agritourism as important or very important for their operations (75%). Responding extension faculty were almost equally distributed gender-wise (female = 51%; male = 49%), averaged 45 years old, and most worked directly with farmers (77%).

**Table 1**  
**A Comparison of Preferences of Agritourism Labels among Residents, Farmers and Extension Faculty**

Labels <sup>1</sup>	Scale Mean <sup>2</sup>			<i>F</i>	<i>p</i> -value
	Residents	Farmers	Extension		
Farm visit	3.8 <sup>a</sup>	3.6 <sup>a</sup>	3.2 <sup>b</sup>	19.219	<0.001
Agricultural tourism	3.6 <sup>a</sup>	3.4 <sup>b</sup>	3.4	5.850	0.003
Farm tourism	3.4 <sup>a</sup>	3.7 <sup>b</sup>	3.4 <sup>a</sup>	10.948	<0.001
Agri-tourism	3.0 <sup>a</sup>	3.8 <sup>b</sup>	3.8 <sup>b</sup>	82.714	<0.001
Agritourism	2.9 <sup>a</sup>	3.9 <sup>b</sup>	3.8 <sup>b</sup>	130.975	<0.001
Rural tourism	3.1	3.0	3.0	0.709	0.492
Agrotourism	2.6	2.5 <sup>a</sup>	2.8 <sup>b</sup>	4.020	0.018
Agritainment	2.6 <sup>a</sup>	2.2 <sup>b</sup>	2.1 <sup>b</sup>	16.517	<0.001

<sup>1</sup> Organized in descendent order based on overall mean

<sup>2</sup> Scale ranged from "1 = Dislike very much" to "5 = Like very much".

<sup>a,b,c</sup> Any two values with different superscripts were significantly different in post-hoc pairwise comparisons

### Label Preferences

Among all samples, the most preferred labels to depict recreational activities offered in agricultural settings were *farm visit* ( $M = 3.7$ ), *agricultural tourism* ( $M = 3.5$ ), and *farm tourism* ( $M = 3.4$ ) as shown in Table 1. However, significant differences were found on the preference for those three labels across the three samples. *Farm visit* was significantly more preferred by residents ( $M = 3.8$ ) and farmers ( $M = 3.6$ ) as compared to extension faculty ( $M = 3.2$ ) with no statistical differences between the first two groups ( $p < 0.001$ ). Residents ( $M = 3.6$ ) had stronger preferences for the *agricultural tourism* label as compared to farmers ( $M = 3.4$ ) and extension faculty ( $M = 3.4$ ;  $p = 0.003$ ); however pair-wise analysis only showed statistical differences between residents and farmers. *Farm tourism* was significantly more preferred by farmers ( $M = 3.7$ ) than residents ( $M = 3.4$ ) and extension faculty ( $M = 3.4$ ), with no differences between the latter two groups ( $p < 0.001$ ).

## Definitional Elements

In terms of definitional elements, overall respondents indicated that a good definition of *agritourism* should include the words *agricultural setting* (76%), *entertainment* (72%), and *farm* (72%), although significant differences in wording preferences were also found across the three samples (Table 2). A significantly greater proportion of farmers (84%) and extension faculty (83%) preferred *agricultural setting* as compared to residents (72%;  $p < 0.001$ ). Significantly more farmers (79%) than residents (69%) and extension faculty (68%) considered that the word *farm* should be included in such definition ( $p = 0.008$ ). The proportion of residents (70%), farmers (76%) and extension faculty (76%) considering *entertainment* as a definitional element of agritourism was not significantly different.

**Table 2**  
**A Comparison of the Preferences of Definitional Elements among Residents, Farmers and Extension Faculty**

Definitional Elements <sup>1</sup>	Percentages			$\chi^2$	p-value
	Residents	Farmers	Extension		
Agricultural setting	72.0 <sup>a</sup>	83.7 <sup>b</sup>	83.2 <sup>b</sup>	20.096	<0.001
Entertainment	69.6	75.8	76.1	5.465	0.065
Farm	69.1 <sup>a</sup>	79.0 <sup>b</sup>	68.4 <sup>a</sup>	9.747	0.008
Farming	67.7	65.5	65.8	0.535	0.765
Education	55.8 <sup>a</sup>	83.7 <sup>b</sup>	80.0 <sup>b</sup>	85.699	<0.001
Working	51.5 <sup>a</sup>	69.0 <sup>b</sup>	54.8 <sup>a</sup>	24.283	<0.001
Visitors	44.9 <sup>a</sup>	76.2 <sup>b</sup>	59.4 <sup>c</sup>	79.829	<0.001
Recreation	37.3 <sup>a</sup>	50.8 <sup>b</sup>	52.9 <sup>b</sup>	23.655	<0.001
Ranch	36.3	42.5	44.5	5.756	0.056
Agriculture	25.1 <sup>a</sup>	42.9 <sup>b</sup>	44.5 <sup>b</sup>	43.860	<0.001
Travel	19.0	21.0	23.9	2.200	0.333
Other	3.0 <sup>a</sup>	15.5 <sup>b</sup>	9.0 <sup>b</sup>	55.419	<0.001

<sup>1</sup> Organized in descendent order based on overall mean

<sup>a,b,c</sup> Any two values with different superscripts were significantly different in post-hoc pair-wise comparisons

Content analysis of qualitative data indicates similar preferences on themes to describe *visiting a farm for recreational purposes* across stakeholders (Table 3). *Education* (e.g., learning, teaching, information) appeared as a top theme across residents ( $n = 343$ ), farmers ( $n = 133$ ), and extension faculty ( $n = 74$ ). *Experience*, either as hands-on-activities (e.g., Pick-your-own; interaction with animals) or as an overall farm adventure, was also a recurrent theme among residents ( $n = 328$ , farmers ( $n = 66$ ), and extension faculty ( $n = 32$ ). *Connection* to land and outdoors (e.g., Back-to-basics) emerged strong among residents ( $n = 206$ ) and farmers ( $n = 68$ ), while *fun* emerged among residents ( $n = 130$ ) and extension faculty ( $n = 31$ ). *Agritourism*, *tours* and *visits* (including agri tourism, ag tourism and agro tourism) were predominantly referred by farmers ( $n = 147$ ) and extension faculty ( $n = 122$ ).

**Table 3**  
**Statement Examples of Themes Emerged Associated with Agritourism**

<b>Farmers</b>
Visit/tour/spending time on a Farm (95)
<i>People traveling near or far to visit a farm and learn about its operations</i>
<i>Having an experience visiting a farm or agricultural type of business for an educational and entertaining/purpose</i>
Learning/educational opportunity/experience on a farm, agricultural setting, etc. (28)
<i>Visiting a working farm and seeing how things grow and what it takes to make that happen</i>
<i>As a tourist on a farm I would expect to see their operations, learn about the methods used and learn about the challenges and successes that the farmer has growing their product. A tour might also include a hands on project or demonstration.</i>
Tourism & agriculture (no mention of farm) (23)
<i>Agriculture and tourism</i>
<i>Tourism centered around agricultural activities</i>
<b>Residents</b>
Visit/Tour/Spending Time on a Farm (198)
<i>Touring or visiting a farm/agricultural setting – farm tour</i>
<i>Visiting a farm for entertainment purposes</i>
Tourism & agriculture (no mention of farm) (172)
<i>Agricultural tourism</i>
<i>Touring agriculture</i>
Negative/Do not know (78)
<i>Have no clue</i>
<i>Sounds weird, not pleasant, aggressive, negative, stupid, like a disease</i>
<b>Extension</b>
Visit/Tour/Spending Time on a Farm (64)
<i>Day long or weekend long visits to farms including various activities. Also directed tours along regional routes with stops at various venues</i>
<i>A farm that opens itself to the public for visits, education, sales, &amp; activities</i>
Learning/educational opportunity/experience on a farm, agricultural setting, etc. (17)
<i>Learning about agriculture/life on the farm</i>
<i>Agriculture entities allowing the general public to learn about their operations and visit them</i>
List of specific activities mentioned relating to a farm or agricultural visit/tour (16)
<i>Event for recreation that occur on farms – corn mazes, hay rides, pick your own fruits and veggies tastings of exotic or antique fruits and vegetables, baby animal fun, learning what a particular farm type (dairy for example) is about and what goes on</i>
<i>A wide variety of activities such as food festivals (blackberry or apple), preschool hay rides, corn mazes or farm bed and breakfasts</i>

*Visit, tour and spending time on a farm* emerged as the most predominant theme when farmers ( $n = 95$ ), residents ( $n = 198$ ), and extension faculty ( $n = 64$ ) described what came to their mind when they hear or read the word *agritourism*. *Educational opportunity and experience on a farm* appeared among farmers ( $n = 28$ ) and extension faculty ( $n = 17$ ). However, it is important

to mention that for a relative large proportion of residents ( $n = 78$ ) the word *agritourism* did not mean anything (e.g., “I have no clue”) or even implied negative meanings (e.g., “sounds weird”, “not pleasant”, “like a disease”).

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Results confirm that agritourism stakeholder groups have dissimilar preferences for labels and definitional elements associated with agritourism. Granted that the aim of this study was to identify the most suitable label to increase the effectiveness of marketing efforts, the key role of the suppliers (farmers) and the consumers (residents) of this form of recreation was deemed as prevailing over extension faculty whose role is mostly to bridge between the first two. Therefore, study results suggest that the use of the “*farm visit*” label should be encouraged to promote this form of recreation and better reach current and potential visitors.

As per defining agritourism, this study found that *entertainment*, *agricultural setting*, and *farm* appeared as prevalent words, while *education* and *experience* were the most predominant emerging themes associated with *visiting a farm for recreational purposes* across all three stakeholders. Therefore, farmers offering agritourism and agencies promoting agritourism offerings should include these words and themes in their marketing communications to better capture the attention of their customers. In the same lines, faculty working on the field should encourage their constituencies to use those words in their extension efforts (e.g., workshops). This study also suggest a word of caution for using the term *agritourism* for marketing purposes, as it did not evoke any specific image or meaning, and it even suggested a negative connotation for a large proportion of residents.

The limited geographic context where this exploratory study was conducted and the use of a non-random panel of residents suggest generalizations beyond the population of this study should be done with caution; therefore, a need exists to replicate this study in a broader context. With this in mind, it is important to highlight that by identifying different preferences of the labels and meanings of agritourism across different stakeholders, this study paved the path in efforts towards the development of a shared understanding of agritourism.

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