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Agritourism: Challenges and opportunities for the rural future

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TTRA 2021 Extended Abstract

Agritourism: Challenges and opportunities for the rural future

Introduction

Recently, a spotlight has been shone on rural tourism (UNWTO, 2020). The challenges facing rural destinations and touristic activities are unique and require focused study. These rural communities are also facing new challenges in ensuring their livelihoods are sustained. Increasingly, rural communities have long been moving away from natural resource extraction-based economies to tourism- and service-based economies (Ashley, et al., 2007; Buzinde, et al., 2014; Nooripoor, 2020). Even those communities still engaged in the cultivation of natural resources, such as farms, have been encouraged to introduce additional revenue streams such as agritourism (e.g. on-farm sales, farm stays, farm tours, etc.) (Kloppenburger, et al., 2000).

In this presentation, we share the results of a 2019 national survey of agritourism operators throughout the US. The survey questions built on results from qualitative research on agritourism and were focused on products and activities offered, operator motivations, challenges and successes, and perceived economic performance. In our proposed 15-minute presentation, we will report on our findings and analysis, including factors linked to perceived success and profitability. We conclude with implications for future research, policy and outreach favoring rural tourism operators.

Literature Review

Agritourism, including direct-to-consumer sales on farms, has a rich history across the globe. Though not formally defined or recognized through policy in the US, agritourism is an increasingly popular diversification strategy and a growing income source for many farmers and ranchers (Busby & Rendle, 2000; Schilling, et al., 2012). In the ever-changing economies of tourism, individual-led efforts such as agritourism have the potential to bring social and economic benefit to rural destinations, building more resilient communities. In post-COVID tourism, this is especially true as travelers find comfort in outdoor, physically-distanced activities.

Introducing agritourism to existing enterprises seems to benefit the hosts. A 2014 study found that small farms with an income diversification strategy report higher average household incomes (Khanal & Mishra, 2014). In addition, renewed interest in food systems and local food has provided the opportunity for farmers to invite the general public to their farms, creating both educational and economic value (Chase & Gubinger, 2014). Recent research suggests that agritourism supports local food systems and enhances direct-to-consumer sales not only by directly influencing tourists' purchasing behavior but also by promoting a broader interest in agriculture (Brune, et al., 2020).

The market for agritourism experiences has been growing, too. Research using a broader definition of agritourism (including direct sales) estimates that \$800 million to \$3 billion a year is generated for U.S. farm income from agritourism activities (Carpio, et al., 2008). In 2002, it was estimated that, nationwide, more than 62 million adults visit farms each year and agritourism was on an

upwards trajectory, having increased substantially during the past few decades. Estimates from the 2012 NASS Census of Agriculture place a value of \$2 billion, with over \$700 million of that coming directly from agritourism experiences, not direct sales (USDA NASS, 2012).

Despite this, few large-scale studies have explored the qualities of successful agritourism operations and their perceived barriers, challenges, and successes. Extant literature is also limited in its geographic scope. While several national studies of agritourism have been conducted in Canada, and various countries in Europe and in South America, little research has been published on agritourism at the national or regional level in the United States. Rozier Rich, et al. (2016) note, "While three national surveys exist which provide insight into agritourism or farm visits [...] 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" (p. 4). This multistate research project builds on previous research at the state level, while also providing much-needed insights into what common themes emerge when considering the multitude of other factors that influence the success of agritourism in the United States.

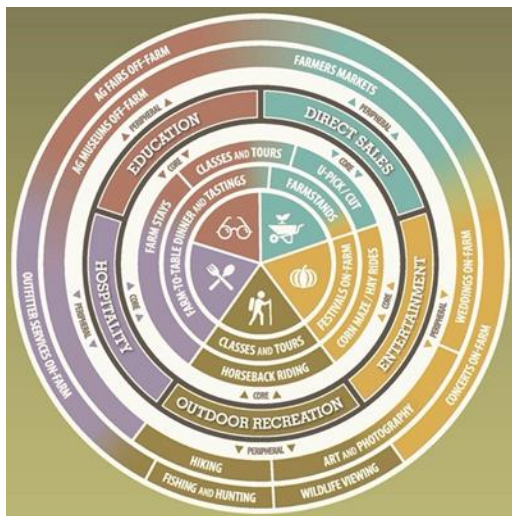


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for Agritourism Activities (Chase, et al., 2018)

For this project we used Chase, et al.’s (2018) conceptual framework for defining and categorizing agritourism and direct sales activities. This framework organizes agritourism activities into core and peripheral activities based on where they take place (on- or off-farm) or the degree to which they are related to agricultural activities (Figure 1). According to the framework, “core activities take place on a working farm or ranch and have deep connections to agricultural production” while “peripheral activities lack a deep connection to agricultural production, even though they may take place on a working farm or ranch” (p. 17). For example, core activities might include product sales and experiences such as farmstands, u-pick, farm tours, overnight stays or farm-to-table meals. Peripheral activities might include off-farm farmers

markets, weddings, music events or outdoor recreation. The framework also organizes activities into five main categories: education, direct sales, entertainment, outdoor recreation, and hospitality. For the purposes of this study, agritourism includes but is not limited to all core and peripheral agritourism activities taking place on-farm, in all categories, as defined in Figure 1. Questions about off-farm sales were included in the survey but their interpretation and analysis will not be included in this presentation.

Methodology

Using the framework presented by Chase, et al. (2018), a survey was developed to be distributed to agritourism operators throughout the US. The online survey took place between November 2019 and February 2020 and began with a question to ensure responses only from working farms and

ranches that have visitors on their property. The survey link was shared with farmers and ranchers through email, social media, and newsletters by university extension systems, state departments of agriculture, agritourism associations, and others working with farmers and ranchers throughout the U.S.

Results

Responses were received from 1834 farms in all 50 states, ranging from one response each from six states, to 222 from operators in Vermont. The largest contributions of data came from Vermont, Oregon, Tennessee, California, Kansas, Wisconsin, Kentucky, and Oklahoma. Responding farmers were of all ages, with 55 being the average age. A majority of responding farmers were women. Almost three-quarters have a college degree. The survey included demographic and firmographic questions as well as questions on operators' goals, future plans for agritourism, perceived success and challenges.

Respondents to our survey reported insightful information regarding their financial viability and their plans for agritourism in the next 5 years. Findings from the surveys are still being analyzed, but initial results point to a positive outlook for agritourism. We are also gathering key insights into the perceived challenges and successes with operators and how we might employ policies and tools to support a healthy economy of agritourism experiences.

Because the survey was conducted in Winter of 2019-20, responses reflect the state of agritourism in the U.S. before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, our insights, coupled with further studies, will allow us to better understand the impacts the pandemic has had on agritourism in the United States.

Conclusion

In the ever-changing economies of tourism, individual-led efforts such as agritourism have the potential to bring social and economic benefit to rural destinations, building more resilient communities. In post-COVID tourism, this is especially true as travelers find comfort in outdoor, physically-distanced activities. The present study highlights not just the many perceived benefits, but also the opportunities inherent with the promotion of agritourism. Among them are social interaction, building goodwill in the community, providing family employment, and, as supported by previous literature, increasing revenue for existing farm enterprises. In the presentation, we will elaborate on these findings, and offer insight into the positive futures of agritourism, and its rural communities, in the United States.

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