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The Current State of Agritourism Research in the United States

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INTRODUCTION/LITERATURE REVIEW

Agritourism, which includes various activities and/or services provided on a working farm with the purpose of attracting visitors, is a growing trend among many U.S. farmers and landowners. Changes in the economy combined with fluctuations in agricultural income and the desire to preserve land and resources has placed increased pressure on farmers across the nation to examine alternative economic opportunities. Many farmers are turning to agritourism as an entrepreneurial response to increase on-farm sales of their value-added products and services and generate revenues directly associated with recreational and tourism activities (McGehee, 2007). Agritourism is a strategy being adopted by farmers to gain a competitive advantage and capitalize on the uniqueness of their farm and farming lifestyle. As such, agritourism has seen a recent growth in popularity across the nation. For example, in 2007, the USDA's Census of Agriculture reported 160,000 US farms were participating in some form of direct sales/agritourism with receipts totaling \$566,834,000, an increase of approximately 180% from 2002. Of these, 23,350 farms claimed income from non-produce related recreational activities, such as farm tours, hunting and fishing.

As the popularity of agritourism grows, studies examining agritourism operations, farms, and agritourists or visitors to agritourism establishments are becoming increasingly prevalent (e.g. Barbieri & Mshenga, 2008; McGehee, Kim, Jennings, 2007; Ollenburg & Buckley, 2007; Phillip, Hunter,

Blackstock, in press). This study sought to provide a comparative analysis of recent agritourism-related survey findings conducted within the U.S. In doing so, central aspects are summarized to provide an understanding of the current state of agritourism research in the U.S. and provide a discussion relating to the need and direction of future research. This discussion is timely and needed given the proliferation of agritourism operations and the challenging context farmers are facing.

METHODOLOGY

Agritourism-related surveys (mostly conducted via postal mail) and findings were obtained from various Internet resources and/or the authors/organizations responsible for administering the surveys. In order to be included for analysis, a copy of the original survey instrument and a copy of the findings/summary of findings (e.g., publication, informative summary) had to be obtained. Additionally, only surveys of agritourism operators and surveys of visitors to agritourism operations/farms were included for analysis. A total of 13 survey instruments and various findings related to the surveys were reviewed for overall content (e.g., questions, results, methodology); nine survey instruments from the perspective of the agritourism provider and four survey instruments from the perspective of the visitor/agritourist were reviewed. Implementation dates for the 13 surveys ranged from 1999-2009. For a listing of the survey resources reviewed, refer to the Survey References section on page 5.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A brief summary of general findings from some of the questions/topics asked by a majority¹ of the surveys are included below followed by a discussion of themes found from the analysis.

Agritourism provider perspective (Information mostly collected via mailed surveys):

- The median number of years in business was 10 years
- Most common types of attractions included on-farm retail, on-farm tours, and/or pick-your-own
- Majority offered 1-2 attractions
- Spring, summer and fall, were seasons noted by a majority of operations; peak months included May through November except for cut-your-own Christmas tree farms and wineries operations
- At the time of data collection, many farms reported an increase in visitation
- Majority of operations utilize part-time employees
- Most farms reported an income of \$15,000 or less from agritourism
- The most common/effective types of advertising/promotional methods used by farms included word-of-mouth, state associations/agricultural departments, brochures, business signs, and websites

Visitor perspective (Most data collected on-site)

- Women were shown to visit agritourism operations more than men
- While visitors' ages varied in reporting, the average age was in the 40's for a majority of the studies
- Majority of visitors were identified as being from the same state, county, and/or neighboring counties as the agritourism operations; distance traveled ranged from 22 – 129 miles
- Majority of visitors traveled in small groups of 2-4 members, mostly composed by family members and/or children
- While annual household income varied among participants, the majority reported annual incomes of \$75,000+

¹ Only includes a review of findings from questions/topics in which a majority of the surveys asked/included: Business perspective at least 5 of the 9 and Visitor perspective at least 3 of the 4.

- Word-of-mouth was the most cited resource used by visitors to plan their agritourism trip
 - However, reaching an agritourism operation “by chance” while en route to other destinations was also cited suggesting the need for good signage of farm locations

Limited focus and need for further research

While findings from the various surveys were generally similar, drawing valid comparisons and/or conclusions between them is difficult because of the variation in their methods, questions asked, and content reported (e.g., while many of the surveys asked similar questions, their reports often shared findings from a sampling of questions). Surveys implemented at the state level appear to be growing in popularity with some states now beginning to conduct follow-up studies. All 13 studies reviewed were conducted on a state-wide level, representing nine different states. To date, an agritourism study has not been conducted at the national level. While three national surveys exist which provide insight into agritourism or farm visits (USDA’s National Survey on Recreation and the Environment, 2000; Agricultural Resource Management Survey, 2004; US Census of Agriculture, 2007), the focus of these studies was not agritourism; rather agritourism was a small component. In order for valid comparisons and generalizations to be made agritourism-focused survey data at a national scale is greatly needed.

This lack of research and knowledge regarding agritourism is troubling because proper tourism planning depends upon sound research. Research provides the information base for effective decision making by tourism managers [and] allows [them] to develop policy, plans, operations, and controls more efficiently (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2006, p. 515). Moreover, van Raaij (1986) posited that consumer research on tourism should be a cornerstone of any marketing strategy given that knowledge of consumer behavior allows marketing managers the ability to understand their target audience, forecast future behavior, and provide the product/service that is wanted by the consumer. Additionally, the marketing concept asserts that the key to achieving organizational goals is determining the needs and wants of target markets and delivering the desired satisfaction more effectively and more efficiently than competitors (Kotler & Bloom, 1984). In order for farms to fully benefit from agritourism as an economic resource, research is needed to understand the market and provide agritourism operations with the data and results needed to effectively market their farm to visitors. A majority of the surveys examined in this study (9 of the 13) were from the agritourism provider perspective; more research is needed examining current and potential visitors to agritourism establishments. Understanding agritourism visitors, the types of experiences they are seeking, and how they are making their travel plans will allow farmers to make wise business decisions regarding where to invest money and how to maximize profit potential.

Defining agritourism

A review of the 13 studies revealed nine unique definitions of agritourism². Some of the commonalities found among the various definitions include:

- All nine definitions included the term farm and/or agriculture
- Four of the definitions incorporated an income component either as a means of income generation and/or as an economic activity. This is worth noting because it is often assumed farmers engage in agritourism endeavors as a means to supplement farm income (McGehee, 2007; McGehee, Kim & Jennings, 2007; Ollenberg & Buckley, 2007)

² Not all of the studies included a definition of agritourism and two of the studies were conducted twice/by the same state and used the same definition each time.

- Five definitions referred to recreation or recreational opportunities, five referred to education or educational opportunities, and two definitions made reference to heritage
- Five definitions specifically referred to activities occurring on a farm, while three made no mention of on-farm involvement, and one definition stated the activities could occur either on-farm or at other outlets
- Three of the definitions included the word “experience” – while one definition specifically mentioned "active involvement", suggesting active, hands-on, and/or engaging experiences
- Only one definition mentioned length of time. Barbieri and Tew (2009) suggest the farm must engage in these activities for fifteen days or more to be considered an agritourism operation
- Five definitions included the word visitor or visiting, one included travel destination, and one included tourism.

Interestingly, none of the definitions distinguished between tourists and visitors (implying distance traveled). This is of importance to the study of agritourism because the term “tourism” is part of the term “agritourism”, and tourists are often defined as having traveled away from their home environment for at least 50 miles one way (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2009). Findings from the studies indicated many of the visitors live in the same state/county as the agritourism operation, traveled approximately 22-129 miles, visited for the day, and/or were repeat visitors. As such, these findings appear to suggest a rationale for focusing on non-traditional tourists (e.g., visitors) potentially proving agritourism operators increased success if they market to day trippers/visitors and forged strong customer loyalty with repeat loyal customers, who are often ignored with the interest to attract traditional tourists. Further research is needed to examine the types of agritourism participants (e.g., tourists versus visitors). Not only would this research prove useful to agritourism marketing strategies but semantically speaking, referring to these occurrences as agritourism or agritourists could imply a misnomer, potentially hindering the fundamental understanding of the concept of agritourism and placing limitations on the inclusion of what enterprises and activities are truly “agritourism”.

CONCLUSION

As the number of farms turning to agritourism increase, agritourism operations are in need of research and resources to help them make more informed business decisions and capitalize effectively and efficiently on national and state-wide trends to ensure the sustainability of their farms. Unfortunately, due to limited and dispersed data and resources, those engaging in these enterprises are making development and marketing decisions with limited or outdated information; and in turn, are likely basing a majority of their decisions on assumptions. Most of these enterprises are operated and managed by farmers, and very few have traditional business and marketing training or expertise. Additionally, little research on agritourism visitors and market effectiveness exists. Thus, business decisions and precious operating dollars are being invested in agritourism with little research or knowledge regarding the potential return on their investment. In short, this review of previous agritourism-related studies calls for more research on agritourism, particularly at the national-level; and calls for more research examining the types of visitors to agritourism establishments.

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